

A Shared Journey

Mid-term Reflections on the Voluntary Sector Initiative

March 2003

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Foreword

In June 2000, the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector launched a five-year joint initiative to renew and strengthen their long-standing relationship. It wasn't the first time the relationship had come under scrutiny — both sectors had already done a lot of groundwork, deliberating long and hard about how they could work together to better serve Canadians.

This report tells the story of the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) over its first two and a half years — how it came to be, what was accomplished and where the VSI is headed as it moves into its next phase and beyond. In telling this story, our aim was not to provide a comprehensive accounting of VSI products and processes — much of that detail can be found in the reports prepared by the voluntary sector–government joint tables guiding the work. Rather, it was to paint a bigger picture of where we stand and what we've learned.

In terms of accomplishments, much of what we set out to achieve has been done, thanks to a workplan that was deliberately “front-end loaded.” An Accord and Codes of Good Practice are in place to guide the two sectors as we map out new ways of working together. As a result of VSI-sponsored activities to celebrate the 2001 United Nations International Year of Volunteers, more Canadians than ever are aware of the important role that volunteering plays in Canadian communities. Over 60 projects designed to build policy capacity within the voluntary sector are either finished or underway. And both sectors have determined how — and through what structures — they will be accountable for future work. We can take great pride in these and other accomplishments that are a part of the VSI's legacy so far.

But there is a “story behind the story” that needs to be told as well. This story, which is perhaps the real legacy of the VSI, is about how the two sectors worked together in a truly joint process, demonstrating the potential for, and value of, an enhanced relationship — one that is respectful, open and committed to making Canada a better place to live.

As members of the body charged with overseeing the approach to the VSI, as well as its many projects and joint working groups, we in the Joint Coordinating Committee enjoyed a unique perspective on how that story unfolded. Certainly, progress faltered at times. Workloads overwhelmed, expectations varied and cultures sometimes clashed. Yet for us and for many of the thousands of others who were involved, the experience has been transformative, giving us a far better appreciation of the challenges faced by the other sector, and forging personal and professional relationships that will endure. Many of these relationships are among voluntary sector organizations, whose members took advantage of opportunities provided by the VSI to build new and stronger alliances and networks.

Through the VSI, the Government of Canada has made clear its recognition of the voluntary sector as the third pillar in Canadian society and its essential role in contributing to the social and economic well being of Canadians. As with most good things, however, the real work will be in building on the products, processes and spirit of

good will that the VSI has engendered and in making the relationship play out “on the ground.” As with most good things, the journey continues.

Kathy O’Hara
Government Co-chair
Joint Coordinating Committee

Patrick Johnston
Sector Co-chair
Joint Coordinating Committee

The Case for Change

Many factors gave rise to the Voluntary Sector Initiative. In fact, it might even be argued that the VSI — or something very like it — was an inevitable product of the social, economic and political forces aligned for change in Canada.

Over the past decade, trends such as a global economy, an increasingly diverse and aging population, changes in the labour force and public demand for a greater role in government affairs have been challenging leaders in the voluntary sector and government to re-assess traditional partnerships and ways of working.

In part, the current climate for change is also a response to the economic and fiscal pressures of the early nineties. Governments at all levels responded to debt and deficit challenges by cutting public spending — including funding to voluntary organizations. At the same time, the federal government was re-examining its role and, as a result, shifting away from direct service delivery and more toward a steering and facilitating role.

One of the consequences of this cost cutting and rebalancing of government activities was a call for nonprofit organizations to “fill the gap” — one that was widened even further by growing public demand for more and better services. But the voluntary sector was not equipped to take on the challenge. Despite vigorous attempts to make its concerns heard, the voluntary sector was facing problems of its own. Some elected officials and members of the media were publicly challenging the accountability of voluntary organizations. And, there were enduring misperceptions about the voluntary sector’s role and operations, for example, the widely held view that its programs and services were delivered solely through the efforts of volunteer staff and, therefore, free. To compound the situation, the loose-knit and sometimes competitive nature of the voluntary sector limited its effectiveness in responding to these and other challenges.

