
VOLUNTARY SECTOR INITIATIVE
Strategic Planning for Aboriginal Input
Report

Ottawa, Ontario
July 03 - 04, 2001

Introduction

On July 03-04, 2001 the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) invited Aboriginal stakeholders from across Canada to a strategic planning exercise to formulate an approach to engage and include the Aboriginal community in the Voluntary Sector Initiative consultations to strengthen the voluntary sector in Canada. Twenty-one Aboriginal participants contributed their expertise to the day and half session. The participants are individuals who are strong volunteers in their own right and/or work within organizations who rely on voluntarism to deliver their programs and services within the Aboriginal community. The Ottawa held session was supported and attended by executive officials and resource people from the VSI who provided participants on the vision and mission of the Voluntary Sector Initiative.

The following report describes the discussion, recommendations and suggested approach to pursue to engage and involve the Aboriginal community within the Voluntary Sector Initiative.

Background

The Voluntary Sector Initiative is co-managed by members of the voluntary sector and the federal government. People representing voluntary organizations across Canada are working with federal public servants over the next 18 months to find ways to strengthen the capacity of the voluntary sector as a whole and individual voluntary organizations to do their work. The work of the VSI will focus on improving the relationship between the voluntary sector and government, creating new tools and resources and strengthening support for voluntary organizations.

The work of the VSI began with the proposals outlined in *Working Together*. Several thousand people will eventually participate in the Initiative through consultations, work groups and forums. From the first round of mainstream consultations within the voluntary community it became apparent that the Aboriginal community was not participating in these sessions. Even though some national Aboriginal organizations (have submitted proposals and are receiving some VSI funding) and are preparing consultations of their own it was clear there was not a sufficient representation or participation of Aboriginal citizens from the voluntary sector participating in the Initiative. This acknowledgement motivated the VSI to do a specific outreach with the Aboriginal community to gain greater participation from the grassroots community.

The participants at the strategic planning session determined at the beginning that their participation was voluntary. Therefore they were not representing their organization or endorsing on behalf of an organization the VSI. This was to ensure that political undertones would not be a factor or consideration in any of the final conclusions reached at the strategy session.

The strategy session began with information informing participants about the history, goal and mandate of the VSI presented by Mr. Al Hatten, Executive Director - National Voluntary Organization and Ms Nancy Wild goose, Deputy Director of the Voluntary Sector Task Force. Ms Betty Plewes, Laura Rektor and Ellen Adelberg from VSI, supported these briefings with additional information and stayed throughout the workshop to provide ongoing support. Once the overview and question/answer period was completed participants were asked to address some key questions that would help guide the strategic thinking for Aboriginal input.

Main Themes

Engaging the Aboriginal community -

The participants at the session agreed that Aboriginal input needs to be as expansive as possible at the grassroots level. This could be achieved with the help of the Aboriginal organizations through their infrastructure and linkages

at regional and local levels. The diversity of the Aboriginal community needs to be recognized both for nationhood, culture and geographic locations. The cultural realities that impact on the definition of what voluntary means in the Aboriginal community will help to communicate the VSI message and will attract Aboriginal attention on this issue. Using traditional systems such as the Clan system would help to reach input from segments of our community not always consulted.

Participants agreed that a “plain language” document on the VSI is required for the Aboriginal community. As well an Aboriginal outreach plan is required to distribute to the communities. These efforts should be implemented with the formation of a reference group to oversee the process.

Using the existing Aboriginal institutions in all sectors to facilitate the VSI consultations was suggested. However, several participants warned not to let the process be overtaken or burden with political overtures. This should be a non-political process. In reference to individuals, most agreed that Aboriginal input must be sought from Elders, women’s organizations, youth, sports and recreation groups.

In terms of what proportional input is “representative” of the Aboriginal community most agreed that the criteria needs to be inclusive of all Aboriginal groupings (First Nations, Metis, Inuit) including gender as well as geographic. Some other considerations to obtain representative input may include language groupings and the different cultural groupings. One suggestion promoted looking at what kind of proportional formula was applied for mainstream consultations and using this as base to determine the Aboriginal consultation. In conclusion, determining the expansion of Aboriginal input would depend on financial considerations and time frame to complete the input.

Approach for Gaining Aboriginal Input -

All participants agreed that Aboriginal participation within the VSI must be integrated into the existing methods of gaining input, such as involvement on all joint tables. As well, the group strongly felt that an “Aboriginal specific” voice must also be gathered, heard and documented.. This is due to the unique and cultural differences that Aboriginal peoples will have when thinking about the voluntary sector within their own community.

When consulting the Aboriginal community, specific considerations should include language interpretation, facilities and/or equipment for the disabled. The role for Elders must be defined as well accommodation must be available for helpers who may accompany the disabled or Elders. Some participant may require childcare and/or transportation to and from sessions.

Gaining input from the Aboriginal community can be accomplished in various ways. This includes approaches such as: roundtables, focus groups, position papers and conferences or meetings. However members of the strategy session suggested some alternative approaches that include other customary methods such as traditional talking circles.

The infrastructure that exists within the Aboriginal communications arena would be a natural start to informing, educating and gaining feedback on the VSI. The Aboriginal print media, APTN, radio stations and websites should be targeted to support the VSI efforts. This should not preclude the mainstream media helping to get the word out to the Aboriginal community on the VSI. Other suggested venues include participating at the annual general meetings of the Aboriginal organizations. Workshops or presentations could assist in obtaining Aboriginal input.

