

**Toward Evidence Based Politics:  
Implications for the Relationship between Public Servants  
and the Voluntary Sector**

Rachel Laforest  
School of Policy Studies  
Queen's University  
Kingston, Ontario

and

Michael Orsini  
School of Political Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario

Paper prepared for *Smart Practices Toward Innovation in Public Management*, 20th  
Anniversary Conference of the Structure and Organization of Government Research  
Committee of the International Political Science Association

DRAFT

Please do not cite without permission

## **Introduction**

The way we create policy today has changed in profound and substantive ways. It requires cooperation, linkages and exchanges. Policy makers are increasingly recognizing that decision-making is not a simple, top-down process imposed by governmental actors, but is the result of ongoing collaboration with multiple actors from diverse backgrounds who mutually try to influence each other. Prying open the policy process to a greater number of actors would seem, then, to be a laudable goal indeed. Partnerships, cross-sectoral collaboration, and relationship building have become the key features of this new governance process (Phillips, 2001). In a world in which ‘government’ has been seemingly replaced by ‘governance’ (Rhodes, 1996; Peters, 2000; Stoker, 1998), success depends on the government’s ability to manage complex relationships and to work across sectors, bridging what can sometimes be intractable cultural and organizational divides. While these partnerships have the potential to encourage creativity and unleash innovation in the bureaucracy, they also create a host of new challenges for policy makers, with which they have yet come to terms. The main danger from the government’s perspective is that opening up the process to a wide range of non-state actors with strong and vigorous views on policy issues may result in a harsh, discordant mixture of voices that can complicate the process of informed decision making.

The new emphasis on evidence-based policy making and results-based management is one way of bridging these divides by securing common ground on the language, tools and skills required to contribute effectively to policy discussions. While one might argue that the explosion of access to information (qualitative and quantitative),

and the privileged role of social science research are forcing actors to rethink how they engage in policy discussion, not to mention reconfigure their goals or objectives and the means by which they will achieve them, we contend that this transformation is not simply the result of external structural forces. It reflects, rather, an explicit move on the part of the Canadian government to promote the dissemination and proliferation of evidence-based policy making as a “smart practice” through a series of specific programs and funding initiatives. This trend towards “evidence-based everything” also reflects a deliberate strategy by the federal government to shape the behaviour of organizations involved in policy making by determining the rules of engagement which, in turn, will help the government better control the outcomes.

The idea of privileging a certain form of policy making rooted in evidence has indeed become a driving force in the search for more efficient ways of delivering policies and programmes. The objective of promoting evidence based policy making as a best practice is also supposed to ensure that we are learning from practices across sectors so that we are not repeating the same mistakes or reinventing the wheel. Nevertheless, there is a disjuncture between the theory of best practice and the impact it has on the ground. Designed to encourage innovation, these practices can be potentially harmful and constraining to the voluntary sector. While it can help to foster a common language that can be easily grasped by all actors involved in policy making, the promotion of smart practices may actually be eclipsed by the counter movement of centralizing political control, which can actually stifle innovation if policy actors are discouraged from engaging in risk taking behaviour, which is, after all, the *sine qua non* of innovation.

Using a series of interviews conducted with representatives from national voluntary sector organizations, this paper explores how these organizations are adapting to the new emphasis on “evidence-based policy making” as a smart practice. Our case study examines how this focus on evidence-based policy, which claims to promote innovation and creativity on the ground, may actually be encouraging a standardization of practices. Rather than seeing a multiplicity of innovative practices, our study shows that voluntary organizations are actually using fewer policy tools and fewer strategies to influence the policy process, investing most of their energy on research and evidence based advocacy. In the process, it is reshaping the relationship between bureaucracy and the voluntary sector.

The first paper of the paper examines the increasing influence of evidence based policy, which is linked to an equally influential shift to evidence based medicine and evidence based practice. The second section provides examples of how the bureaucracy’s relationship with the voluntary sector is being influenced by evidence-based practice, looking at particular federal government programs and initiatives that have encouraged a shift toward evidence based policy. In the third section, we explore some of the effects of this shift toward evidence based policy making, and how are they are transforming not only the voluntary sector but also the relationship between the voluntary sector and the public sector. In particular, we examine the federal government’s support of knowledge transfer brokers in the sector such as the National Children’s Alliance, and the Voluntary Sector Initiative, a process which instituted codes of good practice in the relationship between the federal government and the sector.

## **The Era of Evidence based policy making**

Twenty-first century social science research might well be renamed the “era of evidence”. Researchers are clamouring to produce “usable knowledge”, government funding bodies are eager to support research that is useful beyond serving to shore up the general corpus of knowledge. At the heart of evidence based policy is the idea that policy can and should be based on the best available social science evidence. After all, who would quibble with the argument that policy be based on the best available evidence?

