
CLIMBING THE LADDER: THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN SETTING SECTORAL STRATEGY

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SHOW ROGER HART'S *LADDER OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION* (1997) TO A room full of engaged young people and you will likely be greeted with vigorous head nods. "How many of you have experienced the bottom three rungs of the ladder – manipulation, decoration, or tokenism?" I tentatively asked a youth audience several years ago during a civic engagement workshop. Hands raised without hesitation, and stories began to emerge – young people participating in one-off policy consultations, to receive no further follow-up information; repeat invitations to be youth representatives on boards or at panel discussions, with limited context; being prominently featured in an organization's annual report without their express consent.

I can relate. Countless consultations, boards, and committees later, myself – a soon-to-be university graduate – and many of my peers still struggle to find a place for ourselves in the sector in which we have grown up. Community-minded from a young age, we were often received warmly as volunteers, summer students, and youth board members. However, the Canadian nonprofit sector fails to transfer a sense of ownership of the future of the nonprofit sector to young people transitioning from youth to young adulthood. Unfortunately, the sector's enthusiasm about meaningful youth engagement does not always translate into support systems for these same youth to later influence the future of the sector as engaged employees and community members.

The stakes are high – the stark employment prospects for young people, the sustainability of nonprofit organizations, and the vitality of our communities depend on strong leadership that facilitates and recognizes the importance of young people's ownership of the sector early on in their careers. This issue is distinct from growing concern over the leadership gap in the nonprofit sector, exemplified by studies that suggest only 2% of Canadian young people aged 16–27 – and disproportionately young women – identify the nonprofit sector as their preferred field of employment (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, 2010). This leadership gap is worrying, but the recruitment of young people is secondary to a more pressing issue – a culture at the organizational and sectoral levels that discourages engaged young people from staying, and prevents qualified emerging leaders from accessing positions of influence and shaping the immediate future of the sector. The foreseeable challenges for Canada's not-for-profit sector in the future – an austere funding climate, barriers to policy advocacy, generational shifts in the labour force, and increased demands to identify and quantify program outcomes – can only be addressed effectively through intergenerational collaboration.

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When well-intentioned employers and organizations engage youth, they are applying a largely individualist approach to an increasingly structural problem. Identifying and engaging “star” young people at the organizational level differs significantly from setting strategy that cultivates a sense of ownership and sector-level perspective in young people nationwide, across organizations and subsectors. Both individual and structural approaches are needed for a cultural shift that values young people’s contributions and positions them as key stakeholders to vision the future of the sector.

Before addressing potential structural approaches, employers and organizations in the sector have an important individual role to play. At this level, four cultural changes are key: (1) communicating a sense of trust; (2) making space for young people to innovate, and fail; (3) providing opportunities for shared power and decision-making; and (4) identifying strategic mentors and allies in the sector. When young people are trusted, supported, and enabled within organizations, a sector-level perspective comes naturally.

Thinking structurally about young people’s ownership of the nonprofit sector is more complex. Imagine Canada’s 2011 National Summit for the Charitable and Nonprofit Sector, in which 100 young leaders were engaged in sector-level strategizing, laid the groundwork for further meaningful conversation and action. Policy is another key site of structural intervention, and further consultation with young people about such issues as labour force planning and employability, philanthropic incentives and tax credits, mentorship and succession planning, and funding reform would be fruitful. Policy tools such as the Government of Ontario’s OSAP loan forgiveness program for university graduates working in the nonprofit sector (Government of Ontario, 2012) are an excellent start, but an integrated, nationwide strategy for young people and the nonprofit sector is long overdue.

Such a strategy could integrate and expand existing research and analysis on youth engagement, volunteerism, and employment; generational shifts in charitable giving and philanthropy; and future trends in the sector. Locating young people at the centre, rather than the periphery, of sector-wide strategizing would build a culture of inclusion, mentorship, and intergenerational collaboration. A long-term youth strategy would position the sector as visionary and forward thinking, rather than shortsighted, reactive, or defensive. As nonprofits become increasingly important service providers due to shifting political dynamics (Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005), this kind of strategy is essential for a vibrant community and economy.

A key part of thinking structurally about young people’s ownership of the nonprofit sector is convening spaces for young people to shape their own collective narrative. Such work is currently being undertaken in Ottawa, Toronto, and other Canadian cities – cultivating networks of young people who are interested in thinking strategically about the sustainability of the sector they envision for their future careers, lives, and families. Such a narrative runs deeper than young people’s anxieties about precarious employment, a lack of core funding for their organizations, and the health of the Canadian economy, although these fears are legitimate. Identifying and communicating young people’s shared narratives about their investment in, and the importance of, the nonprofit sector is an exercise in thinking sectorally and validating diversity across geographies, career trajectories, and subsectors. Key to this national strategy is giving young people equal power

to set the agenda and identify policy priorities, and recognizing that “young people” is a contested and heterogeneous category. Envisioning the future of the nonprofit sector with, rather than for, young people is not just a question of organizational leadership – it is the foundation of sustainable communities and a healthy democracy for years to come.

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