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IMPACTS OF DEVOLVING SETTLEMENT FUNDING ON GOVERNMENT-SPOS RELATIONSHIP: BC EXPERIENCE[1]

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Government and SPOs have always had an asymmetric-symbiotic relationship the success of which requires not only mutual trust and respect. In this paper, based on the fifteen-year settlement funding devolution experience of British Columbia, we argue that a successful government-SPOs relationship also requires both sides to take concrete steps to collaboratively enact the principles of mutual trust and respect.

In Canada, the voluntary sector has played an important role in delivering government funded social programs in many areas. To recognize the contribution of the voluntary sector, the Government of Canada and the sector signed an accord which outlines the values and principles that govern their partnership. In the Foreword of the Accord (Voluntary Sector Task Force, 2001), it states this partnership is built upon a sound foundation of trust and mutual respect. No doubt these two principles are necessary for a successful partnership; however, given some of the dynamics between funding agencies and the voluntary sector, trust and mutual respect as broad concepts are not sufficient to explain how a successful partnership works.

In the field of settlement services, the voluntary sector has traditionally partnered with the government to deliver services to newcomers to Canada. This partnership has become almost a symbiotic – coexisting and interdependent – relationship between the government and the service provider organizations (SPOs), a great majority of which are voluntary organizations.

However, this symbiotic relationship is not in an equal footing. It is asymmetrical in terms of control: while SPOs have the expertise and mechanism to deliver the service in the community, they have relatively little power compared to the government which has control of funding, policy making, program development and monitoring and evaluation.

The asymmetrical power of control has led to an inherent tension in the government-SPO partnership. Understanding this tension and effective approaches to addressing this tension has to go beyond broad concepts of mutual trust and respect and speak to the actions and approaches that build partner-

ships in the face of the asymmetrical power relationship.

In this paper, based on the experience of British Columbia, we examine what other factors contributed to a relatively successful partnership between the Government of British Columbia and settlement service sector. Information presented in this paper is largely based on findings of a study on the devolution of settlement funding for which 41 people from different levels of government and SPOs (both voluntary sector and private sector), who have played a significant role in the settlement service and programming, were interviewed.

THE BC EXPERIENCE

In May 1998, the Governments of Canada and British Columbia entered into the first of three bilateral agreements that devolved responsibility for the design and delivery of immigration settlement and integration services to the BC Government. Over time the mix and diversity of these programs changed and two subsequent agreements between the governments were signed in 2004 and 2010 with increased funding for BC. Under these arrangements, the BC Government developed a wide array of innovative programming and put its relationship with SPOs on an entirely new footing.

CHALLENGES IN BC'S EXPERIENCE

During the devolution period, the BC Government-SPOs partnership went through some ups and downs. Perhaps the most noticeable tension was the introduction of a Request-for-Proposal (RFP) procurement mechanism in 2003, replacing a more negotiated, grant-based system. The introduction of the RFP process upset and disrupted the existing service delivery system and caused tremendous stresses in the sector. Some smaller SPOs, including ethnic based organizations and English-as-second-language training organizations, were closed down. As a result, there was a noticeable tension between the BC Government Branch and the SPOs and led to a political mobilization which ended with a compromised resolution.

This incident reflects the asymmetrical nature of the partnership: it was a unilateral move by the Branch. However, in hindsight, most respondents from both the SPOs and the Branch agreed that the introduction of the RFP generated positive impacts on the funding process, SPOs' internal capacity and a new partnership model in the sector. In fact, both the BC Government and the sector learned from this experience and made adjustment to improve the partnership. In general, there was a strong consensus among all respondents that the BC partnership has been a positive and successful one. So the question is: what made the asymmetrical BC Government-SPOs relationship turn out to be a positive one?

WHAT DID BC GOVERNMENT DO?

According to the respondents, the BC Government has smoothed this asymmetrical partnership by taking a strongly consultative approach, rationalizing the rules of the game and investing resources to support sectoral capacity building.

CONSULTATIVE MODEL

The BC model has even been praised by almost all the respondents as a "consultative model." In the last fifteen years, the BC government actively engaged, consulted and sought feedback from major sector stakeholders through umbrella organizations, conferences and seminars and special advisory committees, etc. Respondents from both the BC government and the SPOs feel that the BC model has generated a collaborative work culture through ongoing genuine exchange of ideas and sharing of information.

