

Bridging Gaps: Building Diversity, Resilience and Connectivity

by ANN DALE

This is the third 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.



Part One. Leadership and Connectivity

In highly plural, Internet savvy, and progressively more sophisticated societies, competing for attention and space on critical public policy issues becomes increasingly challenging, particularly for the environmental movement. Why? Many of its leaders can be characterized as lone wolf activists, an admirable trait for ringing the alarm and highlighting the seriousness of environmental threats currently facing humankind. However, this strength is also a weakness; many leaders work independently and tirelessly providing critical capacity within their own organizations, but often, little connectivity between organizations occurs. This hampers the ability of dispersed environmental groups to be able to act as a cohesive and integrated social movement. This 'gap' is further enlarged by a lack of leadership from the larger better-funded organizations in their actions towards their less well-endowed colleagues working at the grass roots. Without a cohesive network and critical mass of strategic partnerships and alliances, the environment is never consistently and persistently high on the political agenda of the day. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the environmental movement lies in the fact that we have not yet begun to invent a politics to go with the concept (MacNeill 1998).

Canadians are clearly looking for ethical leadership in identifying the solutions and actions for meaningful change, at both the individual and collective level. In poll after poll, the public results reveal that they trust scientists and environmental leaders more than elected officials and public servants. There is a need for the environmental movement to seize leadership in this area, and for Canadian funding organizations to provide the incentives for enhanced strategic networking between groups.

In particular, the environmental movement needs to accelerate its use of new media (website linkages, online presence, online issue forums, real-time e-Dialogues) in more dynamic and interactive ways within their respective constituencies, in strategic partnerships with the research community, and through the deliberative building of online **social networks** to create a critical mass of involved Canadians for meaningful social change.

A **social network** is a social structure made of "nodes", which are generally individuals or organizations. A network maps the ways in which people and groups are connected through various relationships ranging from casual acquaintance to close familiar bonds. Networks operate at many levels, from families up to the level of nations, and affect the way that problems are solved, and organizations are run. According to social network theory, the attributes of members are less important than their relationships to other actors within the network. Social networking also refers to a category of Internet applications to help connect friends, business partners, or other individuals together using a variety of tools. These applications, known as online social networks are becoming increasingly popular. (Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2006).



Research shows that the Internet is increasingly a site of meaningful engagement, and many people are using the Internet to intensify their connection to their local communities and community organizations (Horrigan 2001). Further, the medium is attracting new and diverse kinds of people to local groups who, once they make contact online, tend to maintain a high level of involvement (Ibid 2001). This makes the Internet a powerful tool for the environmental movement in facilitating social engagement and change, particularly among youth.

In order to be involved, however, Canadians need to have a basic environmental literacy about the issues, especially in the information age of the 21st century. For example, research into online engagement in critical public policy issues such as the Post-Kyoto public forum (www.rrublicforums.ca) and the work of the Romanow Commission on our universal health care system revealed that public knowledge about the underlying issues can be shallow, even when they are top-of-the mind concerns. Because of the trust that the public places in environmental leaders, the movement could play a critical role in enhancing civic literacy and public engagement in key environmental concerns. But this function has been consistently eroded over the last decade as funders, and in particular governments, have withdrawn funding for core capacity such as research and communications and instead have focused on single-action and specific projects. All civil society actors and leaders need to be involved in enhancing civic literacy around critical environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity conservation, lack of integrated long-term sustainability planning, land degradation, water and air quality, and pollution abatement and ecosystem restoration.