The third pillar: Canada’s voluntary sector

A vital pillar of Canadian society, the voluntary sector works with the government and the private sector to enhance quality of life for Canadians. Known also as the third sector, the nonprofit sector and the voluntary and community-based sector, the voluntary sector is a significant social and economic force in the country — for example, it:

- Is made up of more than 180,000 nonprofit organizations (of which over 80,000 are registered charities) as well as hundreds of thousands of groups that are not incorporated;
- Employs 1.3 million people (9 percent of working Canadians);
- Is supported by the efforts of 6.5 million volunteers who dedicate more than 1 billion hours each year (the equivalent of 580,000 full-time jobs);
- Includes a wide array of groups and organizations — ranging from service clubs and advocacy coalitions to food banks, international aid organizations, symphonies and local sports clubs; and
- Has annual revenues of \$90 billion and assets of \$109 billion.

There are many good reasons for strengthening the voluntary sector. In recent years, voluntary sector organizations — and Canadians on their behalf — have been calling for the voluntary sector to play a greater role in setting public policies. It makes sense; voluntary sector organizations are uniquely positioned to reach and hear the voices of Canadians, particularly those of marginalized groups whose views may not otherwise be heard. Through its front-line activities, the voluntary sector gains valuable insights into how policies and programs are actually working — where it counts — in communities across the country. If they are to carry out this expanded role effectively, voluntary sector organizations need greater capacity in key areas, including people, money and “know-how.”

A stronger voluntary sector also enhances citizen participation and gives voice to the many perspectives in Canadian society. In doing so, it helps to build social cohesion, reinforcing a sense of common purpose, a shared commitment and a sense of community among diverse parts of society. It makes Canada a better place to live.

By coming together through the VSI, the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector have committed to enhance their relationship in order to achieve mutual goals. For its part, the federal government sees the voluntary sector — together with the business community — as an essential partner in achieving its broad social and economic objectives. It’s pragmatism at its best; the government needs a strong, responsive voluntary sector that can assist departments and agencies as they develop policies, and plan programs and services for Canadians. It also needs to stay connected with citizens at the community level — a function the voluntary sector is well placed to carry out.

As for the voluntary sector, the VSI is a unique opportunity to validate and build support for its role and contribution, and to ensure its ongoing ability to meet the demands of Canadian society.

The Voluntary Sector Initiative: Reframing Our Relationship

“As in the past, the boundaries between the private, public and voluntary sectors are once again shifting, while each sector continues to make important contributions to Canada’s social and economic development. By working together and developing a greater trust and confidence, the government and the voluntary sector can accomplish much more for Canadians.”

Working Together
August 1999

Strong roots

The Voluntary Sector Initiative is not the first step in the process of renewing and reframing the relationship between the two sectors. It builds on a substantial body of work undertaken both jointly and separately by the voluntary sector and the Government of Canada over the past several years.

In February 1999, the Voluntary Sector Roundtable (VSR) (comprised of twelve national umbrella organizations) released an independent inquiry it had commissioned on issues of accountability and governance in the voluntary sector. The final report of the inquiry, entitled [*Building on Strength: Improving Governance and Accountability in Canada's Voluntary Sector*](#), set out 41 recommendations designed to enhance the voluntary sector's effectiveness.

This report was the impetus for federal government and voluntary sector leaders to come together in "joint tables" to explore three issues of common concern: building a new relationship, strengthening the capacity of the voluntary sector, and improving the regulatory environment in which the voluntary sector operates. The first stage of this undertaking culminated in an August 1999 report entitled [*Working Together: A Government of Canada/Voluntary Sector Joint Initiative*](#). Much of the work of the VSI is based on recommendations set out in *Working Together*.

At the same time, the government was moving to a strengthened voluntary sector and an enhanced government-voluntary sector relationship. Its commitment was made clear in the October 1999 [*Speech from the Throne*](#), which underscored the need for an active partnership with the voluntary sector to support Canadians and build stronger communities. In June, the two sectors announced a joint initiative entitled "Partnering for the Benefit of Canadians: Government of Canada – Voluntary Sector Initiative."

Extract from the Speech from the Throne
"In 2001, Canadians will mark the International Year of Volunteers —a time to celebrate the achievements of Canada's everyday heroes. The Government recognizes the need to build partnerships with communities and to renew its relationship with the voluntary organizations that serve and sustain them."
 October 12, 1999

About the Voluntary Sector Initiative

A joint initiative between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector, the VSI is designed to enhance the relationship between the two sectors and to strengthen the voluntary sector's capacity to meet the challenges of the future.

