

Coping with Reality: Key Issues Facing Canada's Environmental Sector in 2006

by **MICHAEL ROBINSON**

This is the second in a series of brief analytical articles by some of Canada's leading thinkers on their views of the issues, needs and gaps in funding within Canada's environmental sector. The purpose of CEGN's Thoughtleader Series is to inform and stimulate strategic thinking, discussion and debate among environmental grantmakers and others, and to enhance their individual and collective focus on high priority and high impact grantmaking.



In coming to grips with the challenges facing Canadians exercising the duty of citizens on environmental issues, it helps to focus on reality. In civil society the environmental sector is small: CEGN's Research Brief (October 2004) reports that the sector represents only 2.7% of the total number of all nonprofit and voluntary organizations in the country (i.e. 4,424 out of 161,227). Most of us who volunteer or work for pay in the sector know this, and govern our expectations accordingly. Much of what we achieve is local in context and voluntary in the extreme. We are players in a NGO field dominated by much older churches, relief organizations, cultural amenities and the behemoth United Ways. In contrast to the above, we are younger, more nimble of thought and action, and often geographically focused on issues directly before us in our cities, towns and rural municipalities. While we tend to be located in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia by sheer numbers, we are truly national in scope. We function from coast to coast to coast in Canada. What we lack in revenue (i.e. the average reported revenue of environmental organizations was \$256,000 in 2003, compared with \$692,000 for average revenue of all Canadian NGOs [CEGN 2004]), we make up for in joie de vivre and call to arms sensibilities. I personally like that we rely much more on earned income from non-governmental sources than government grants. There is freedom in this fact.

Faced with the above realities, we have our own unique and related challenges. For instance, we frequently lament the low level of government support for our work, and a related issue of difficulty in participating in the development of public policy (National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Organizations - NSNVO, Statistics Canada, 2004). These concerns are deserving of serious critical thought. Environmental NGOs in civil

society have a duty to be reasoned advocates for change. We are purposefully and decidedly non-governmental. We sting and attack misguided government policy. Sometimes we laud actions that follow the pattern of our advocacy. So why bellyache over poor government funding? Rather than bite the hand that feeds us, we need to bite the hand that does not feed us. Clear advocacy is untied to government coffers.

Similarly, we need to be careful about the conundrum of governments being unwilling to permit us to participate in public policy development. If we have angered them by our advocacy (or the tone of our advocacy), we need to ask if the tone justifies the lack of inclusion. I think that governments are generally most willing to involve us when we come with allied supporters who contribute to our budgets, like members, corporate supporters, and foundations. The democratic process ultimately respects non-governmental funding success more than it does governmental funding largesse. By crafting coalitions of non-governmental funders we set the stage for participation in public process. If we are frozen out, we can appeal to our allies for lobby assistance. The key to success is broad coalitions of strange bed partners who demonstrate unity to governments around issues that require their intervention and action. Generally when David Suzuki, Ray Anderson, and the Board of Trade come to town together, Sussex Drive or city hall will listen.



Philanthropists and foundations have a key role to play in addressing this form of coalition building. Were I possessed of enormous wealth and influence, I would require environmental NGOs to come forward as leaders of broadly-based, non-governmental coalitions. I would favour those activists who worked on cross-sectoral solutions to environmental problems. In doing so, I would also ally my foundation's money with the written word, and speak on behalf of the change desired by the coalition. Words and money work well together. They are not mutually distinct.

I further suspect that the general public is awakening to the value of the cross-sectoral advocacy approach. People are getting turned off by isolated environmental doomsayers and prognosticators. We are collectively as Canadians starting to understand the broad aspects of climate change, to appreciate the need for complex international agreements like Kyoto, and to understand that we all have the power of choice, not just in electing our politicians at the ballot box, but in buying responsible technologies for our homes and places of work. Collective action, in groups and as individuals, is coming of age.

Another challenge facing us in working with government is understanding that we need great citizens to embrace public service—and work for government. A key issue for me is the long list of well qualified applicants for our NGO positions, and their willingness to earn less money in the cause. Each MA or PhD hired by an environmental NGO, is one who does not find work with a government ministry facing the dilemma of the great boomer retirement. The boomers are mean age 65 in 2016, and already government environmental staffs (at all levels) are feeling the collective pinch. To the degree that many of the best and brightest opt for NGO service, government is denied rejuvenation and talent. I know that many of my University of Calgary students felt a government job was a last choice option, and this attitude has to change. And for it to change some things have to happen. To begin with, young talent in government has to be given opportunity. Senior managers need to become more participatory in style, more team-centred in behaviour, and more willing to share praise for achievement. As we have all begun to realize, the generations X and Y are different in their expectations of working life, and will not tolerate long apprenticeships with uninspiring journeymen. A successful Deputy Minister today has to create an environment in the ministry that really brings young

employees into the picture of research, policy formation, the testing of options, and the advocacy of best options to politicians. Coupled with these opportunities, senior managers have to understand that their staffs must keep up with knowledge management, information technology, and information transfer. To do less is to lose bright young employees to NGOs and the private sector where managers may already practice these behaviours more willingly.