The complexity and dynamic connectivity of environmental issues demand that all sectors of society need to be engaged in novel ways. Fundamentally, governments must come up with new ways of inducing micro-behavioural changes through different engagements of Canadian publics, in which environmental organizations could play a pivotal role. For it is beyond the ability of any level of government to develop macro policy levers in isolation from civil society leaders. This requires unprecedented levels of collaboration between government policy makers and environmental groups with some of the leading-edge researchers and their students in order to develop greater critical capacity for diffusing ecological literacy and

knowledge throughout Canadian society. Knowledge diffusion is much more than information dissemination, and leaders, both young and old, need to appreciate leading-edge techniques (network theory, values-based communication strategies), complemented by the use of new media, to speed the exploitation of knowledge through diverse sectors of Canadian society. This will only occur, however, if environmental groups develop more sophisticated ways of communicating issues that respond to the values, the societal class distinctions and the media to which different publics relate—in other words, differentiated audience strategies. Most people receive ‘news’ according to their social status, and employ different media based on both their socio-economic status and their values. It is important, therefore, when communicating environmental issues to understand this difference, that people consume news differently and that the media exploits these differences in their attempts to polarize rather than inform debate. There are strategies for social communication, where people recognize themselves in the message, and that appeal to their values (Trudeau Foundation 2005).

One of the ways to increase the speed of knowledge diffusion is through deliberate formation of social networks, which are themselves changing as a result of new information communication technologies (ICTs) such as chat rooms, online forums (www.rrublicforums.ca) and online dialogues (www.e-dialogues.ca). ICT networks have several characteristics that enhance the diffusion of knowledge. Some of these characteristics are their speed of communication, reducing time lags in diffusion; the ability to stimulate novel e-communities of practice independent of place; the ability to bring diverse people together in a more neutral space independent of normal physical cues that may enhance more meaningful dialogue, and in particular their capacity to provide greater space for interdisciplinary thinking, which is critical to the implementation of more sustainable futures. However, enhancing knowledge diffusion to more diverse publics through ICTs will only be successful if the self-organizing properties and the spontaneous properties of the Internet are not lost in the creation of new socially diverse networks to build a more cohesive and coherent consistencies for environmental change and action on the part of individuals and political decision-makers.

Is there a way to combine the most modern communications methods and network strategies to get climate change on every person’s cell phone in this

country, to create “*smart mobs*” for environmental issues, and ultimately an enduring, socially cohesive political constituency for meaningful social change, both for the sake of humanity and the other creatures with whom we share the planet?

A *smart mob* is a group that, contrary to the usual connotations of a mob, behaves intelligently or efficiently because of its exponentially increasing network links, using communication technologies such as the Internet, computer-mediated communication such as Internet relay chat, wireless mobile phones and personal digital assistants. This type of network empowers individuals to connect to information and others, allowing for social coordination. Examples include e-Bay, the street protests organized by the anti-globalization movement, and the text messages that were sent in the Philippines thought to be partly responsible for the ousting of former President Joseph Estrada.

Part Two. Funding: Fissures and Gaps in the Environmental Movement

A 1997 feasibility study commissioned by Environment Canada of the Canadian Biodiversity Institute, (Dale 1997) to determine the funding gaps in the environmental community revealed four broad factors affecting capacity—scale, lack of diversity, increasing competition for fewer and fewer funds, and an overall shift to more conservative funding by industry, governments and foundations, coupled with a decrease in the availability of core funding. More critically, the study found in its interviews with 32 environmental organizations that leaders of these groups were diverting more and more attention away from long-term strategic issues and planning at the expense of public communication and education programs. Further, the voluntary sector was in danger of splitting into two camps—large organizations with a workable relationship with government and the capacity to deliver high-demand services, and smaller organizations that are more vulnerable because they are more dependent on take-it-or-leave-it and short term project-specific funding. The National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations has recently confirmed these findings; planning for the future, funding and issues of scale remain among the top capacity issues identified by Canada’s environmental organizations in 2003.

The biggest gap in funding within the movement is a lack of funding for the large, horizontal issues so critical for the planet’s long-term survival. These issues are not easily bounded or one solution easily identifiable, rather they are multi-faceted and imprecise; they are messy, but nonetheless are essential to our future. For example, one of the biggest environmental issues facing communities everywhere, including other species, is climate change, and yet it received just 3% of grant dollars, alternative transportation received 1%, and terrestrial ecosystems/land received 44% of total grant dollars allocated by environmental grantmakers in 2002 (Townshend 2004). Terrestrial ecosystem and land protection, while admirable, will not be maintained nor restored in any meaningful way if we continue current land use patterns, increasing urban sprawl and transportation choices.