Unique in its "jointness," the VSI invited more than 125 representatives of Canada's voluntary sector and federal government departments to sit at "joint tables," each of which was co-chaired by a government and a voluntary sector representative. The joint tables focused on how to improve the relationship between the two sectors in key areas, specifically, by:

Developing a framework agreement that articulates a vision and principles;

VSI \$94.6 million over five years

Government/Voluntary Sector Accord and Partnership	\$11.5M
Strengthening the capacity of the voluntary sector	\$ 35M
International Year of Volunteers and the National Volunteerism Initiative	\$10M
Dealing with regulatory issues	\$8.6M
Sectoral Involvement in Departmental Policy Development	\$28.5M
Dealing with federal funding issues	\$ 1M

Building the voluntary sector's capacity (i.e., knowledge, skills and means) to respond to Canadians' needs;
Streamlining reporting requirements and regulations that affect the voluntary sector;
Proposing a new approach to financing the voluntary sector that is long-term and sustainable;
Enhancing knowledge about the voluntary sector, its scope, nature and operations;
Increasing recognition of the voluntary sector's contribution to Canadian society; and
Promoting and supporting volunteerism.

To support VSI activities, the Government of Canada allocated \$94.6 million over five years. Both sectors also made substantial in-kind contributions, including the time and expertise of participants, and the use of facilities and equipment.

The VSI has benefited from strong leadership over its first two and a half years. A Reference Group of Ministers, including nine cabinet ministers appointed by the Prime Minister, provided oversight of the VSI. The Reference Group was chaired by the Honourable Lucienne Robillard, President of the Treasury Board. At the government working level, a committee of assistant deputy ministers provided strategic advice to ministers and federal government representatives on joint tables and sought input from the broader federal community on important issues.

On the voluntary sector side, a Voluntary Sector Steering Group (VSSG) gave political and strategic direction to the voluntary sector and oversaw the work of the VSI. The VSSG included 26 senior representatives of the voluntary sector (including the co-chairs of all joint tables) and, later on in the process, a participant from the National Visible Minority Reference Group and the Aboriginal Reference Group.

Taking Stock of Our Achievements

The Voluntary Sector Initiative made substantial progress during the first half of its mandate, advancing its goals in many of the areas identified as priorities by both the government and the voluntary sector. Some of the major accomplishments of the VSI are outlined below. For a more detailed accounting of these and other achievements, please see the joint table reports on the VSI website at www.vsi-isbc.ca.

What about other levels of government?

Canada's provincial, territorial and municipal governments enjoy their own unique and multi-faceted relationships with the voluntary sector.

Over the past two and a half years, the federal government has participated in regular meetings with provincial/territorial representatives, reporting on progress and responding to questions.

Representatives from other levels of government have commented favourably on how the VSI has sparked links within the voluntary sector and interest in the sector's relationship with governments at all levels.

An enhanced relationship

The federal government and the voluntary sector share a long history of joining forces. In fact, many departments and voluntary agencies have forged long-term relationships that are instrumental in achieving their common goals.

The Accord

From the outset, a major focus of the VSI was developing a joint accord or framework agreement that would provide visible and concrete recognition of the importance of the relationship. Signed on December 5, 2001, [*An Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector*](#) (the Accord) is a landmark agreement marking the beginning of an enhanced relationship between the two sectors. For the first time ever, the Accord identifies common values and principles to guide a working relationship and commits both parties to building that relationship. The product of extensive research, as well as spirited, informed debate and discussion, the Accord is a lasting legacy.

Codes of Good Practice

Part of the Accord's strength is its recognition of the need for practical measures to breathe life into its provisions. With this in mind, it calls for organizational structures, processes and tools for implementing the Accord and monitoring and reporting on progress. Two such tools, developed in a joint process and endorsed by both sectors in the fall of 2002, will guide their evolving relationship as they explore new ways of working together in the areas of funding and policy dialogue.

Grounded in the recognition that the sectors must be accountable to Canadians, [*A Code of Good Practice on Funding*](#) also acknowledges the need to ensure the voluntary sector's sustainable capacity. Building on shared principles, this Code identifies specific measures to enhance the flexibility, responsiveness and consistency of funding arrangements. Over time, and supported by continuing communication between the sectors, these practices will become the basis of a renewed funding relationship between the sectors.

