
Open Letter to Directors, Executive Directors, and CEOs of Canadian Charities and Non-Profits

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Dear colleagues,

First, let me thank you for the work that you, your staff, and volunteers have done to keep Canadians safe during the pandemic. Your heroic efforts have not gone unnoticed or unappreciated. I also know that Canadians will rely on you to help them stride slowly, yet confidently, into the recovery stage of this crisis.

But our country also needs to wake up to another crisis. The scourge of racism holds back prospects for security, safety, and opportunity for all its victims. But it has a particularly malignant effect on Black Canadians and Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Canadians recognize this; they have taken to the streets with vociferous demands to address it. Governments, corporations, the media, and other institutions are all taking a hard look at themselves to ask the question: what have we done to recognize and address all kinds of racism?

But what about charities and non-profits?

In June 2019, the Senate Charities Committee tabled its final report. Buried in the 42 recommendations is one that deserves re-examination given the context of the day. In the report we took note of the size, scope, and influence of the sector. We noted that it touches all aspects of our lives, from religion to sports, from seniors to young people. It also wields sizeable heft in other aspects: it contributes 8% to the GDP and employs close to two million Canadians. But what about its diversity?

Sadly, the absence of data gets in the way of answering these questions with any real reliability. An e-consultation conducted in connection to the Senate study, although not statistically significant, found that more than half of the organizations which responded to the survey did not collect data on diversity of employees or directors.

Further, studies by academic institutions like the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University paint a picture of a sector that may talk the talk but appears to be unwilling to walk the walk. The evidence that is available is not encouraging. Racialized minorities made up 54% of the Greater Toronto Area's total population in 2017. However, their representation in leadership roles in the voluntary sector falls short. Only 38% of boards analyzed had at least 20% racialized minority leaders, and 19% had none. Equally notable, 38% of senior management teams had at least 20% racialized minority representation, while 52% had none.

The Senate recommended a reasonable start to get data on diversity in the charitable sector. It recommended that the CRA include questions on both the T1044 and the T3010 forms on diversity representation on boards of directors as per the existing employment equity definitions.

In this way, the data could be aggregated to present a picture of diversity in the sector on an annual basis. Based on clear evidence, the country and the sector could see if progress is being made, how and where.

Since the Senate tabled the report, events have overtaken it. Parliament has not met on a regular basis and the Senate Charities report has not yet been debated or approved. However, the need to ensure that leaders reflect the diversity of our country's population has heightened. The sector does not have the time to wait for the report's recommendations to be implemented. It must take action now. That action is now in the hands of its leaders.

Each charity or non-profit can undertake such a review voluntarily on an annual basis. More importantly, large sector membership-based organizations, like Imagine Canada, Community Foundations of Canada, the Ontario Nonprofit Network, and the Philanthropic Foundations of Canada can request that their members disclose this data on a voluntary basis. Given that the membership of these organizations is large, it would create a significant evidence base from which to draw conclusions. Collected annually, it would give impetus to provide a national picture of diversity in the sector. Because the sector would be in the driver's seat, it could choose to disaggregate the data to further understand issues of race and intersectionality. Most importantly, evidence could lead to action: the opportunity to compare successes and challenges and share best practices. All without legislation.

The sector could go one step further. It could make disclosure of such information a criterion for all members, thus making it mandatory within their associations. This would send a powerful signal of leadership to the rest of Canada.

Charities and non-profits are often frustrated and hamstrung by the federal government in their efforts to achieve their missions. The sector has urged the government to take it more seriously, as it should. Yet, here is an opportunity to state exactly how serious the charitable sector is on a matter of national urgency. It is time for the sector to lead, to show the way for others, so that others may follow.

I am calling on the sector to take up this call and be a leader and a champion for diversity and

inclusion. In the fight against racism, this is not the only step. But it is the first that will bring evidence-based reflections and changes.

I have often been asked if the sector is ready for this change. My observations to date are summed up as follows: the sector's spirit is willing, but its flesh is weak.

I sincerely hope that you will prove me wrong.

Sincerely,

The Honourable Ratna Omidvar, C.M., O.Ont.

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