However, greater access to information and research by a variety of actors has transformed the policy making ‘playing field’. The skills required to influence public policy have changed. Access, influence, and overall policy success are no longer determined solely by traditional power politics, where actors leverage their strength through numbers and where the squeaky wheel gets the grease. It is a politics in which knowledge, or more appropriately, scientific expertise, triumphs.

Although even the non-specialist can appreciate that the world of policy making is “messy, unstable and uncertain”, the policy model upon which evidence based policy making is based reflects a world in which objective, conclusive information is supplied to policy makers, who have previously set policy goals and the means to achieve them (Young et al, 2002: 218). This discourse establishes science as the legitimate site for policy making (Dobrowolsky and Jenson, forthcoming; Laforest and Orsini, 2003). While this shift creates opportunities for organizations who engage in research activities, it also constrains their options by closing off political spaces to forms of representation that may

be unconventional or too politicized. What is perhaps more insidious is that this shift towards evidence-based policy making conveys an image of a policy process that is depoliticized and in which information and data can speak for themselves. It is important to stress here that certain forms of evidence occupy a privileged position in the ‘hierarchy of evidence’, with statistical research and economic modelling near the top of the hierarchy and “lay forms of evidence” such as public consultations or focus groups at the bottom (Young et al, 2002). Not surprisingly, old fashioned advocacy has no place in the new lexicon.

Decision-makers are now exposed to a wide range of views, data, and information, which can be interpreted in a multitude of ways (OECD, 1994). Just exactly what constitutes expertise and who might be seen as an expert in the policy process have undergone profound change as a result of this explosion of knowledge. While policy expertise was traditionally the safeguard of public servants, the federal government, concerned as it purports to be about democratic legitimacy, now requires the input of the third parties in developing, designing, and implementing policy (Pierre, 1998). Nevertheless, given the diversity of actors involved in policy making and working on issues collaboratively, it becomes imperative that actors share best practices and develop common ways of addressing problems. It also creates a need for “a common language, a community of discourse among those who have different perspectives and interests and who use different specialist languages” (OECD, 1994: 25). As Bardach notes, “Collaborators cannot always choose partners who share intellectual capital, but I would count it as a smart practice for them to create it as they go along.” (Bardach, 1998: 202).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Intellectual capital here is taken to mean, “agreed on facts, shared problem definitions, and mutual understandings [that] not only [provide] a common basis for discussion and [move] the players toward

Here research activities can play an important role in enabling not only cross-sectoral ‘connectivity’, but inter-departmental linkages as well. It allows actors to share knowledge and learn from one another.

Moreover, grounding policy in an evidence base is central to the federal government’s concerns with accountability and results-based management. As

Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin explain,

What is notable and novel, in both Canada and Britain, is that this pragmatic orientation is given credence by wedding popular policy proposals to deliverable policy targets, quantified through various indicators [...] Pragmatic promises (old and new) become measured, and are more closely monitored. First, policies are developed in ways that project future outcomes in light of their productive potential: the choices being made now bank on the benefits to be reaped later on. Second, not only are pledges made with future targets in mind, but also advancement on these goals is scrutinized.<sup>2</sup> (Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin, 7)

Hence, while relinquishing some of its responsibilities in the sphere of policy making, the federal government wants to ensure the quality of inputs that are provided by third parties involved. As a result, along with a move towards greater flexibility and innovation in policy, there is also a counter movement to regain control by emphasizing results-based management.<sup>3</sup> Both of these shifts are intertwined. They reflect a delicate balancing act between providing greater flexibility and range to allow these actors to be innovative, while maintaining some degree of control over the process. The federal government does not intend to lose its capacity to manage the policy process, but rather it needs to ensure that certain conditions are met.

---

agreement on policy issues, but [allow] them to use this shared information to coordinate many of their actions.” (From Innes, Gruber, and their colleagues;1994, pp. ix-x, quoted in Bardach, 1998: 202).

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Dobrowolsky and Denis Saint-Martin, “Agency, Actors and Change in a Child-Focused Future: Problematizing Path Dependency’s Past and Statist Parameters”, Working draft,” forthcoming in Governance, 2004 but I don’t have the exact title; available at: [www.fas.umontreal.ca/pol/cohesionsociale](http://www.fas.umontreal.ca/pol/cohesionsociale).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, as Borins notes, even application for public sector innovation awards in the U.S. are judged “on the basis of results (such as improvements in the well being of program clients, service improvements, or reduced cost).” (Borins, 2000, p. 499).

## **Developing evidence based practice in the voluntary sector: Is it smart? Is it innovative?**

The idea of promoting innovation has become a driving force in the search for more efficient ways of delivering public services and programmes. Not surprisingly given that governance occurs increasingly through networks, studies show that the involvement of the private and voluntary sectors is key to successful public management innovation (Borins, 2001). Arguably, however, much of the emphasis has centered on how to encourage innovation in the delivery of services via private sector and third sector partners given the academic interest in welfare state restructuring and the offloading of public services to other sectors. There is a dearth of research concerning the link between innovation practices and citizen involvement in policy processes, which is all the more baffling given the increasing attention paid to growing citizen disillusionment with political systems that appear closed, unaccountable and lacking in transparency (Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Nevitte, 1996). Yet, the voluntary sector is increasingly seen a valuable intermediary between the state and the general public.