The voluntary sector plays a crucial role in representing the views of its stakeholders in the public policy process, particularly the voices of unheard and marginalized groups. The best practices set out in [*A Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue*](#) encourage government

The building blocks

The Accord sets out common values and principles to shape future practices:

Values:

- democracy
- active citizenship
- equality
- diversity
- inclusion
- social justice

Principles:

- independence
- interdependence
- dialogue
- co-operation and collaboration
- accountability to all Canadians

“The goal of strengthening capacity is to enhance the ability of the sector and these organizations to achieve their missions, bring their visions to life and fulfill their roles.”

Working Together

departments and agencies, and voluntary sector organizations to deepen their policy dialogue and improve public policies through, for example, making information more accessible and striving for a better understanding of one another's broad policy objectives. This Code also commits the federal government to reviewing its major policy and programs proposals using a voluntary sector "lens" or analytical framework.

Many departments and agencies, and voluntary sector organizations are already using some of the practices outlined in the Codes. The challenge now will be to embed these practices in the sectors' day-to-day relationships. Plans are underway to distribute and promote the Codes widely.

Increased capacity in the voluntary sector

One of the priorities of the VSI is to strengthen the voluntary sector by making strategic investments and removing barriers that prevent it from operating as efficiently as possible.

People first

An important challenge for the voluntary sector is to attract and support the efforts of its millions of paid staff and volunteers. One VSI project, the [National Learning Initiative](#), tackles this problem head on by identifying the skills and competencies required by voluntary sector leaders, as well as where they can obtain relevant training.

Another VSI project will provide practical information and best-practice tools on important human resource issues, such as access to benefit and retirement plans. The [Human Resources in the Voluntary Sector](#) project is also building an inventory of knowledgeable resource people who can help organizations put in place effective management and administrative structures and processes.

Financial sustainability

Voluntary sector organizations receive their funding and resources from many sources, including earned income from their activities, and contributions from outside sources such as individual donors, foundations, corporations and governments. The VSI is sponsoring several research projects to explore such issues as the impact of various funding mechanisms on financial sustainability, and new mechanisms and models of funding in other countries.

Putting information to work

In an increasingly information-driven age, organizations need to be able to collect and manage information, and get it to the people who need it. The VSI has identified a number of strategies for promoting the effective use of technology in the voluntary sector, including:

- Talk with funders about including technology investments for the voluntary sector in their policies and practices;
- Help organizations use available technology more effectively and efficiently—for example, by linking existing networks;
- Develop a portal for the sector;
- Create a web-based interactive service designed specifically for the sector and its funders; and
- Raise awareness about the benefits of information management and technology, and provide information about available tools.

Another project, the *Financial Management and Accountability Toolbox*, is designed to enhance financial management skills within the voluntary sector. Aimed primarily at small- and mid-sized organizations, the Toolbox will offer a comprehensive inventory of resources on how to successfully manage funds.

The policy connection

Through its ability to galvanize Canadians on important issues and act as an early warning system on a broad range of issues — from land mines and climate change to family violence and HIV/AIDS — the voluntary sector can inform and enrich policy debates, identify emerging priorities and offer innovative proposals for change.

Under the VSI [*Sectoral Involvement in Departmental Policy Development*](#) (SIDPD) program, voluntary organizations are gaining valuable experience and skills in the public policy arena. More than \$28.5 million has been allocated to projects that partner voluntary organizations with federal government departments and agencies to develop policies and identify processes for involving voluntary sector groups in policy-making. Projects aimed at building policy capacity in the voluntary sector will continue to be funded under the SIDPD program until 2004.

The [*Policy Internships and Fellowships*](#) pilot project gives government and voluntary sector workers the chance to trade positions for up to one year. The project, which provides a unique opportunity for an “insider’s look” at how the other sector operates, will help to bridge the cultural gap between the two sectors.

A streamlined regulatory framework

The laws and regulations governing the voluntary sector need to keep pace with the realities of today’s environment. With this in mind, the two sectors are reviewing the regulatory framework with a particular focus on:

Simplifying the tax information return (T3010) filed annually by all registered charities — a new, more streamlined form has been drafted and will be available in early 2003;
Improving public access to regulatory information and making regulatory activities more transparent;

Examining new institutional models and determining whether changes should be made to the legislation governing charities;

Introducing intermediate sanctions under the Income Tax Act so that de-registration is not the only option for charities that do not comply with the rules; and

Improving the appeals process by setting up an internal review procedure.

