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Social Justice Strategies

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I have been asked to make a few comments about strategies for social justice work. I will draw heavily on the work of my own organization, Community Foundations of Canada (CFC), and hope that I can successfully link with yesterday's work as well.

CFC decided to jump into justice work for several reasons, chief among them being our belief that foundations have an important role to play in promoting and supporting social change. To elaborate on that I should tell you a bit about Canada. We are a prosperous country – one that has been referred to as having a high quality of life and the envy of many. All that is true – if you are not a first nations person, a newcomer from some parts of the world, a person born into a poor family (and there are more and more of them) or one of the thousands who find their way to food banks or sleep on the streets. So, we in the community foundation world were drawn into asking ourselves about our role in bringing about social change.

That is of course a simplified way of stating why we got into this. The how was that we had two staff who were sponsored by us in an extraordinarily innovative program at McGill University. They were doing a Masters in Voluntary Sector Leadership through the business school and one of their requirements was a significant piece of work that would benefit the sponsoring organization, in this case CFC. I well remember a meeting with them when they returned from the international module of the program, telling me that their lives had been changed, and wondering how we could be more effective in Canada in foundation work. We got busy right away!

That's the story. You have seen some of the research we did, research that has in part guided our work, but in and of itself has become useful, as part of what we did was to make sure it was widely circulated. And it helped us plan for the next stage of our work in social justice.

We determined that there are three broad strategies we have to put in place if we are to reach our destination – a multi-pronged approach. I call them the three "Cs" – commitment, capacity and change.

The first has to do with creating commitment among foundations – and here I ask you to keep in mind that we are tackling this from the perspective of an association of foundations – not a single foundation, though I think what I am about to say is easily applicable to single foundations. So, creating commitment. For us that means we have some work to do to change attitudes and transform embedded ways of thinking about granting and the role of foundations. In part that means looking at the language issue - some of our members have discomfort with the language of "social justice".

We need to develop a program that will allow community foundations to find themselves in this work in a way that is comfortable to them at this time, knowing that over time we will all become more comfortable with the language. We also knew that we have to create awareness of the issue and the problem in various ways (conference sessions, a corner in our regular bulletin, etc.). We knew we must dedicate time for learning, have a plan for communicating and disseminating learnings and information so that there is a broad spread of ideas and information. For us, strategically, it's not good enough for only a few foundations to get involved – we had to build momentum, encourage buy-in.

As we build commitment we are very clear about some of the challenges: risk averse boards who are preoccupied with what donors might think; the stance that community foundations like to take of being neutral and objective; the ways in which boards are made up; the regulatory environment especially with regard to advocacy and definition of charity and last but not least, our own capacity, especially to balance and link all our work. Finding ways to think about and tackle those challenges is part of building commitment and building capacity.

We recognise that building commitment is building capacity - there is not much difference between them, but in this instance we are approaching capacity building, the second "C" in a practical way. That means providing hands on experience and practical tools, strengthening some practices such as how we people our boards, thinking long term and being patient, calling on outside expertise, especially from those who are affected by the issue, balancing our social justice granting with other granting and mobilizing all the foundation's assets for this work – in other words, not seeing this work as only related to our granting but in relation to all we do: donor services, community convening, being knowledge resources for our communities. Levering other funds, and being generators of knowledge and experience for our communities and our field is key to building capacity. And, last but not least in this strategic area of building capacity is working in partnership. For us that means several things: not doing what others can do better than us, but joining them and bringing what we can; sometimes it means proactively seeking out those who can join us. And perhaps most importantly, making sure that we model/demonstrate inclusive partnerships – a core principle we embrace.

Finally, we need to be strategic in a third area. That is the area of change – change in public policy. Canada has exceptionally restrictive laws on advocacy and on the definition of charity – that is the environment in which we can do our work and make our grants. We have determined that we need to be active, with others, in working toward regulatory reform. It does not mean trying to get rid of regulations – rather it means working with others, including governments, to ensure we have the right regulations in place

We are moving ahead with some specific action to in these areas of strategy. I will not give you all the specific program details here, but rather now tell you what I think has helped us move the strategies ahead.

First, community foundations in Canada have a set of guiding principles in place. It took us about three years from the time we began developing them to the time we all said, "we've got it". Now we see those principles at work in nearly every foundation – they are referred to, shared in communities, and serve as the basis for everything else we do, including our justice work. I cannot tell you often enough how important this is to our

work – we believe our justice work grew out of the principles – in fact, we ‘d say the principles inevitably led us to justice work. We always knew these principles would lead us down the road we are now traveling. And especially since we knew that even as the principles were guiding our work, our communities were still experiencing great distress. So, the urgency to move to a next level was keen.

So, our work is strategically rooted in a set of principles to which there has been buy in – in our case a network of over 125 foundations, but in most cases, a single foundation will be the obvious place.

Secondly, we have been and remain committed to research. We need to be grounded, and to understand the historical context of our work, both in terms of our on country and in philanthropy generally and community foundations specifically. So, to move us ahead, we did some formal research, we did some informal survey work and we collected and told stories. We have just released a paper on storytelling that will guide how we describe to others what we are doing. That grounding in research and storytelling helped us find language (we are still not fully there!) and gave us material to spread around. It somehow validated that were on the right track.

We also put in place another of our practices: a reference group, made up of members and others who had knowledge, etc. This is in fact a learning group as well as a guiding group. John Heller and Shari Turitz have been part of this group.

And finally, let me talk a bit about one other relevant strategy, linked to all three “Cs” that is helping us move forward: dissemination and replication. The latter is of course important for us as we are trying to tackle this across a whole country. The work of Lisbeth (Lee) Schorr has inspired us. She has helped us understand why replication is so hard and that what we want to do is replicate the “essence” and allow the actual adaptation to flower locally in its own way, provided there is an agreed to, common set of core components, some kind of agreed to results and a way to monitor progress and when it makes sense to make changes as well as when we all need to be doing the same thing. She reminded us of the value of working in coalitions, and perhaps most importantly that dissemination of ideas and attitudes is as important as anything! Finally, Lee spoke, in a seminar I attended recently, of the critical role of an intermediary organization like ours in moving things along. We can provide continuous backing, engage with funders, help change the rules and actually make sure dissemination occurs. We have begun to do that and view the commitment to dissemination as critical to our success.

Yesterday we spent some time talking about what social justice foundation work really means. We believe that society should be organized in a way that allows equal opportunity for all its members. Our social justice work is directed at social change, seeking solutions to social, economic and political injustice by addressing root causes, not just symptoms. We have a long distance to travel, but the determination to begin the journey.

I am glad I can share a bit of our journey with you and more importantly, learn with and from you about yours.