In fact, ‘evidence’ from federal government documents and speeches suggests that these discourses on the voluntary sector have been pushed forward by a desire to reconnect with individual citizens. For example, Mel Cappe, former Clerk of the Privy Council, stated: “The voluntary sector reaches out and touches parts of society which the government cannot easily or efficiently reach...”<sup>4</sup> The federal government also recognized the need to engage Canadians around the common objective of better serving

---

<sup>4</sup> Mel Cappe, “Building a New relationship with the Voluntary Sector”, Speech to the Third Canadian Leaders’ Forum on the Voluntary Sector, May 31, 1999, Available at <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Clerkspeechesandmessages>.

Canadians.<sup>5</sup> In fact, communicating with the public and enhancing participation in the policy process have become key objective of the federal government, which sees the voluntary sector as a potential partner for involving citizens in the decision-making process. The federal government therefore clearly has an interest in strengthening voluntary sector involvement in policy development.

Promoting evidence-based practice is seen by the federal government as a useful practice to ensure appropriate accountability and transparency in policy making, and in the process, to foster public trust. As voluntary sector organizations begin to assume a greater role in policy making, they can contribute significantly through the gathering and sharing of information, and act as the go-between to transmit this valuable body of knowledge/ information to citizens.

In order to do so effectively, however, these organizations require greater sophistication with understanding and applying information to ensure the quality of the inputs feeding into the policy process. The rationale is that organizations must be competent in the area in which policy advice is proffered. The last thing that the federal government wants to do is encourage the proliferation of advocacy groups who are critical of government policies as it did in the 1980s (Pal, 1993; Phillips and Jenson, 1996). Rather, by focusing on evidence-based policy, it is expected that voluntary organizations will possess sufficient information to make informed, reasoned decisions, they will have the capacity to see issues from different perspective, and, ideally, it is hoped they will be better positioned to make policy trade-offs. By promoting the use of evidence and data in policy making, the federal government can almost guarantee the

---

<sup>5</sup> Phillips and Orsini.

quality of the advice that feeds into the process without having to intervene directly in the process.

This shift is not unique to Canada, as a number of industrialized countries such as the UK, New Zealand and Australia have also recently embarked on initiatives to encourage evidence-based policy making in the voluntary sector (Solesbury 2001). Part of the reason lies in the potential contribution that the sector can bring to both policy making and service delivery. In fact, as Bardach notes, there is a wealth of opportunities for innovation that can arise from the involvement of voluntary organizations and non-traditional participants, which can often go unnoticed (Bardach, n.d.). Because of their ties to the community and their role in the delivery of social programmes, voluntary sector organizations are ideally suited to provide input and knowledge to improve not only the quality of decisions being made, but the programmes themselves and how they are delivered. Exploiting these latent opportunities, Bardach argues, can be a smart practice, since the public sector can create value without incurring too many expenses (Bardach, 1998). Their involvement, therefore, can be an important element in public sector innovation. How effective it is as a smart practice, however, will depend on how it is done, what impact it might have on the voluntary sector and on its relationship with the public sector.

### **Promoting Evidence Based Policy Making: The Federal Government's Role**

In order to reshape its relationship with the voluntary sector, the federal government established a number of organizational arrangements that would allow voluntary sector organizations to develop evidence based practices. The first important

step for the federal government was to develop a long term informal contract with the voluntary sector based on a mutual understanding of the sector's roles and responsibilities. This work led to the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), a joint initiative which purports to reflect a commitment to improved communication and collaboration between the federal government and the voluntary sector. In the process, the parameters for engagement in policy making were reframed.

The first two years of this five-year, \$94.6 million Initiative focused on laying down the foundations of a new relationship. The work of the VSI is conducted by joint tables drawing membership equally from the federal government and the voluntary sector. A Joint Coordinating Committee was established to provide leadership and oversight for the VSI. Six other joint tables and three working groups were established to implement specific elements of the VSI. The Joint Tables are assisted by two newly created Secretariats, the Voluntary Sector Task Force and the Voluntary Sector Secretariat.

The work of the VSI unfolded in two distinct phases. The first phase used the joint tables over the first two to three years to launch specific activities, and establish mechanisms for ongoing dialogue and reporting. The bulk of the work and the monies was allocated to the first phase with \$11.5 million allotted to building a more positive relationship between the federal government and the sector through the development of an Accord and codes of conduct; \$35 million for strengthening the capacity of the sector and the knowledge of it through the institutionalization of the National Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (NSGVP); \$8.6 million to improve the regulatory framework; \$1 million to modernize the federal funding strategies; \$10 million to

encourage the benefits of volunteering and \$28.5 million to involve the sector in policy development.

