
REFLECTIONS ON STARLINGS, COLLABORATIVES, AND THE NATURE OF THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

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THE VOLUNTARY NONPROFIT SECTOR IS A COLLECTION OF HIGHLY VARIED organizations that create a landscape of care across Canada. Most often the sector is understood through the nature of its components or through its relations to government rather than through the complexity of the whole. In this article, I speculate about how we can re-conceptualize the sector, which is, of course, no longer either predominantly voluntary or entirely nonprofit and is most certainly in changing relations with governments. Using the long view of my own history and the broad view across the sector gained from my daily work at the Ontario Trillium Foundation, I reflect on what the sector is and how it is evolving highly collaborative structures, two or more organizations working together to achieve a common goal, which are producing change at warp speeds. Drawing from the compelling ideas and natural world models of complexity science, I offer reflection on my own journey of discovery into the nature of the sector.

Forty years is a long time, I am realizing, to have been working in the nonprofit sector; more than half of its history in Canada, if you count its genesis from the 1943 March Report. This was the document that first proposed the welfare state as a partnership between government and civil society as Canadians set out to address the legacy of insecurity and deprivation created by two world wars and the Great Depression (Elson, 2007). Its history is twice as long if you date the sector from the first charities built prior to the turn of the century on old world models of wealth and church-related organizations in England and France.

I was trained in the early 1970s in community development and have worked since then in various small nonprofit organizations, building mental health services where there were none, organizing visual and lively arts in rural Ontario, developing the public storyline of violence in families and services for women, raising awareness of children with learning disabilities in Ontario schools, and facilitating for First Nations as they developed conversations about rights entitlement and self-determination. I have run organizations, sat on boards, worked as a researcher, facilitator, and writer for hire – doing all the things that are the stock and trade of community organizing.

If forty years provides the “long view” from which to consider the extraordinary and rapid pace of change that is occurring in the sector now, it is the “broad view” out across the sector gained from my current job in the provincial program of the Ontario Trillium Foundation that has turned me into an inveterate sector watcher. A decade ago, I went “inside” to work as a funder where I review and recommend investment from among

some \$40M dollars a year worth of new project ideas and innovation in the human services sector. Understanding trends in sector organizing is something I work at daily in order to effectively coach provincial and national organizations to situate their work in a shifting landscape. Sometimes it is like watching weather come across big water; small ripples and eddies portend a sea change to come.

This quest for re-description began several years ago when I took eighteen months away from my work at the Foundation to join the federal Task Force on Community Investments (TFCI). I had been hoping to apply the broad view of shift and change to the micro-detail of improved federal funding practice (TFCI, 2006). Developing recommendations involved facilitating focus groups in departments that provide Grants and Contributions programs (Gs&Cs) to sector organizations. Yet, in the course of the work, I found myself struggling constantly to provide alternatives to outdated language and metaphors and to describe the vibrant realities that I know of the sector through my work. It was as if many of the bureaucrats I worked with did not “see” the sector as a coherent system as I do, but as a collection of disparate not-quite-business-like organizations. Seldom at a loss for words, I found the experience jarring. Sometimes I undertook explanation using my own stories. Yet as I spoke of the very different organizations I have worked with, I realized that it is only recently, and in retrospect, that I have begun to understand even the range of my own work as a career path in the nonprofit sector¹. I have become curious about this relative inability to evoke the collectivity of the sector, a kind of invisibility that doesn’t seem to afflict either the business or the public sector. Without an understanding of the whole, its purpose and ways of working, the parts are just parts, loose on the landscape.

Inside, we have seldom had the capacity to articulate the role and the nature of the sector as the rich tapestry of change and ethos of care that is how I believe that most would see our work. Long definitional discussions have yielded expressions of frustration, compared to “pinning Jello to a wall.” Without ever really achieving resolution, earlier definitional debates of the sector over voluntary, not-for-profit, and community-based descriptors have more recently given way to new definitional discussion. The focus now is on social enterprise, enterprising nonprofits, and mission-driven for-profits, and the distinctions between them, as the face of the sector changes and new forms of organization develop in the “hybrid space” between the civil society and the commercial market.