Philanthropists and foundations can help resolve these key issues by funding in-service training programs and supporting institutes that promote participatory policy development and knowledge management training for university and college students. While for-profit companies must be expected to pay their own way down the knowledge highway, less well endowed NGOs and government departments can benefit from access to programs they could not fund themselves. Funding NGOs to staff, create and offer such programs to government and other NGOs should be an economically viable and useful enterprise. And we have already seen that creative entrepreneurship is an asset of existing environmental NGOs. There is an added benefit in mixing trainees from government and NGO employees in such courses: they will begin to network across sectors at a young age when working partnerships are freely sought out and formed. They will retain these networks as they age.

An understanding of many of the above issues may be best learned at the corporate wheel. After all, well managed companies know they have to stay competitive to prosper, and they are the essence of entrepreneurship. When environmental NGOs complain about the difficulty of obtaining board members (NSNVO), they should think about approaching corporate governance experts. A positive legacy of the egregious Enron and Worldcom collapses, and the ensuing Sarbanes-Oxley corporate regulatory binge, is a renewed enthusiasm for good governance. Too many NGOs in my experience have suffered greatly at the hands of amateur, well-intentioned, but badly governed boards. To begin with, bad NGO boards meddle in management. They should not. The duty of the governance board is to provide strategic direction to the managers. The duty of senior management is to implement governance strategy in the refined air of management freedom. Management manages; boards govern. It is as simple as that. It is interesting to note that the NSNVO survey identified "difficulty planning for the future" as the most frequently

reported problem of environmental organizations (sixty-five percent of Canadian environmental organizations surveyed named this issue as their key problem)! To me this is a bald-faced assertion of a crisis in environmental NGO governance. It is the board's duty to lay out the broad organizational strategy. In the absence of this action, management has to act as a board (a critical flaw), and worse, the board may confuse itself for management and meddle.

The *Profile of Environmental Grantmaking in Canada: 2002 National Overview* (CEGN, 2004) indicates that the category of "capacity building" received the largest amount of support (grant \$ by activity) at 23%. The report indicates that this granting went towards "general or operating support, as well as project support for capacity building activities such as strategic planning, fundraising development, staff development and equipment." It would be interesting to know just how much money went to board development workshops, and board/management development workshops. I suspect there is a great need for both in the sector. In terms of priority, given the demonstrably higher need for "planning for the future," I think that board/management training in environmental NGOs should be a key priority for environmental funders. I also think that the boards and management of the funders themselves should be similarly trained. Evidence for this need is the low profile of such training in the CEGN *2002 National Overview* of environmental grantmaking (see Figure 4. Grant \$ by Activity). Both the funders and the NGOs need to spruce up their understanding of the board/management divide, and the necessary practices of good governance and good management. In terms of understanding good governance, "you have to know what it is to recognize it in others."

Overall, as we embrace the environmental future we deserve, we need to realistically understand that it will be one of our own making. This may seem dreadfully simplistic, but the point I wish to make is that an individual's environmental quality is understood locally. It may increasingly be determined in the smokestacks of the developing capitalist world, but each of us has local decisions we make ourselves that count. We can reduce our individual travel-induced CO₂ emissions by 70% by utilizing hybrid technology. We can embrace bioregional agriculture and refuse to eat reefer-trucked watermelons from San Diego. We can "stay where we are" more often and dispense with wasteful and pretentious jet travel. We can, in short, choose to live

differently. When we do, we act first, before the prodding of local, regional or national government. In doing so we role model desired behaviour for children, friends and neighbours. We also can take personal pleasure in knowing that our thoughts and our actions coincide. I think that all environmental activism is really local, that it is at best self-initiated, and that it should flow from our inborn sense of civic duty to the common good.

Having said this, there is much that environmental funders can do to promote individual duty and action. Given that the largest category of these grant makers by type are private/family foundations (44% of the number of grant makers in the CEGN 2002 data set), they are already acting as individuals or family-based units. Let their largesse in turn flow to those projects which best empower other individuals and families to do the most common good. Let them reward collaborations of non-governmental actors who will in future inspire governments to do the right thing. Let them fund training for boards and management of environmental NGOs so that they will successfully plan for the future, diversify their non-governmental funding sources, obtain high caliber board members who know how to govern, and best of all—participate in the development of public policy that embraces the commons.

In this quest all environmental funders have the right to expect clearly thought out proposals, plain spoken reporting of progress (an acknowledgement of failure with the willingness to learn again), and the right to celebrate their collaborative successes. Whenever possible, funders need to seek out bright young university and college graduates for their staffs and boards. They need to give them training to keep them abreast of appropriate and amazing new technologies, and they need to involve them directly in the work. Ideally these young defenders of the commons will choose to work across the sectors, and develop a taste for the environmental cultures of NGOs, business and government. Ideally some of the best will work in all of the sectors, and share the benefits of their early training and networking with us all. At the bottom and the top of their success will be our individual choices to give opportunity to youth, who like us, desire a common future characterized by species and cultural diversity, respect for the natural world, and an understanding that everything in this world is interwoven in the fabric of life. 🌱

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