The first phase was intended to contribute to building the foundation for long-term change by advancing the dialogue between the two sectors. The second phase was intended to focus on developing a more positive relationship between the federal government and the voluntary sector, and overseeing the implementation of programs and recommendations developed during the first phase of the VSI such as the Accord, which was signed by the federal government and the voluntary sector in Dec. 2001, as well as the development of Codes of conduct. These two documents, the Accord and the Codes of conduct, are critical to providing a guide for good practices within the sector, as they provide a signal of the changing codes of behaviour and conduct that regulate relationships in policy making.

In fact, if we use the policy document prepared by the Capacity Joint Table as our guide, organizations may need to learn new rules of etiquette (Capacity Joint Table, 2003). In a section of the document titled “Saying Thank you”, the author explains that “recognizing efforts made in support of your issues is one of the most important steps in policy dialogue. Recognizing efforts will add to your organization's credibility and will help build strong relationships.” (Capacity Joint Table, Voluntary Sector Initiative, p. 51). The document also contains a series of “tips” to voluntary sector organizations that may not be aware of the proper etiquette or informal rules of conduct when dealing with governmental actors:

- Be prompt. Make note of when there has been an important event (for example, a vote in the legislature, the issuance of a grant, an activity supported by the grant) and say thank you right away. The more quickly you acknowledge a person for their support, the better.
- If you are pursuing press coverage, publicly acknowledge support at an event with good photo opportunities.
- Be aware of your timing - choose times where your efforts will have an increased legislative impact.
- Be sure to thank officials even when they don't agree with you or things don't go your way. Don't forget that effective public policy influence requires sustained input over a period of time. Significant changes in public policy take a long time to initiate and longer to implement. Building relationships along the way will make it a more pleasant process.
- Use thank you letters as simple and formal responses to officials. Provide a specific example of how the official's actions on a policy issue affected your organization and its clients.
- Re-address the same letter to the "Letters to the Editor" section of your local paper.
- Say "thank you" personally in a public forum. For example, get up at an appropriate time in the House, such as a question and answer period, and say that you appreciate the MP's action, vote or whatever they have done to support your organization.
- If you are part of an organization that covers many districts and you send a letter expressing gratitude to an MP, make sure you send copies of your letter to your organization's members who live in the MP's constituency and let the MP know that you have so. (Capacity Joint Table, Voluntary Sector Initiative, p. 51)

This recent publication on voluntary sector involvement in policy development signals clearly just how government expects organizations to behave and act. It prescribes and provides a guide for appropriate conduct in the policy realm directed at specific behaviours. It is clear from the tone of the document that confrontational or “innovative” tactics will not be tolerated if the sector wishes to be seen as a legitimate and responsible partner in the serious world of policy making. Rather, what is emerging is a model of bureaucratized interactions which can profoundly transform the relationship between the federal government and voluntary organizations. As we shall see later, the federal government may have promoted these tools of best practice without a fundamental

understanding of how to foster an environment conducive to innovation in the voluntary sector.

The federal government also launched a number of other initiatives under the VSI in order to identify and disseminate good practices, including a series of training sessions across the country and in federal departments in the area of human resources management using training material and implementation guides. The rationale for these programs is to promote the dissemination of technical, managerial, administrative and professional skills that are deemed relevant across the sector. A web portal has been established through which organizations can share lessons and best practices.

Another important initiative under the VSI was the creation of the Sectoral Involvement in Departmental Policy Development (SIDPD) program, a \$30 million initiative designed to invest in capacity building in policy development. According to Lucienne Robillard, the federal cabinet minister overseeing the VSI at the time, “these projects are instrumental in building the voluntary sector's capacity to influence Government of Canada policy-making” (Government of Canada, 2001, Aug. 8). In fact, a number of these projects are identified as examples of ‘best practice’ in voluntary sector-government partnerships and are to be reported and shared with the voluntary sector and government departments in order to encourage similar action.

Aside from the VSI, the second step taken by the federal government was to redesign the patterns of resource flows (both financial and informational) between the federal government and the voluntary sector. To foster knowledge transfer, the federal government recognized the need to create communities of knowledge and began to invest

in the voluntary sector to create communities of research that would generate useable data and information. Not only would this build capacity in the voluntary sector, it was reasoned, it would also help to establish a research community that could participate in policy discussion, as well as ensure leadership in the future.

The federal government began to encourage collaboration across sectors through a number of initiatives in order to improve the production, dissemination and uptake of policy-relevant research. Driven by funders of social science programs such as the Social Science and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC's) Community-University Research Alliance (CURA), there is a new thirst for building knowledge through cross-sectoral collaboration so that organizations with similar interests can work together and learn from one another. The payoff would be knowledge, practices and skills that could be dispersed across sectors.

A network of Research Data Centres in Canada, otherwise known as knowledge brokers, was also created by the federal government to facilitate this process. The Canadian Learning Institute and the Canadian Institute of Health Information are examples of initiatives that were specifically geared to enable outside actors to participate in policy making.