For instance, learning from the first RFP, a consultative approach was used to conduct the procurement. Consultations included surveys to obtain feedback on past procurements, face to face and over-the-phone meetings to share new programming ideas and formal, structured face-to-face consultation/information sessions for feedback and for buy-in. Province-wide sectoral meetings were held to explain and implement new policies and programs. Indeed, the responsible Branch under the BC Government has actively engaged and consulted the sector in design and delivery of new programs such as the Vulnerable Immigrant Populations Program, Guided Pathways approach, Settlement Workers in School and professional training. Through consultation meetings and special committees the sector can directly and/or indirectly influence the development of new initiatives. One example is the Skills Connect funding formula. The sector proposed a case-based funding formula which is more appropriate for the service.

RATIONALIZATION OF THE RULES

Throughout the years, the BC Government has also developed a set of rationalized policies for the settlement programs. This includes:

- The development of performance management system and logic models shifted the program evaluation from output to outcome and better defined programs goals and outcomes.

- The RFP rationalized the funding allocation process and put more emphasis on front-end planning and shifted from input accountability to outcome accountability. This helped clarify the mutual expectations between the government and SPOs.

- BC's evaluation processes evolved considerably over time. During the 1998-2005 era, when programs were fairly stable, some regular evaluations were done. As the pilots rolled out during 2005-2009, the Branch engaged external contractors to undertake evaluations of the new initiatives. In 2009, the Branch's stance on evaluation changed, in the context of increased funding from the Government of Canada, program reviews in the BC government and the drive in the Branch to pilot and build new settlement programs. One of the results was to embed evaluation and evaluation data systems into the program design and contract management processes. The sector had mixed feelings about the evaluation process. Over time, they became more aware of and agreed with, the importance of evaluation. Moreover, their partnership in the development of the outcomes and logic models went a long way to building faith in the evaluation processes and the sector appreciated the collaborative, evidence-based approach.

By taking these steps, the Branch moved towards a more rational, evidence-based approach, which helped to clarify the rules of the game and in doing so in a collaborative manner, helped to build a partnership based on a more consistent set of mutually held standards.

INVESTING RESOURCE TO THE SECTOR'S CAPACITY BUILDING

Under the BC model, the Branch also invested considerably in building the capacity of the sector SPOs. SPOs are funded to build capacity in the sector support as a whole. The two major associations – AMSSA and ELSA NET – have received and provide support to coordinate the sector and facilitate the communication between the government and the sector. Meanwhile, with the support of the BC Government, smaller consortia have also formed to advise the government on delivering programs and services to newcomers. For instance, the Settlement Workers in School (SWIS) program has brought many participating school boards, albeit informally, together to express their concerns and interests to the BC government.

Respondents generally agree that the BC settlement service system has become more professionalized in the last 15 years. Many respondents point to the significant efforts of the BC government to enhance the service quality by providing funding and leadership in developing the BC Training Framework and the Competence Dictionary and coordinating a competency-based in-service training and professional development system for BC's settlement sector.

The development of the WelcomeBC.ca also provides SPOs online access to reliable, client-focused information on settlement and immigration services to encourage immigration to BC and to help newcomers better adapt to life in their new communities. Clients and settlement service agencies can obtain up-to-date information on living, working and settling in BC through the immigration portal, foreign-language micro-sites and mobile and social media channels.

By investing in the capacity of the sector, both as service deliverers and as a fairly coherent stakeholder group, the Branch helped to address some of the capacity asymmetries between government and the SPOs. While the Branch continued to hold the major policy and funding levers, the investment in the professionalization and organization of the sector made it a more equal partnership.

WHAT DID THE SECTOR DO?

In the last eighteen years, the sector has learned to be highly adaptive. The sector had to significantly adapt when the procurement system was implemented over 2003 to 2005.

One result was the formation of consortia among major settlement service organizations. Under the consortium model, several major SPOs in the Lower Mainland coordinated among themselves and worked collaboratively to bid for service contracts in the Request for Proposal process. As a result, an implicit division of labour among the SPOs has been formed at least in the Lower Mainland. Similar collaborative models were adopted by the sector to bid for other new initiatives such as Skills Connect and Vulnerable Immigrant Populations Program.