At the same time, a separate process was examining reforms to the *Canada Corporations Act* and making recommendations concerning directors’ liability, an issue that can affect volunteers serving on governing boards.

A better funding relationship

Both the federal government and the voluntary sector recognize the need to provide greater clarity, consistency and transparency in their funding relationships. A VSI-sponsored product developed by the Treasury Board Secretariat — the *Federal Strategy on Funding Practices and Policies* — proposes innovative solutions to irritants and obstacles in the funding process.

One of its elements is the Strategic Investment Approach, which encourages individual departments and agencies to use current funding mechanisms to make targeted investments in partner voluntary sector organizations in such areas as governance, management, community outreach, and information management and technology. Already in use by some departments, the approach is designed to build organizations' capacity to deliver programs and services, and to participate more effectively in policy-making processes.

Increased knowledge about the sector

Making a positive contribution to the work of the voluntary sector means knowing more about the people and organizations that power it, as well as how it works. Three statistical tools will help to build an inventory of facts and figures on the voluntary sector:

- Conducted every three years, the [Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating](#) will monitor progress and trends in volunteering, charitable activity and civic participation among Canadians.
- A [Satellite Account](#) will generate information about the voluntary sector's contribution to the Canadian economy, including data on revenues, expenditures, investment projects, assets, liabilities and net worth.
- The results of a [National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations](#) are expected to be available in 2004. This survey is collecting comprehensive information about the breadth of the voluntary and nonprofit sector in Canada and the types of organizations and the services they provide. It will also assess areas where the capacity of organizations could be improved.

What Canadians said

In a national survey conducted by EKOS Research in the summer of 2002, Canada's opinion leaders and members of the public said:

- The voluntary sector is better than either the government or the private sector in: responding to social needs; behaving in an ethical way; and delivering high quality services (more than 50 percent of respondents).
- The voluntary sector should increase its role in public programs and policies (61 percent of opinion leaders; 41 percent of the public).
- In 10 years, the voluntary sector will be much more influential in the lives of everyday Canadians (64 percent of opinion leaders; 54 percent of the public).

« [Positioning the Voluntary Sector in Canada: What the Elite and General Public Say](#) »

Information from these sources will provide the government and the voluntary sector with a solid base for developing, administering and evaluating programs related to the voluntary sector.

More recognition of the voluntary sector's role

Many Canadians are not aware of how the voluntary sector touches their daily lives. In fact, the sector's 180,000 diverse organizations employ over a million Canadians, mobilize an even greater number of volunteers and contribute enormously to the country's economic and social life.

To raise awareness about the voluntary sector's essential role, representatives from the federal government and the voluntary sector are working together on a voluntary sector awareness initiative. Reflecting input from volunteers and voluntary sector organizations across the country, the campaign will target a variety of audiences with positive messages about the sector's role and contributions.

Greater support for volunteerism

More than 6.5 million volunteers give their time, energy and skills to support voluntary sector organizations in making Canada a better place to live. However, these volunteer resources are eroding; the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating showed that 13 percent fewer Canadians volunteered in 2000 than in 1997 — the equivalent of 29,000 full-time jobs lost. Furthermore, only 7 percent of Canadians contributed almost three-quarters of all volunteer effort. Clearly, efforts must be made to deepen and extend this pool of volunteers if the voluntary sector is to sustain and expand its activities.

A unique springboard for VSI initiatives, the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) prompted celebrations across the country to showcase volunteers' invaluable contributions. Organizers followed up a high-profile media launch of IYV with an extensive social marketing campaign, an online certification program in volunteer resource management, support for corporate partnerships, and a host of other initiatives.

Building on the momentum and accomplishments of IYV, the VSI identified some of the challenges to volunteer recruitment, retention, support and recognition. From the work completed so far, it is clear that much can be done to enhance the capacity of voluntary organizations to administer volunteer resources, and attract and retain new volunteers.