The third step taken by the federal government has been to afford greater political space and credibility to actors who have begun to engage in evidence based practice. As one organization representative recounts, "Data-based or evidence-based advocacy is viewed as more credible, compelling and influential than other forms of advocacy. It parallels a move in government, at least on paper, towards data-based decision-making. When the stories that organizations communicate are based in evidence, in data, the

audience (including governments, professionals and the general public) has more confidence in the interpretation of the problem and the solutions proposed.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, voluntary sector organizations in the field of children and family services have been particularly adept at using longitudinal data and studies to gain credibility in policy making. As a result of access to data and research, voluntary organizations have begun to focus on the importance of investing in third party monitoring and indicator development in order to play a leading role in the policy making process. As the National Children’s Alliance writes, “Monitoring is not only about assessing the effectiveness of these government agreements; even more important to the Alliance is monitoring to influence public policy through evidence and data-based advocacy.” (NCA newsletter, December 2003: 4)

The National Children’s Alliance (NCA), the Canadian Council of Social Development (CCSD), the Vanier Institute of the Family, the Canadian Institute of Child Health, Campaign 2000, and the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Child are also involved in monitoring activities.<sup>7</sup> While many of these organizations have been compiling data for close to a decade, what is distinct in today’s environment is that they are now recognized by the federal government as ‘experts’ in the field of child poverty (McKeen, 2004). Whereas previously they would mobilize their members on the basis of these reports and pressure governments from outside formal structures, they now have

---

<sup>6</sup> Karen Kidder, *Third Party Monitoring of Canada’s Promise for Children*, National Children’s Alliance, November 13, 2003, available at: <http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Campaign 2000 publishes the annual Report Card on Child Poverty in Canada, drawing on the Statistics Canada Survey of Consumer Finances, among others; the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of Children publishes *How Does Canada Measure Up*; the Canadian Council on Social Development publishes the Progress of Canada’s Children annually, draws on a wide range of Statistics Canada surveys and other sources; the Canadian Institute of Child Health publishes the *Health of Canada’s Children: A CICH Profile* every four to five years; and the Vanier Institute of the Family publishes *Profiling Canada’s Families*, approximately every six years drawing on Statistics Canada census and survey data.

secured credibility and access to the policy table because of their knowledge in this area. Broad monitoring efforts, such as *The Progress of Canada's Children* and *How does Canada Measure Up?*, serve as important resources to organizations to support research, proposal writing, policy, program development and advocacy. In response to their success and lobbying work, more monies are being distributed to develop comprehensive indicators and develop data systems within the sector, which will ultimately feed into the policy process.

What impact are these new arrangements and initiatives having on the sector and on its relationship with government? It is to these issues that we now turn.

### **Transforming the voluntary sector**

The new found emphasis on evidence and knowledge dissemination has brought about a number of significant changes in the sector. Driven by a boom in research contracts, in request for proposals, and demands for consultant work in the voluntary sector, organizations have seen their research budgets expand.

We identify at least four important effects of these evidence-based initiatives on the sector: redefining the requisite skills set; redefinition of stakes/claims; changes in the repertoires of political action; and shifting alliances/tensions in the sector. While the paper does not permit us to examine each in depth, we instead sketch the main contours of these effects.

First, the move towards evidence based policy making requires that voluntary sector actors acquire a certain set of skills if they are to influence policy in their targeted area. Organizations are now expected to conduct or at least support/fund research that is objective, reliable, not to mention translatable to their constituencies and to policy makers – all in the interest of building policy capacity. They need to keep abreast of any developments in their field and be able to interpret research for decision-makers and for their constituency. Studies are important, but equally important is the pithy executive summary that translates the research into terms that are understandable by a lay audience. For those organizations with sufficient resources, conducting such research may not be a daunting challenge; for others, however, budgets do not permit the hiring of a researcher, nor do they allow for the contracting out of research.

In the document prepared by the Voluntary Sector Initiative Capacity Table this year that billed itself as a primer for voluntary sector organizations interested in influencing policy, organizations are implored to get busy acquiring the necessary skills in order to join the policy club (Capacity Joint Table, 2004). Four key areas are identified: skill acquisition and development; gathering knowledge and information; identification and use of tools and resources; and climate and process for policy development and analysis. The document makes a direct link between research skills and an organization's credibility:

Research is an essential component of policy analysis and strategy development. It is crucial that your organization is seen as credible and is able to back up what it knows from experience with sound evidence and research. If you don't have research staff of your own, there are ways to find research assistance in most communities. Apply for project funding from government, a foundation or other funders to conduct research. Contact your nearest university or college – there are often students or faculty who are interested in conducting local research. Find out

who has already done research on your issue and learn from them. (Capacity Joint Table, Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2004, p. 28)

In order to meet these demands, organizations need to develop new analytical skills either through training or through new hiring practices. Both these avenues, however, can have a long term impact on an organization. Already, our study reveals an important shift in the type of individuals employed. For example, the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), which had a tradition of hiring social workers and activists who began their careers in grassroots organizations, is now increasingly hiring professional researchers who may not have those necessary links to community. One cannot underestimate the impact that such a shift in personnel can have on the culture of the organization.