What is constant is the notion of change. Perhaps the sector does not stay the same for long enough to build a definition based on organizational description, and our reconceptualization must fasten rather on notions of change and impermanence. While federal government discussions on red tape continue to grind on without dramatic impact on investment practice (Philips 2010), sector conversations appear to be moving away from discussion of reliance on, or even hope for, improved or increased government funding. Many have simply withdrawn from the discussion, moving instead to learning about new highly collaborative models of operation and more entrepreneurial ways of thinking about and generating revenue.

I first started watching this shift in the last recession, as a new funder, in the newly reconstituted Ontario Trillium Foundation in 1999. I was gripped by the angst of sector workers (some former colleagues on the grant-writing side of the desk) in the midst of

what was then termed a funding crisis (Scott & Pike, 2005). I began then to speculate on the “sea change” in public funding that was shifting investment to project-based outcome rather than core funding relationships – funding organizations to “do” rather than to “be” – and to tell the stories of the new styles of organizations that were emerging. This work on “financial vibrancy” (Struthers, 2005) drew from a set of Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) case studies on organizational finance to describe six capacities that were shared by organizations that were doing well financially – the outliers in the funding crisis. These capacities included financial literacy, sustainability modeling, nurturing participation, meaningful planning, communication, and the capacity to build relationships. I found myself describing highly fluid and relational organizations with strong abilities to forge collaborative work. So “porous” were the structures of some of these organizations that they could alter shape and form to adapt to the changing requirements of new projects and partnerships to get their work done.

These organizations most often had a narrow laser-beam focus on mission, were focused on change, and used their relationships consciously, leveraging the knowledge of constituents and the capacities of partner organizations to create the ability to change course and form and reform quickly and in a highly opportunistic manner. What I can see now that I couldn’t when I first wrote the material is that only two of the capacities of financially vibrant organizations are about getting and managing money. The other four are the capacities that build and hold collaborative relationships in the work.

I remember well the cold winter day in my living room surrounded by the piles of colour-coded text that resulted from the qualitative analysis of some 60 case studies. With dismay I realized that the capacities these organizations related to their financial wellbeing were nothing like what was being described in the capacity building literature on effective organizations. This literature described strong mission, vision, and strategy that yielded strong program and internal management. I came to realize that these functions are grounded in a value of stability drawn from organizational development literature written in more predictable times (Connolly & Lukas). It was with some relief that I found that Lester Salaman had similar findings in a 2003 study that suggested that American nonprofits too were in pursuit of partnerships and collaboration as a response to fiscal stress (Sussman, 2003).

Stability is, of course, not an effective goal at a time when the sector is repositioning itself in the wake of rapidly changing political and economic environments. The capacities that lead to resilience, the ability to be opportunistic and to manage and leverage a broad range of potential partnerships, are much more valuable when unpredictable change and short foresight horizons are the norm. These organizations were doing well because they had begun to build organizational forms that could change as fast as the social change work they were committed to. They had done this by connecting with others with similar interest. Where there is relevance in the work, resources follow.

Now, some years and another recession later, it has been fascinating to watch these new style organizations become more the norm from my funder’s chair. The proof is in the pudding, so to speak. In Ontario, at least, the sector seems to have weathered what could have been a devastating recession year. While difficult, from the view of my own provincial granting portfolio, there has been no sign of a halt in the thinking or innovation and

no anxious rush for tide-over funds. There is also no question that the calibre of projects has increased over the last decade, alongside the increased capacity to attract and hold greater numbers of working partners in collaborative relationships.

Collaboration, particularly with non-traditional partners, yields access not only to new resources but to different ways of thinking about the work and emergent opportunity. I have had the sense of the sector “re-tooling” operations in many places, building the capacity to hold diverse and often extraordinary numbers of relationships. In this, organizations become much less dependent on government or any single financial partner and more entrepreneurial, but also ideas seem to be moving faster through these more porous structures, building common thought and practice across communities of both work and geography. These newer types of organizations trade on relationships and an exchange of capacity to build innovation.