The [*Canada Volunteerism Initiative*](#) (formerly the *National Volunteerism Initiative*) is designed to do just that. Three national centres will provide leadership, resources and support for information, capacity building and awareness, community support, and

It's Our Way

The Aboriginal voluntary sector is active in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities across the country. The VSI's Aboriginal Reference Group has produced *It's Our Way*, a video highlighting Aboriginal cultural traditions and views on volunteerism.

knowledge development. To ensure maximum impact at the local level, 13 networks — one in each province and territory — will identify voluntary sector needs and priorities in their area and advise the centres on program design and delivery.

An innovative, inclusive process

Some of the VSI's most enduring legacies — and lessons — are the product of its innovative approach. Joint governance, loosely articulated lines of authority, and a broad-based and inclusive process — all of these factors contributed to the VSI's unique character, as well as to its outcomes.

Working jointly

In the spirit of the joint process that produced [Working Together](#), federal government and voluntary sector representatives tackled priority issues in six joint working groups or “joint tables” as well as a joint coordinating committee. Drawn equally from each sector and co-chaired by representatives from each sector, members of the joint tables were selected based on their experience, expertise and commitment. From the voluntary sector, an independent committee chose 65 members from among 1000 nominees from national and local organizations across the country. Government representatives included senior public servants (all but one from the National Capital Region), some with a long history of collaborating with the voluntary sector on a variety of programs, and others who brought a fresh perspective to the discussions.

What made the VSI unique was that the two sectors, through the joint tables, were collaborating in virtually uncharted territory. No one had ever tried to make a joint process work in such a complex environment, one with so many disparate and sometimes contradictory interests. Directed only by a broad mandate devised by the federal government, the joint tables worked independently, developing a diverse range of creative processes and products in support of their goals.

Reflecting on the experiences of the past two and a half years, there is a consensus that the joint table process provided a positive forum for both sectors to demonstrate their commitment, to work collaboratively and to address difficult issues openly and respectfully. In an important sense, the process acted as a microcosm of the broader working relationship, reinforcing the potential for successful collaboration on complex and difficult issues.

At the same time, however, the process highlighted some of their fundamental differences, particularly in terms of culture and ways of working. Bureaucratic and hierarchical, the federal government's work culture focuses strongly on ensuring accountability through deadlines and deliverables. This culture was sometimes at odds

with that of the voluntary sector, with its predominantly “flat” structure, diverse membership and consensus-building approach. In many cases, these differences required that joint tables devote considerable energy “up front” to establish rapport, build trust, develop a common language, and forge common goals and objectives. In the end, all

participants benefited from the process, gaining an enhanced appreciation of the constraints inherent in each other's cultures, structures and processes.

On structure and accountability

One of the consequences and requirements of working in uncharted territory is the need to be nimble, to adapt as circumstances dictate. As the body responsible for providing guidance and oversight for the VSI, the Joint Coordinating Committee (JCC) had the challenge of ensuring effective co-ordination and accountability while, at the same time, supporting the independent efforts of the various joint tables. Over the first two and a half years of the VSI, that balance shifted subtly but perceptibly.

By the end of the first year of the VSI, it became increasingly clear that, although joint tables were progressing toward their individual goals, their loosely defined mandates and lines of authority were causing some inefficiency and duplication. Given only a "soft" coordinating role — with few levers of overall financial control and no possibility of reallocating funds — the JCC developed an overall strategic vision for the joint tables' work and established concrete outcomes for evaluating progress. As well, the JCC addressed several cross cutting themes — including, for example, communication, consultation and research — and put in place a system for monitoring the progress of individual joint tables.

In retrospect, VSI's experience demonstrated the importance of providing a "strong enough" centre, adequate direction and accountability for mandate, objectives, lines of authority and responsibilities. Clarity is necessary to promote effectiveness and efficiency, as well as to avoid potential misunderstandings about "where the buck stops." This includes clear communication of federal government accountabilities, and checks and balances that require any agreement binding the Government of Canada — for example, the Accord and Codes of Good Practice — to be approved by the federal government's central agencies. At several key stages, misperceptions about the joint tables' authority to speak on behalf of the government as a whole had the potential to undermine the process.