Second, the increased importance of evidence-based policy is forcing actors in the voluntary sector to rethink the claims they can make against governments. Our analysis found many significant changes in the attitudes of participants using an evidence base to advocate on policy issues. Considerable increases in political knowledge and information revealed a mainstreaming of ideas. Organizations had become increasingly cautious in their approach. Claims that can not be supported by the type of research that is valued sometimes need to be watered down or abandoned altogether in favour of claims that are achievable.

Organizations are also being counselled to be patient with their demands, since building a solid body of evidence around a particular issue requires time and careful work. Because of this sense of accomplishment, organizations are more willing to make

short term concessions in order to secure long term goals. However this is creating rifts within the sector, particularly between national umbrella organizations and their members whose political horizon is shorter.

Those organizations that have been waiting for years for governments to take action on certain policy areas do not appreciate being told that they have to wait a little longer. In fact, some leaders of organizations are having a lot of difficulty convincing the rank and file that the wait is worth it. Local members of national umbrella groups have reported a growing dissonance between their short-term needs, and the long-term strategic policy focus that seems to dominate at the national level. Many of the groups interviewed have begun to question the relevance of investing their time and energy on securing long-term gains at the national level, particularly in a period of constrained resources, when they face so many pressing issues in their daily practice.

Third, with evidence based engagement comes a change in the repertoires of action pursued by organization. Related to the second point, a focus on acquiring reliable, sound evidence justifies strategies that are conventional or routinized. Since non-state actors sometimes rely on the element of surprise in order to attack opponents and sometimes need to bend the rules in order to press their claims, an approach grounded in research may not be the fertile ground upon which to introduce unconventional forms of advocacy, much less creative protest. As a result, organizations are encouraged to ‘play it safe’ and take their cue from the research. Already, we are seeing signs of change occurring in the style and forms of political action. Voluntary organizations relying

increasingly on research and data to support their advocacy work have undergone important organizational overhaul.

This shift has particular implications for voluntary sector organizations whose basis for intervention has historically lied with the interests that they represent. Engaging in the policy process is no longer a way to express one's views, collective identity, or to establish new frames of meaning that can alter the policy discourse. Rather, the sector's involvement in policy is depoliticized, and tailored to fit into pre-existing bureaucratic modes of decision making. This has contributed to a growing professionalization of policy making and advocacy, which has the potential to undermine the community-oriented nature of voluntary sector organizations.

Clearly, this move towards evidence-policy makers does not create an environment conducive to innovation, flexibility or change. Since the frequent initiators of innovation are usually the front line workers with close ties to the community, this move towards evidence and research distances the organization from its constituency. It also closes off spaces for those in the community who wish to feed their views into the policy process. Once the "evidence is in", there is no need to consult with other actors in the sector who may hold contrary views, but who lack the necessary "evidence" to bolster their claims.

Fourth, this shift toward evidence based policy is already revealing tensions within the sector as well as creating new divisions. This is not surprising given the fact that the sector is diverse in terms of philosophy/ideology and approach. Previously, however, these battles were fought and (sometimes) resolved within the sector. Today, new battle lines have been drawn, creating one group of privileged organizations, which

enjoy access and influence and have the necessary resources to influence policy, and another group of organizations, which has been frozen out of the policy process for reasons of ideological opposition, lack of technical skills/capacity, or both.

While access to data and information heightens the potential for voluntary organizations to influence the policy process, it can also lead to a greater detachment from their membership base. It also drives a wedge between elites in the sector who enjoy privileged access to policy makers and/or bureaucrats and rank and file members of these same organizations who may not. In fact, under this new model, it is those organizations which behave appropriately that receive rewards: credibility, legitimacy, privileged access to policy makers through formal and informal channels, and even funding. This dynamic has forced the voluntary sector to connect far more closely with the federal government bureaucracy than ever before. As a result, the lines of communication between upper level management and voluntary organizations have been opened. This need to turn attention upward has undermined horizontal loyalty and led to tensions across the sector. It creates a climate of entrepreneurship as organizations strive to distinguish themselves in the political arena, or in service delivery. Rather than promoting teamwork, participation and flexibility; these dynamics encourage divisions and the creation of more hierarchy within the sector. As noted by Laforest and Orsini, national voluntary organizations have been particularly affected, as the new-found coziness with the federal government has harmed their legitimacy on the ground among local member organizations. (Laforest and Orsini, 2003)

What the government is encouraging, then, is openings or “windows of opportunity” for some organizations and their members while closing off opportunities to

organizations who may not have the requisite expertise or access, not to mention shutting out those rank and file members of “chosen” organizations who may feel disconnected from the elites who are dictating their organization’s agenda. While it has afforded privileged access to some, it has provoked resentment among those who feel that these new elites are dominating the sector and receiving the lion’s share of funding and opportunities. In particular, the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy and Volunteer Canada have been singled as having received substantial funding under the federal government’s Voluntary Sector Initiative.