In the early part of this decade, it seemed that much of the work was to build primary networks of like organizations. Technological innovation has enabled interconnected websites and e-learning to create much broader inter-sectoral conversations. Now it would seem that working in networks and densely woven networks of networks has become the norm as social networking technology matures and permits broader, and often global, reach in the work.

If collaboration is about a set of relationships intentionally mobilized to create innovation, then it is worth exploring what we know about the nature of relationships in organizing practice and how they contribute to innovation. A sector away, David Lane and Robert Maxwell (1995) coined the phrase “generative relationships” to spin theory on the connection between relationships and innovation in times when foresight horizons are both short and complex and when the environment experiences cascades of change. They detail the success of ROLM, a small US telecommunications firm that took a relational approach to marketing the emergent technology of PBX phone systems², increasing revenue increase by two-hundred fold over five years, as they drew market share from ATT and Northern Telecom. ROLM developed reciprocal relationships between sales representatives and customers so that IT engineers could generate innovative products more closely aligned to what their customers imagined. Planning, they suggest, is not effective strategy when the world is changing very fast. Instead, organizations need mechanisms to actively monitor their world and take up agency:

The world in which you must act does not sit passively out there waiting to yield up its secrets. Instead, your world is under active construction, you are part of the construction crew – and there isn’t any blueprint. (Lane & Maxwell, 1995)

“Generative relationships” intentionally span different perspectives and create something that neither partner could predict in advance or accomplish alone. If change is a constant in sector work, and innovation is its product, then collaborative relationships are method.

The deliberate seeking out of different rather than similar perspectives is evident in many of the broad collaborative tables and projects that I work with now at the Foundation. We have learned to “park” definitional issues, tolerating difference and holding the

tension of not knowing to enable synergies of practice to emerge more fully before closing the definitional box. Far from a disparaging reference, this is method-making Jello, learning to hold definitional form and structure fluid for extended periods of time until collectively ready to allow it to “set” in a shape is what is new in the world. This is a skill I see appearing in many places as the sector increases its capacity for collaboration, in the best cases recognizing that the most generative relationships emerge across this creative tension of difference.

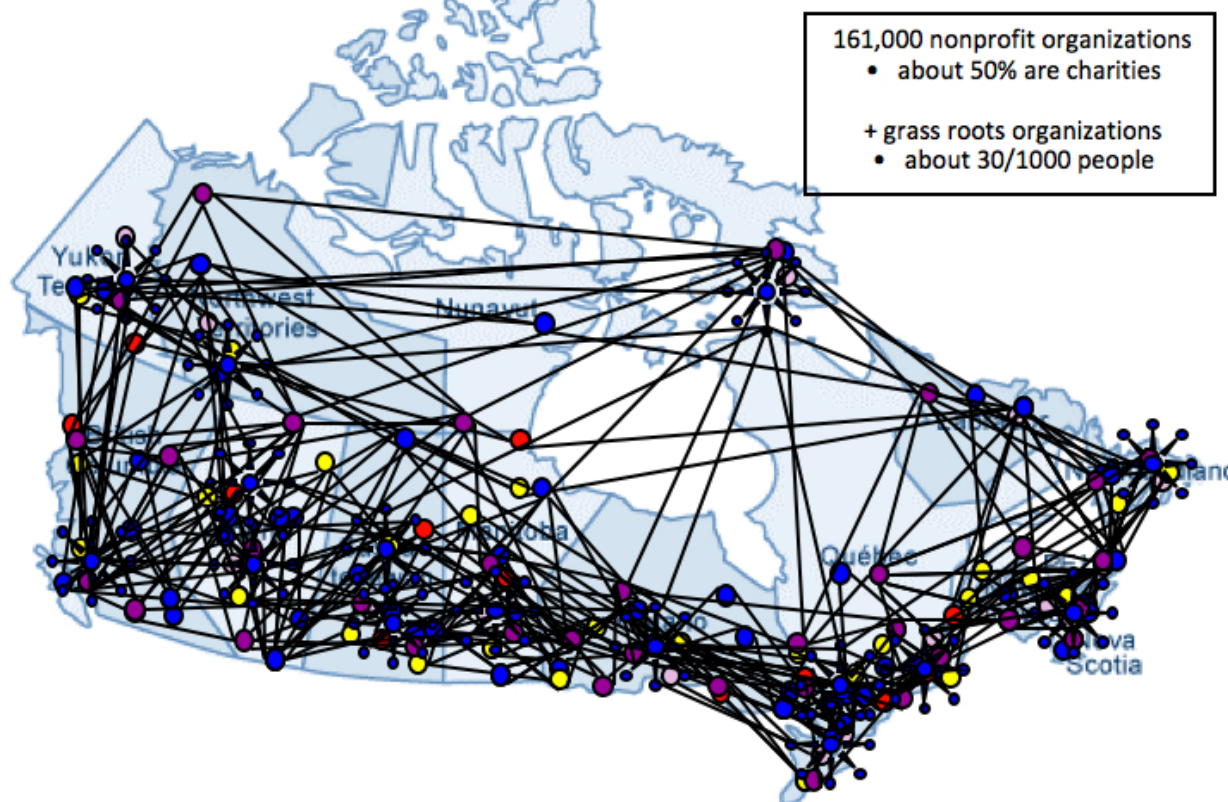
The implications for effective public investment practices of these shifts in sector operation are enormous. Rapid decision-making, flexible timelines, and tolerance for changes in outcome are essential. A segmented, rather than whole, view of a sector functioning in such a highly collaborative fashion makes it nearly impossible to be strategic in investment. For these reasons, the further I got into my work with the federal Task Force, the more I felt compelled to try to describe the sector as a collective whole. As Power Point “decks” are the tool of federal policy development and a picture is worth a thousand words, I set out to make a visual representation of the sector and have used it both inside and outside of government many times.