The environmental movement as a whole tends to be very goal oriented, and included organizations often act as competing fiefdoms, sacrificing the main goal for competition for public attention and funding for more specific (local) issues. If a potential leader or key strategist emerges, there is a tendency to dominate rather than support. Environmental organizations rarely initiate strategic partnerships or ‘mergers’ to consolidate market awareness on a big issue; an exception is the Green Budget Coalition (www.greenbudget.ca). Yet, considerable economies of scale and more importantly, effectiveness could occur through consolidated management, marketing and communications strategies on any one issue. This is also reflected in the invisibility of environmental organizations in public policy development, and again, this is due to lack of capacity. Most people at the table are paid by their respective organizations to participate in government consultations and round tables, corporate decision-makers and public servants for example, whereas the NGO representative is taking valuable time away from their organization’s core needs to be able to participate in public policy meetings, except for the larger, more heavily funded organizations. In 1997, Executive Directors of small to medium-sized environmental groups had to divert their time from substantive issues to fundraising, with many spending 70% to 90% of their time on the latter (Dale 1997), depending upon their funding base. Subsequent research confirms that this continues to be a serious issue (Hall et al 2004; Vesnecki and Adess 2002; Tierney 2006).

Thus, a critical need of the environmental movement is to receive sustained, long-term core funding to develop greater capacity in the following key areas: research; strategic communication strategies; coalition building and network leadership between organizations, and internal human resource capacity. Environmental groups, particularly smaller to medium-sized organizations, need resources to develop succession plans and to provide stable, reliable salaries that will allow environmental leaders to have greater personal security and the ability for personal long-term planning, including educational opportunities, training and development. This is particularly important in terms of contributing to the coherence, professionalism and reliability of environmental organizations and their continued capacity to provide consistent and sustained leadership in Canada.

Another crucial gap in environmental funding in Canada, in addition to a lack of funding for the large systemic issues, is a lack of risk-taking in funding novel groups and organizations and experimental programs and projects. The need for metrics predisposes funders to fund those organizations with the greatest credibility—large established membership base, research capacity, well-known leaders, and established reputation, which of course, leads to increasing concentration and lack of diversity in who and what gets funded in this country. Encouraging diversity includes funding the novel, including initiatives that facilitate learning and knowledge diffusion. If it is implicit in a funder's objectives that they will deliberately incur risk, perhaps by directing 30% of their funds to less established groups and individuals who are seen to be leading novel cross-cutting projects that are in no one's self-interest to fund, then surely this can be defensible and acceptable for prudence and probity purposes? Funders also have to realize the changing nature of the environmental movement, as the field is now increasingly crowded by larger quasi-government organizations and former consulting companies who have transformed themselves into not-for-profit organizations who are now competing with traditionally established groups for fewer and fewer funds. Should these groups be considered on the same playing field by funders, given their more privileged access to resources from governments?

Conclusions: Diversity, Resilience and Connectivity

To summarize, the challenges facing the environmental movement are similar to those facing the environment in general, a lack of diversity, resilience and critical connectivity. *Diversity* in terms of large groups playing a leadership role in ensuring a healthy balance in the movement between small, medium and large scale organizations, and local, regional and national foci. The concept of diversity is particularly challenging in terms of communicating its value and conservation to increasingly plural, complex differentiated audiences, and the lack of capacity to respond to complex 'commons' issues that transcend socio-political boundaries, such as conflict over competing land uses, climate change and biodiversity conservation. *Resilience* in terms of critical capacity within environmental organizations particularly with respect to sustained research, communications and educational programs is a critical issue for small and medium sized environmental groups. And *connectivity* between groups must be augmented by addressing regional disparities in funding, connecting the dots between people and organizations and specifically, between the research and environmental organizations.