What is not yet clear is how much resistance will emerge within the voluntary sector to attempts to internalize such a code of discipline. Already many local and provincial organizations have reported that they feel pressures from within the sector to follow, chapter and verse, the terms of engagement outlined in the Accord and the Codes of good conduct.

As is evident, these four effects are linked, since changing the skills required in order to gain access to the policy process will have an impact on the articulation of forces within the sector, on the patterns of representation, and on the alliances between groups. For instance, the federal government’s decision to anoint the National Children’s Alliance (NCA) as the authentic voice on child poverty was related to the NCA’s explicit decision to accept the rules of ‘evidence-based engagement’. The NCA received federal funding in order to serve as a representative for the sector, despite the fact that Campaign 2000, a more radical group, was more established and had traditionally intervened on issues regarding children. Campaign 2000 had enjoyed much popular support in the 1990s in the fight against child poverty (Mahon and Phillips, 2003).

The NCA, one should recall, was instrumental in putting early childhood development on the governmental policy radar. It did so, however, using the powerful research provided by renowned neuroscientist Fraser Mustard on child brain development. The awakening of governments, both federal and provincial, to the importance of early childhood intervention, affected the articulation of claims among those voluntary sector actors in the field of family and child services. As a result, many long standing child poverty advocates, recognizing a “policy window”, adjusted their agenda towards early childhood development and away from poverty. Many of the groups in the field of family and children services recall that they felt the government was open to discussing issues on early childhood development because of the attention that the Longitudinal survey on Kids and Health and the work of Fraser Mustard had brought to the issue.

This shift in policy focus obviously had an important impact within the sector of family and children services because it shifted the potential alliances among groups. This decision also had an effect on the weight of policy discourses within the sector. It marginalized children’s poverty in favour of early childhood development issues. In fact, some long standing advocates of child poverty were unwilling to shift their focus away from child poverty, others like the women’s movement felt that by focusing on the ‘child’ obscured how these issues tie into women’s issues. The result was that the women’s movement and the anti-poverty movement were virtually absent from the policy community around early childhood development (McKeen, 2004).

Moreover, new allies began to present themselves such as the Canadian School Boards Association, Canadian Teachers' Federation, Canadian Nurses Association,

Canadian Paediatric Society because they felt that by focusing initially on early childhood development there was an opportunity in the long-term to use these alliances to build support for government intervention in later years. Moreover, the more conservative approach grounded in research appealed to them.

Rather than seeing a diversification of practices and avenues for political action, the example of the NCA illustrates that the sector's energies were channelled towards building a relationship with the federal government and working in collaboration. While the move towards evidence based policy making and monitoring has added new policy tools to the repertoire of action within the sector; other modes of action have been left aside such as advocacy and civic engagement. Moreover, the conditions generated by a sharing of information and data contribute to a mainstreaming of the sector and of its practices, as more radical organizations disengage from the federal government.

As a result, voluntary organizations may have undermined their relationship to their members, thereby undercutting their long-term capacity for involvement in policy. Paradoxically, national voluntary organizations are losing their credibility as actors who can legitimately claim to represent community interests at a time when government appears to be most interested in talking to average citizens, as opposed to the "usual suspects." (Jenson and Phillips, 1996 )<sup>8</sup> This is particularly relevant when one thinks of the importance of empowering citizens and community in order to foster public sector innovation (Borins, 2001). Encouraging elites within the sector to interact with

---

<sup>8</sup> This trend is not unique to Canada, however. Skocpol (2003) has written recently on the professionalization of advocacy in the American context; and Saurugger (2002) has witnessed a similar shift in France. Both argue that because today's advocacy groups are staff-heavy and focused on lobbying, research, and media projects, they are managed from the top with few opportunities for member leverage from below.

governments, all the while neglecting the communities from which these sector actors acquire legitimacy, can be a recipe for disaster.

While the value and contribution of science and evidence needs to be recognized, so too does the importance of citizen's perspectives and experiential knowledge, which provide alternative and creative ways of framing policy issues. Empowering local communities should also be valued as an end in itself. In order to be a truly learning experience, policy debates need to provide space for genuine dialogue, an exchange of ideas, and challenging beliefs. It is only through such processes, that bureaucrats may be able to step out of the box, take risks and perhaps learn to innovate in an era of increasing complexity and uncertainty.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to fill an important gap in the literature on innovation in public management, which often neglects the important role played by the voluntary sector in a number of areas, including service and program delivery, the policy process, and citizenship building. We have argued that evidence based policy making not only privileges certain sector actors who have the requisite skills and knowledge to take part in policy dialogue; it has the potential to mainstream the sector and divest it of its potential to empower citizens and communities. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that organizations are increasingly relying on data and evidence as a platform for their advocacy, rather than turning to their members in order to represent their interests. This shift has profound implications for democratic participation and citizen engagement.