A broad reach

Another of the defining characteristics — and strengths — of the VSI was its breadth. Both sectors worked hard to ensure the involvement of diverse stakeholders. For government, the aim was to promote awareness of the VSI by reaching the widest possible range of current and future stakeholders. In part, this was accomplished through a number of interdepartmental committees of senior executives — for example, the ADM Executive Committee and the ADM Advisory Committee — and the Interdepartmental Working Groups on Communications and Policy. The VSI also encouraged the involvement of deputy ministers through regular presentations and announcements regarding the progress of the VSI. To further encourage horizontality, support services for the VSI were housed in one of the government's central agencies, the Privy Council Office. At the working level, representatives from across many departments and agencies were invited to provide input and advice through a range of consultations and working sessions hosted by individual joint tables.

On the voluntary sector side, many of the joint tables sponsored comprehensive, broad-based community consultations, making special efforts to ensure the participation of voluntary sector groups and organizations from all regions of the country. There were challenges; the voluntary sector is a vast network of more than 180,000 organizations that vary in size and composition from small community-based groups to large, national umbrella organizations and that include neighbourhood associations, service clubs, advocacy coalitions, food banks, shelters, transition houses, symphonies and local sports clubs.

One of the goals of the VSI has been to ensure that these myriad and disparate voices have an opportunity to be heard. Under-represented groups such as visible minority, Aboriginal and women's groups expressed concern about their lack of involvement in the VSI. The Secretariat held consultations and produced a paper on the unique challenges facing small organizations. It also commissioned a research brief on gender issues in the voluntary sector. Two under-represented groups came together as reference groups to the VSI: the National Visible Minority Reference Group and the Aboriginal Reference Group, both of which provided input and insight at key points along the way.

In all, more than 140 engagement sessions and consultations on themes such as the Accord and the Codes of Good Practice, the regulatory regime and awareness building, were held in 40 towns and cities across the country during these first two and a half years. A powerful tool in building the voluntary sector's "sense of itself," these consultations and other meetings have promoted cohesion and a "sector identity" among voluntary sector organizations, and have demonstrated the power of collaboration as a tool for achieving common goals. Moreover, the process has helped to promote inclusiveness by validating and reinforcing the sector's diversity. As the VSI moves forward, the sector's new and emerging coalitions and networks will no doubt be instrumental in advancing a strong and cohesive voluntary sector agenda.

Building on Momentum: the Way Forward

Over the next two and a half years, the Voluntary Sector Initiative will continue to make progress on its outstanding commitments. These include implementing many of the recommendations set out by the sectors in their joint table reports, for example, the recommendations on improving the regulatory environment and those designed to put information technology to work. Other milestones lie ahead as well: the Canada Volunteerism Initiative Centres will open in 2003 and the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations is slated to begin the same year. A comprehensive evaluation of the VSI and its component programs will begin in 2004. And, given the dynamic environment in which we live, new issues and challenges are sure to arise.

The will is there — both the voluntary sector and the federal government are putting in place new structures to follow up on the work of the joint tables. In reflecting on the structures and processes that would best serve the VSI's interests, both sectors have tried to take into account the lessons learned during the VSI's first years. For its part, the Government of Canada has identified a Minister Responsible for the Voluntary Sector. It's a good fit; the Minister is also responsible for Canadian Heritage, which oversees substantial resources and a number of major federal government programs related to the voluntary sector. A ministerial consultative committee, which will replace the Reference Group of Ministers, will provide on-going championship of the VSI. This committee will meet at least annually separately as well as with the voluntary sector to review results, report to Canadians on the status of the relationship and guide future work.

For the benefit of Canadians

Over the long term, the investments made through the VSI are intended to benefit Canadians by supporting:

- Better programs and services;
- Enhanced employment opportunities;
- More volunteers who are better supported in their efforts; and
- Public policies that reflect the voices of stronger communities

Some outstanding issues

One set of issues that is of great importance to the voluntary sector includes advocacy, sector financing and access to tax benefits. The sector would like the federal government to expand access to tax benefits to a broader range of organizations, increase the current 10 percent limit on advocacy activities and explore federal levers for broader sector financing.

At the outset of the VSI, the voluntary sector established two "sector only" working groups: one dealing with the issue of funding/financing and the other with advocacy. While the goal was to engage federal government representatives in an in-depth discussion and review of these issues, government officials made the decision to address them internally.

As the VSI moves into its final phase, the voluntary sector and the federal government will continue to study these issues separately.