Meanwhile the sector has enthusiastically participated in the consultative process. They made a recognizable and significant contribution to the development of new programs to address different needs of newcomers.

Working with other providers had other effects on the sector. When the school boards introduced the Settlement Workers in School (SWIS) program, they offered a higher salary scale for the SWIS workers, attracting many experienced workers from the major community-based SPOs. This caused major concern within the sector. To minimize the discrepancies of salary scales and after advocating in a coordinated way to the government, the salary of settlement service workers in community organizations was later adjusted in the procurement. This helped retain experienced workers in and attracted new workers to the sector.

Other examples of the adaptations from the SPOs include:

- To respond to the BCSAP Training Framework, SPOs were funded to formulate and organize their own in-service training programs.

- The outcome-based logic model of WelcomeBC

framework introduced a new accountability system. The sector has gradually adopted an ongoing program monitoring and evaluation system. Many SPOs, particularly larger organizations, have collaborated with former Metropolis BC researchers to conduct program evaluation and need assessments. Indeed, their performance in terms of providing quality service to newcomers has been confirmed by the different program monitoring and evaluation exercises.

CONCLUSION

As a final remark, respondents of the study also recognized that the increase in funding and the stability of government and SPOs staff are also important factors. The increased funding allowed both sides to take a creative approach in collaboration for development of new approaches. Meanwhile, the stability of staff not only accumulated practice wisdom in both the government and the sector but also established a trustful partnership. In sum, the BC model is a good example of how government and SPOs can work collaboratively even under a asymmetrical-symbiotic partnership. The BC example shows how, with concrete steps to build a collaborative approach through a strongly consultative approach, rationalizing the rules, capacity building and adaptation by both partners, governments and their SPO partners can enact the principles of mutual trust and respect.

NOTE

Findings reported in this paper is abstracted from the report, Devolving Settlement Funding from the Government of Canada: The British Columbia Experience, 1998-2013, written by Heather Dickson, Evert Lindquist, Ben Pollard, Miu Chung Yan for the Western Canadian Consortium on Integration, Citizenship and Cohesion (recently renamed to Immigration Research West).

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LES EFFETS DU TRANSFERT DES RESPONSABILITÉS RELATIVES AU FINANCEMENT DES SERVICES D'ÉTABLISSEMENT SUR LA RELATION ENTRE LE GOUVERNEMENT ET LES FS : L'EXPÉRIENCE DE LA COLOMBIE-BRITANNIQUE[1]

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Le gouvernement et les FS ont toujours évolué dans un rapport asymétrique-symbiotique dont le succès dépend non seulement de l'établissement d'une confiance mutuelle, mais également d'un respect mutuel. À travers cet article, qui se base sur l'expérience du transfert du financement de l'établissement en Colombie-Britannique qui s'est produit sur 15 ans, nous proposons qu'une relation réussie entre le gouvernement et les FS exige que les deux parties prennent des mesures concrètes pour arriver à établir une collaboration basée sur les principes de la confiance et du respect mutuel.

Au Canada, le secteur du bénévolat a joué un rôle important dans la prestation des programmes sociaux financés par gouvernement dans plusieurs régions. Afin de reconnaitre la contribution du secteur bénévole, le gouvernement du Canada et ce secteur ont signé une entente qui énonce les valeurs et les principes qui régissent leur association. Dans l'avant-propos de l'entente (Groupe de travail sur le secteur bénévole, 2001), il est écrit que ce partenariat est construit sur une base solide de confiance et de respect mutuel. Il n'y a pas de doutes que ces deux principes sont nécessaires pour assurer la réussite de tout partenariat ; cependant, étant donné certains mécanismes en jeu entre les agences de financement et le secteur bénévole, des concepts aussi vagues que la confiance et le respect ne suffisent pas pour expliquer comment un partenariat réussi fonctionne.

Dans le domaine des services d'établissement, le secteur bénévole a traditionnellement travaillé en collaboration avec le gouvernement lors de la prestation des services aux nouveaux arrivants au Canada. Ce partenariat est devenu une relation presque symbiotique — de coexistence et d'interdépendance — entre le gouvernement et les organismes fournissant des services (FS), qui sont en grande partie constitués d'organismes bénévoles.