I begin with a map of Canada, and then the narrative develops like this: in the mid-1980s, people became aware of men dying of HIV/AIDS in their communities and began to form organizations (little mauve dots appear sprinkled across the country). Then, as they learned of each other, they begin to link or even join up their efforts (black lines appear and join up the dots). Then we started to think in communities about people needing to stay out of institutions as they age, and the sector created organizations to support elders in their homes (many more red dots), and then joined them up...and so on across a realm of civic activities, some joining nationally and some, like little starbursts, connecting at the community level. The hive of activity ranges from hockey clubs to quilters; from mentoring to lobbying; from job-creation to teaching about better energy conservation; from prevention of illness to emergency preparedness and sophisticated input to public policy. Eventually the coloured dots and lines fill the map of our country until the provincial distinctions blur and disappear. And then, the narrative goes: “and so we have” – dramatic pause for audience participation, at which point inevitably someone will say... “a mess.” And so it is.

The story of the sector is, of course, much more complex than what I can portray on a single one-dimensional slide. While many networks form from the bottom up, others form from the top downward and outward, providing forums for national and provincial issues. One might also rightfully argue that we have two distinct sets of webs, each with unique organizing characteristics and history developing independently in French and English Canada.

It was sometime after I left the federal government, when I was working on a collaborative research project on how funders use networks of relationships to manage risk and make informed decisions about investments,³ that I was struck with one of those blinding flashes of the obvious. The network maps we were studying were identical in form and shape to the messy Power Point slide map of the country. We can potentially conceive of the sector not only as increasingly networked but, in and of itself, as a network. Not very graphically compelling, that map, but from the visual now comes a metaphor

Canadian NPO Sector



that accounts for the whole. We can understand the sector as a densely woven shimmering messy web of care that traverses the nation, changing at warp speed as Canadians form, morph, reform, and collaborate in networks of organizations that learn rapidly and respond to the needs and desires of people in communities.

Understanding the sector as a diverse network or a web rather than as a particular set of like organizations is only a conceptual quarter-turn – but it opens new avenues that transcend definition by organizational form and focuses on the dynamic of change. A network is an ephemeral thing. The expectation of change is built in. It is shifting constantly, not hardwired. There is no need to try to pin it to the wall.