There were two areas that were specifically identified as not the best methods for gaining the Aboriginal perspective

on VSI. Not recommended were surveys or telephone interviews. A more personal approach was suggested in documenting and gaining Aboriginal input. The group emphasized again that this should be a community driven process with politics kept outside the process!

Implementing Aboriginal Input -

The Aboriginal participants agreed that if one Aboriginal organization was asked to lead the VSI consultations this may lead to some political issues. However, it was recognized that a key stakeholder is the Friendship Centre network with their locations across Canada. The Friendship Centre movement was built on the principal of voluntarism.

It was suggested that the major Aboriginal (political) organizations would be very helpful if their infrastructure and network could be accessed when disseminating information or collecting input on the VSI. To facilitate the coordination of the Aboriginal input participants recommended forming a reference group with a contracted coordinator to support their work.

The group identified two issues of concern. The first was concern about securing the financial commitment to gain the Aboriginal input. VSI indicated that due to financial considerations and the schedule of events the Aboriginal budget will have to be sought from a variety of sources from within the Initiative. A final workplan could not be drafted until the financial resources are known and considered.

The second issue was a statement of concern that the Aboriginal community will want further assurances from the VSI that the Aboriginal input will be heard and will have significant impact on the final outcomes of the VSI goals.

Aboriginal Priorities - Communications

- rework the VSI material into plain language geared for the Aboriginal community;
- educate VSI tables as well as others participating in the Initiative about Aboriginal customs, culture in the voluntary sector;
- explore producing a video (formally request resources for a short video);
- recruit individuals who can communicate the Initiative in Aboriginal languages.

Integrating into existing VSI structures

- nominate Aboriginal participants to all working tables and groups;
- work with the communications table (awareness table) regarding Aboriginal input;
- inform other Aboriginal individuals, organizations to get involved on VSI tables, meetings events etc..

Research and Development

- document the Aboriginal definition of voluntary activity;
- define what volunteer means to Aboriginal people;
- document what benefits this Initiative will have for Aboriginal people in Canada;
- do further research on best approaches to engage the Aboriginal community on the VSI;
- determine what the long term commitment is to the voluntary sector and how will it impact on Aboriginal communities;
- document 3 Aboriginal examples of voluntarism for use in communicating the VSI;
- document and profile the positive contributions occurring from the Aboriginal community;
- change existing policies that will support the Aboriginal voluntary sector.

Considerations

- The Aboriginal community views voluntary action as a life long commitment to family and community. Therefore this type of activity is not strictly seen as voluntary but rather contributions to ones environment. This view of voluntarism is seem more as a expectation within the Aboriginal community, culturally individuals are obligated throughout their life to this principle. This differing view will require an Aboriginal specific definition of voluntarism to reflect the cultural realities within the Aboriginal community.
- The Aboriginal community in Canada is consulted on a host of varying initiatives due to the unique relationship with Canada. (Aboriginal people are not just another stakeholder group) The VSI is one of many subjects, which makes our task more difficult in obtaining Aboriginal participation. Consultation fatigue exists within Aboriginal groups which will have to be considered when finalizing our strategic approach for Aboriginal input to the VSI.
- The Aboriginal community does not have any infrastructure that supports the voluntary sector within their own communities. The Friendship Centre may be the closest example of infrastructure however this only represents one section of the Aboriginal voluntary efforts. The Aboriginal Reference Group will need to consider this obstacle when collecting Aboriginal view.
- The National Aboriginal organizations should be informed and contacted regarding the work that may be undertaken by the Aboriginal reference group. Collaboration could occur however, this should not be seen as a sanctioning process.

Consensus on Decisions

- **A reference group should be formed from the representatives who attended the strategic planning session.**
- **Terms of reference and workplan will be drafted for consideration by the group.**
- **VSI will contract Patricia Baxter to support the co-ordination and research work on behalf of the group.**
- **A steering group will help to support some of the decision making required before the group meets again. This Steering Committee members will be: Mr. Dan George, Ms Betty Kennedy, Ms Cheryl McLean, Ms Doreen Saulis and George Monroe.**
- **The VSI will explore financial options to help support the work of the Aboriginal reference group, steering committee and co-ordination required Aboriginal input.**

List of Participants

British Columbia

Mr. Dan George
Executive Director
Prince George Native Friendship Centre

Mr. Lou Demerais
Executive Director

Vancouver Native Health Society

Ms Cecila Thomas
BC Aboriginal Network
Network Disabilities Society

Alberta

Mr. Ed Lavallee
Ms. Kim Ghostkeeper

Saskatchewan

Mr. Ron Rivard

Manitoba

Mr. Wayne Helgason
Executive Director
Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

Mr. George Monroe
Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

Mr. Damon Johnston
Centre of Aboriginal Human Resources Development

Mr. Dan David
Director of News
Aboriginal Peoples Television Network

Mr. Vince Hill

Ontario

Mr Paul Skanks

Ms Wanda Big Canoe

Mr. Joe Hester
Executive Director
Anishnawbe Health

Ms. Betty Kennedy

Quebec

Ms. Dale Montour

Nunavut

Ms. Millie Evalik

Yukon

Cheryl McLean
Director
Aboriginal Languages A - 8G

Yukon Government

NWT

Chief Cece McCauley

New Brunswick

Ms. Doreen Saulis

Newfoundland

Chief Nellie Power