At the departmental level, a committee of assistant deputy ministers will be struck to oversee the work of the VSI. Chaired by the responsible assistant deputy minister of Canadian Heritage, the committee's task will be to sustain and build on the VSI's horizontal approach and provide strong championship of the VSI as it proceeds. The designated assistant deputy minister of Human Resources Development Canada will serve as vice-chair of the committee. Staff support for voluntary sector issues and partnerships will be housed in Canadian Heritage focal point.

For the voluntary sector, a transitional Voluntary Sector Forum (the Forum) is now in place. Its membership includes representatives from the VSI's Voluntary Sector Steering Group, Aboriginal and minority groups, and other interested public and private sector organizations from across the country. The Forum will be working to sustain the momentum of the VSI as it continues oversight of on-going initiatives, identifies and moves forward on emerging issues, and ensures that outstanding concerns, such as advocacy and voluntary sector financing, stay front and centre as sector priorities. As it does so, the Forum will continue to build networks and relationships with the federal government, as well as within the sector itself. The Forum will be accountable to the sector through a Voluntary Sector Assembly, including a broad base of voluntary sector representatives that will come together periodically to review issues and provide advice.

In the joint space between the sectors, a joint steering committee made up of senior government officials and sector representatives and co-chaired by the chairs of the ADM Committee and the Voluntary Sector Forum will ensure that the work of the VSI stays focused and on track.

Begun in the spirit of "jointness," the shared journey of the VSI continues.

List of Joint Coordinating Committee Members

Voluntary Sector Representatives

Patrick Johnston (Co-chair)

President and CEO
Canadian Centre for Philanthropy

Ann Mowat

Past Chair, Board of Directors
The Coalition of
National Voluntary Organizations

Martha Parker

Executive Director
Volunteer Calgary

Monica Patten

President and CEO
Community Foundations of Canada

Lucie Rémillard

President and Executive Director
St. Justine Hospital Foundation
Montreal

Penelope Rowe

Executive Director
Community Services Council of
Newfoundland and Labrador

Michael Weil

President, Chief Executive Officer
YMCA of Canada

Government Representatives

Kathy O'Hara (Co-chair)

Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet
Privy Council Office

Margaret Biggs

Assistant Deputy Minister
Human Resources Development Canada

Scott Broughton

Assistant Deputy Minister
Health Canada

Florence Ievers

Co-ordinator
Status of Women Canada

Bill McCloskey

Assistant Commissioner
Canada Customs and Revenue Agency

Eileen Sarkar

Assistant Deputy Minister
Canadian Heritage

Mike Sheridan

Assistant Chief Statistician
Statistics Canada

Josée Touchette

Vice President
Canadian International Development
Agency

Secretariat

Susan Carter

Executive Director
Voluntary Sector Initiative Secretariat

Jacqueline Gonçalves

Director of Operations and Engagement
Voluntary Sector Task Force
Privy Council Office

Nancy Wildgoose

Executive Director
Voluntary Sector Task Force
Privy Council Office

Documentalist

Dr. Kathy Brock

Director
Public Policy and the Third Sector
School of Policy Studies
Queen's University

Related documents

A Code of Good Practice on Funding

http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/funding/funding_code.cfm

A Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue

http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/policy/policy_code.cfm

An Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector

http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/relationship/the_accord_doc/index.cfm

Building on Strength: Improving Governance and Accountability in Canada's Voluntary Sector

http://www.vsr-trsb.net/pagvs/Building_on_Strength.htm

Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/knowledge/nsgyp.cfm>

Canada Volunteerism Initiative

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/hr/cvi.cfm>

Human Resources in the Voluntary Sector

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/hr/hrvs.cfm>

National Learning Initiative

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/hr/nli.cfm>

National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/knowledge/nsnvo.cfm>

Policy Internships and Fellowships

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/policy/piaf.cfm>

Positioning the Voluntary Sector in Canada: What the Elite and General Public Say

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/dev/redesign/eng/awareness/pdf/awareness%5Fopinion%5Freport.pdf>

Satellite Account

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/knowledge/satellite.cfm>

Speech from the Throne – October 1999

http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/default.asp?Language=E&page=informationresources&sub=sftddt&doc=sftddt1999_e.htm

VSI Sectoral Involvement in Departmental Policy Development

<http://www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/policy/sidpd.cfm>

Working Together: A Government of Canada/Voluntary Sector Joint Initiative

<http://www.vsr-trsb.net/publications/pco-e.pdf>