Evidence based practice should not be seen as the only valid input into policy making and the standard reference for all involved in policy. It should be thought of as one of the contributions that the voluntary sector can make to policy making. Also important is the everyday “situated knowledge” that organizations can bring to the table. After all, voluntary organizations are spaces where democracy, the exercise of citizenship and social participation could be enhanced. To allow creative problem solving and engage in a genuine policy dialogue, governments need to recognize and embrace the diversity within the sector rather than convey the message that there is only one form of acceptable behaviour. It is therefore critical that a solid, mutually supporting relationship be built between the sector and the federal government. In order to do so, it must harness the skills and knowledge of voluntary sector organizations in order to improve the policy process, rather than impose a one-size-fits-all model onto the sector which is constraining and not respectful of the sector’s distinctive organizational culture.

## References

- Bardach, Eugene, "Smart (Best) Practices Research: Understanding and Making Use of What Look Like Good Ideas from Somewhere Else," pp. 1-12.  
Available at: [http://archive.epinet.org/real\\_media/010111/materials/Bardach.pdf](http://archive.epinet.org/real_media/010111/materials/Bardach.pdf)
- Bardach, Eugene, 1998. *Getting Agencies to Work Together: The Practice and Theory of Managerial Craftsmanship*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Borins, Sandford, "Loose Cannons and Rule Breakers, or Enterprising Leaders? Some Evidence About Innovative Public Managers," *Public Administration Review*, Nov./Dec. 2000, Vol. 60, No. 6, pp. 498-507.
- Denhardt, Robert B. and Janet Vinzant Denhardt, "The New Public Service: Serving Rather than Steering," *Public Administration Review*, Nov./Dec. 2000, Vol. 60, No. 6, pp. 549-559.
- Jenson, Jane and Susan Phillips, "Regime Shift: New Citizenship Practices in Canada", *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14, 1996.
- Harrow, Jenny, "Capacity Building as a Public Management Tool: Myth, magic, or the main chance? *Public Management Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, 2001, pp. 209-230.
- Laforest, Rachel, and Michael Orsini, "Savoir, pouvoir et pragmatisme: l'expertise au service de l'action sociale," *Lien social et Politiques* 50, Automne 2003, pp. 135-145.
- Mahon, Rianne and Phillips, S. *Dual-Earner Families Caught in a Liberal Welfare Regime? The Politics of Child Care Policy in Canada*, in ??????
- McKeen, Wendy, *Money in their Own Name*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.
- Nevitte, Neil, *The Decline of Deference*, Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 1996.
- Pal, Leslie A., *Interests of State: The Politics of Language, Multiculturalism and Feminism in Canada*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993.
- Pharr, Susan and Putnam, Robert (eds.) *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Phillips, Susan, "More than Stakeholders: Reforming State-Voluntary Sector Relations", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol.. 35, no 4, 2001, pp. 182-202.
- Pierre, Jon. "Public Consultation and Citizen Participation: The Dilemmas of Policy

- Advice,” pp. 137-163, in *Taking Stock: Assessing Public Sector Reforms*, B. Guy Peters and Daniel J. Savoie (eds.), McGill-Queen’s University Press/ Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1998.
- Rhodes, R.A.W. “The New Governance: Governing without government,” *Political Studies* 44 (4), 1996, pp. 652-667.
- Saint-Martin, Denis and Alexandra Dobrowolsky, “Agency, Actors and Change in a Child-Focused Future: Problematizing Path Dependency’s Past and Statist Parameters”, Working Paper.  
Available at:  
[http://www.fas.umontreal.ca/pol/cohesionsociale/pageworking\\_paper.htm](http://www.fas.umontreal.ca/pol/cohesionsociale/pageworking_paper.htm)
- Sanderson, Ian, “Complexity, Evaluation and Evidence-Based Policy”, Policy Research Institute, 2000, available at: [www.europeanevaluation.org/docs/71\\_sanderson.pdf](http://www.europeanevaluation.org/docs/71_sanderson.pdf)
- Skocpol, Theda, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.
- Voluntary Sector Initiative, Capacity Joint Table, *Participating in Federal Public Policy: A Guide for the Voluntary Sector*, Ottawa, 2003.
- Young, Ken, Deborah Ashby, Annette Boaz, and Lesley Grayson, “Social Science and the Evidence-based Policy Movement,” *Social Policy and Society* 1: 3, 2002, pp. 215-224.
- Plouffe, Louise A. “Bridging policy research and policy: Experience from Health Canada's Seniors Independence Research Program”, *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de politiques* Spring 2000. vol. 1, no1.
- Saurugger, Sabine " L'expertise : une forme de participation des groupes d'intérêt au processus décisionnel communautaire ", *Revue française de science politique*, 2002, 52(4), p.367-393
- Solesbury, William, “Evidence-based policy making: whence it came and where it’s going”, ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, October 2001, available at: <http://www.evidencenetwork.org/Documents/wp1.pdf>