Increasingly, operators in the sector, myself including, have been drawn into the implications of complexity theory to frame an emerging understanding of these highly collaborative and networked ways of working. Newtonian physics gave us organizational models that “run like a well-oiled machine,” where each cause has a predictable effect, every cog fits into its wheel, and information flows from the top down on a need-to-know basis. Complexity theory offers new and compelling models, not only for organizations but for the nature of organizing itself. If slime mold can mimic the engineering of Tokyo’s rail system in twenty-four hours, (CBC News, 2010); if schools of fish, flocks of birds, and a flutter of butterflies can together travel thousands of kilometers; if forests

self-select species and sequentially mature over hundreds of years, why would people in communities be any different?

Schools of fish, flocks of birds, butterflies, and forests are complex adaptive systems (CAS). A CAS is, by definition, “a collection of individual agents, who have the freedom to act in unpredictable ways, and whose actions are interconnected such that they produce system-wide patterns” (Eoyang, 2004). In a hierarchy, information flows from top to bottom and from bottom to top along well-greased bureaucratic channels, with little room for deviance and a lot of room for control. In a network or a CAS, information flows randomly and yet in a patterned way – think of water always cutting new channels, always flowing from high to low, yet still having the capacity to rush or meander, settle for a time in a backwater, be drunk or excreted, evaporate or freeze, constantly in motion. A network is adaptive, constantly learning and changing, morphing organizational form and function.

Self-organizing systems are more than the sum of their parts in that, if you reduce them to their components – little piles of organizational cogs and wheels – you would most certainly fail to grasp the whole. A self-organizing system is able to reproduce itself and evolve; it is, in that sense, alive. The sector is like that, more than a collection of discrete organizations, a complex system that changes and evolves in constant motion as communities change. These images from the natural world, perhaps not so separate from ourselves, offer new models of human organization that account for shift and change.

With shift and change come agency and, as Stuart Kauffman (2008), a leading thinker on complexity science and self-organization, points out from a scientific point of view, with agency come meaning, doing, and values. These three components, making meaning, figuring out the doing, and paying attention to values are easily recognizable as the components so central to the sector’s work. Seeing ourselves, and our self-organization for change, as part of an evolving and complex natural world (rather than through the old narratives that cast man in dominion over it), creates a meta-story of organizing in communities where we can look beyond the detail of naming form to recognize an overarching structure of altruistic work.

New language describing the sector as a “social” or “people-centred” economy is beginning to emerge from the more entrepreneurial end of the sector. Lynn Eakin (2009) writes of the “the public benefit economy,” recognizing the economic participation and impact of the sector on the Canadian economy but also the notion of an economy as a collective system of organizations. Most complexity theorists translating the new scientific models to organizational development focus on the random forces at play in the commercial economy, likely because the nonprofit sector is barely on their radar. But seen this way, as two complex adaptive systems with inherent impetus for growth and change, albeit for differing motive, it becomes clearer that – structurally at least – there is affinity between civil society and the market economy. As I watch the shift to more entrepreneurial organizational forms to reach public benefit, I sometimes wonder if we are seeing the influence of the market economy on the sector or reinventing the market itself to more public benefit and sustainable ends.

Not so long ago I was sitting on a bus – a quiet place where I spend quite a bit of time commuting – reading a statistical journal. It was not my usual reading but a random

pick off the coffee table at 6 am. I came upon the work of Andrea Cavanaugh and Irene Giardina (2008), statisticians and researchers studying the flocking behaviour of starlings. Intrigued, I was able to locate Andrea in Rome through another complex adaptive system, the Internet. In the fall, we have all seen these small birds flock in hundreds, even thousands, to weave intricate patterns in the air as they prepare for fall migration. Who knows why they are doing these extraordinary aerial acrobats, but nature seldom wastes energy. Perhaps they are practicing. Their very livelihood depends on their ability to stay connected on brutally long journeys to the warmer climes. No V of geese this, the natural model that came into vogue in leadership literature several years ago, helping us to understand succession planning and that leadership should be shared for the good of the flock. These small birds stay in relationship to an enormous number of others in mid-air, accommodating shift and change that is instantaneous – and, as one flock watcher on Ottmore (a few miles east of Oxford, UK) marvelled on a UTube video,⁴ they never crash. How is that? What is the organizing model offered by a flock of starlings?