The issue of connectivity deserves greater elaboration, especially given current demographic trends, including the retirement in this decade of the 'baby boomers', experts from governments, corporate leaders (e.g., CEOs) and above all, policy experts and academics. This is a strategic opportunity for environmental groups to capitalize on a highly educated and sophisticated volunteer pool of expertise and experience, and to create novel partnerships and networks of volunteer collaboration with retired academics and government experts. This will require a greater sophistication and novel human resource management skills currently not manifest in the leadership of many environmental groups, particularly the small and medium sized organizations.

Critical leadership can be provided by foundations in connecting the dots through their overview capacity and knowledge of the movement as a whole. For example, when two similar applications request funding, a foundation could encourage more partnerships through its financial leverage, and in some cases, even actively stimulate partnerships between large, medium and

grass-roots organizations. Through strategic partnerships and novel alliances, strengths and weaknesses could be optimized between groups and individual leaders.

The environmental movement itself, however, has to recognize its own issues with 'crowding' by the 'large, well-established organizations', and their corresponding leadership responsibilities towards smaller and less well-endowed organizations. Strategic partnering is one solution for achieving critical mass, and allowing access to critical missing infrastructure (such as charitable status¹), and overcoming regional disparities and the relative inexperience of some organizations compared to others (almost 30% of environmental organizations have been in operation for less than 10 years) (CEGN 2004). This will also contribute to greater connectivity between younger and more senior activists across organizations, helping to bridge the silos, stovepipes and solitudes (Dale 2001) that characterize the country. Increasing connectivity should also occur through a stronger and coherent Internet presence.

Leadership among environmental funders and civil society leaders requires determining a clear coherent set of national priorities for research and action, particularly when some of the most critical issues are also the most complex for response. Climate change affects everyone, and its impacts are synergistic, unpredictable, highly unstable and its threshold effects impossible to predict. Given the federal government is backing away from the Kyoto protocol, funding for a nation-wide climate change campaign designed to both inform and influence people's lifestyle choices is essential for future human security. Such an initiative requires an unprecedented level of co-operation between environmental organizations, researchers and scientists as well as leadership and campaign coherence. Is such a campaign possible? If we look to the changes brought about in 20 years by the anti-smoking campaign, can we learn from this experience and implement a campaign to achieve similar results in a ten-year time frame, or an even five-year time frame? Such a campaign will require a large capital investment, possibly 5 to 10 million dollars, which runs counter to current funding patterns, as the sector is characterized by a few large grants and many smaller grants—with a median grant amount of \$11,700 (CEGN 2004).

Clearly, the environmental movement has to come into the 21st century and embrace both social as well as ecological imperatives, the built as well as the non-built environment, as the greatest challenge is not necessarily one of scientific or managed origin, rather it is about dealing with people and their diverse cultures, interests, visions, priorities and needs (Norgaard 1994) through knowledge diffusion. Adopting systems thinking in their strategic planning and communications between organizations could accomplish this. Canadian communities are facing formidable challenges attempting to meet sustainable development imperatives in rapidly changing global, national and local contexts. Specific challenges include economic and social development; public health (water, air, and land quality); access to and long-term maintenance of natural resources; economic disparities; sewage, transportation and policing infrastructure; information communication technologies (ICTs); fear of change (powerlessness, breaking traditional dependencies); decreasing levels of engagement in volunteerism and voting; fragmentation (rapidly changing demographics, special interest groups) and governance (decision-making, First Nations and federal/provincial relationships). Such issues are dynamically interconnected and cannot be dealt with in isolation by any one community alone, as many of them span traditional jurisdictions and local capacity. This is particularly true for intellectual, social and cultural connections. The failure to implement sustainable community development is social, not scientific; it is clear we know enough to act now (Dale and Robinson 1995). ♻️

As always, I am indebted to younger people, in particular, Jason Lukerhoff for his ideas expressed at the 2006 Trudeau Foundation Summer Institute and Kathryn Townshend, for her incisive editing. AD

¹ Environment organizations are less likely to have charitable status than nonprofit and voluntary organizations overall, 59% do not have charitable status. CEGN Research Brief, October 2004.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of CEGN or the series' funders.

CEGN would like to acknowledge and thank the [Ontario Trillium Foundation](#) and the [George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation](#) for their generous support of the Thoughtleader Series.



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