Using statistical modelling, Andrea and Irene have determined that each bird navigates its place in the flock by watching the seven other birds in its peripheral vision. No map, no guidance system, no strategic plan – just a highly adaptive capacity to watch their air-space and stay exactly the same distance away from the same seven other birds creating a whole that twists and pirouettes in the air, shifting with minute changes in air current and sunlight.

And here we get to the nub. Not only change but collaboration within a collectivity is at the essence of the work of civil society organizations. In my corner of Trillium, our most important review question about a project funding decision is: Does it change the landscape on which this organization is working? The focus is not only on the impact of funding on the recipient organization but also on those whose work will be changed because they share the landscape of the work. This is what the nonprofit sector is for, many people in organizations working in a constant process of change to public benefit, change that is now happening at a faster and faster pace. That is the value proposition perhaps of the sector – that capacity to learn and change faster than any other mechanism on the public stage.

The notion of “emergence” as defined in complexity science text, is usually explained as “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Kauffman, 1995, p. 24), oddly a phrase we used to describe a community in the early days of the community development movement in the 1970s, when the new science was but a gleam in an eye. The sector seen as a system of interacting organizations has the potential to reproduce itself and to evolve and to do so in a way that cannot be predicted. Stuart Kauffman (2008) puts it this way:

We live in a universe, biosphere, and human culture that are not only emergent but radically creative. We live in a world whose unfolding we often cannot pre-
vision, prestate or predict – a world of explosive creativity on all sides. This is a
central part of the new scientific worldview. (p. 5)

The notion is that a living collective, such as a slime mould or a flock of starlings, a community or even a civil entire sector can, through deliberate strategy – but as often also without conscious collective intention – emerge with similar and timely notions for inno-

vative projects at the same time. As funders, we see this often, and our work is then to link people up with one another to look for the potential for synergy and contribution. The common phrase “an idea whose time has come” speaks to a kind of agency and creativity that is not mechanistic, but arises, perhaps in several places at once, from a common “field” (Scharma, 2005) of people working and thinking about particular civic issues.

What happens when we apply these kinds of models to the image of the “mess” on the map – when we introduce the three-dimensional movement of people organizing themselves as groups. We begin to understand each sector organization as a part of a densely interwoven system that is much fleeter than government, bides deep in the heart of virtually every Canadian community, and can, as a system, develop knowledge of concern and wellbeing, of problem and solution, as rapidly as a starling can turn and works solely for altruistic purposes.

This is in some ways an enormously comforting view of the sector. Rather than “special interest groups” or radical lobbyists or competing forms of organization we, like the starlings, are simply doing what comes naturally. Good people with agency and creativity learning and collaborating together, each in our small corners and yet part of a civic structure profoundly alive to the concerns of those around us as well as the landscape we share. As we begin to make organizing method from the complex and adaptive processes of the natural world around us, what will it mean for our ability to respond more quickly to the aftermath of an earthquake half a world away, the flooding of a tiny First Nations community in remote Northern Ontario, an over-capacity healthcare system, or global warming and a sustainable planet? Perhaps, just perhaps, we can see ourselves figured in the dynamic process of evolution itself: our own evolution as a society and as a species and the evolution of the planet it is now imperative that we learn to share.

NOTES

1. In contrast, I recently met a young grant-seeker who has created a social enterprise where he works with young people who want to earn a living and change the world at the same time. It struck me that he has figured out not only this notion of career path but has a good start on branding as well.
2. While not germane to the story, a BPX is a Private Branch eXchange System sometimes known as a phone switch or phone switching device that connects office telephones in a business with the public telephone network that make many things that we now take for granted possible, such as automated greetings for callers using recorded messages, dialing menus, connections to voicemail, and teleconferencing.
3. “Meta Strategies” by Marilyn Struthers and Liz Rykert, article forthcoming.
4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XH-groCeKbE&feature=related>

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