

Winning The Race Against Time: How to make environmental grantmaking work better right now

by **MARK SARNER**

This is the fifth 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.



Environmentalists have good reasons to celebrate these days. The environment is unquestionably the global issue of the moment. It hasn't been this high on the public's agenda since the 80's. This time around there appears to be a deeper understanding of the issues, more sophistication in the public's recognition of the actions needed, more support for big, bold action and more focus on who can make the changes that will count: big government and big business.

Let's not pop the corks quite yet, however. There are some good reasons for caution amidst the euphoria. There is considerable confusion over what the foci for action should be. Is climate change the same as the environment issues of the 80's? Exactly how do we relate endangered species and spaces to the global warming issue? How do we sort out ends and means? Will the government and corporate announcements that fill the air these days translate into policy action over time? Will the breadth and speed of action be enough to enable us to catch up and get ahead of coming calamities in what can best be characterized as a race against time?

Just because environment seems to be at a high water mark as an issue does not guarantee that it will continue to rise to the point where it bursts the dam of inaction and becomes the transforming wave of change that we need. Nor is it in any way certain that as it rolls out it will do so in a way that will sustain, grow and move in the right direction. We have seen issues rise like this before only to watch them fall back into the public opinion backwater.

My intent here is not to dampen enthusiasm but rather to encourage some sober thought and to call for a major change in how grantmakers exert their considerable

influence on the work of Canada's ENGOs. It is urgent that grantmakers take a fresh and hard look at where and how they are deploying money. There is no time to waste. If, as is widely recognized, government and corporate policy change are the critical factors in moving towards the world we want and need, then exponentially more focus, priority and resources need to go into championing just such change. Where grantmakers put their money will have a pivotal impact on where ENGOs put their energies. That, in turn, will profoundly influence the outcome – the health of the environment. It is that simple. And that graphic.

The record of where grantmakers have been giving their money, as reflected in CEGN's profile of environmental grantmaking in Canada in 2002, is telling. A few issues stand out:

- **The money is spread awfully thin.** While \$132 million was distributed by the 90 grantmakers in the profile it went to 1,520 organizations – mostly in smallish amounts. Is giving a little to so many a good approach? Modest giving too often leads to modest to minimal results. The downside here is not money lost but opportunity lost. While giving like this does syndicate the risk, this is social investing for charitable purposes rather than financial investment for return. It is time to think big and to grant accordingly.



Now is the time for big vision, big ideas and big actions. At least 25% of grants should be going in large amounts to a few very big ideas. That's \$33 million+ going to two, three or four major undertakings. If money is power, and it often is, imagine what a big impact such an approach could generate.

• **Asking environmental organizations what they want is not the answer.**

If what has been supported in the past was the answer we wouldn't be in the situation we currently find ourselves. Looking at how money is distributed, it is clear that "same old, same old" may be good as far as it goes but it doesn't go far enough fast enough. Sure it makes sense to buy land, to clean up rivers and streams, to do basic education, but the sum total of all these initiatives won't add up to the kind of massive and rapid change the world needs now. That change will be, more than anything else, a product of policy change and action by big government and big business. Yet, as things stand, a mere pittance goes into advocacy and very little goes into public policy work.

• **Grantmakers need to step up as never before, to lead from the front as opposed to hanging back.**

A shared vision isn't going to emerge on its own. It must be created in a new way, probably by grantmakers working together. Big ideas need to cut across the missions, mandates and methodologies of individual organizations. ENGOs need to be incented to collaborate in new and different ways. Only changes in funding criteria will cause organizations to move beyond their own self-interest and survival, to the greater public interest, survival of the planet. The way funds are allocated will determine whether this will happen, how and how fast. More alignment is the goal. It is not that any organization needs to give up its own agenda, only that more have to work better together against some shared goals and objectives and in truly outward-oriented coalitions and working groups where outcome is all and process is a means to an end and nothing else.

• **Grantmakers have to find new sources of knowledge, inspiration and models for effective action.**

It is clear that the sector is far too insular, too inward for its own good. The result is that too much time is spent in the environment clubhouse talking to their members and not enough is spent looking outwards at what is going on. The clubishness starts with ENGOs themselves, with groups of ENGO representatives gathering for conferences and

meetings, talking to each other and learning the same old stuff from the same old people. Bonding is a good thing. But it is not the only thing. Grantmakers have the power to bring fresh air, shine new light, to spark new ideas and actions through where they put their money. This *Thoughtleader Series* is a case in point. More such initiatives are badly needed.

The immediate challenge is clear enough. A fresh approach to funding is the key to ensuring that ENGOs are more effective going forward. That approach will come from grantmakers moving beyond the familiar, the comfortable and the predictable and into a new frontier. This new approach should be built on a better understanding of the nature of social change and of how to impact public and corporate policy.

Unfortunately, this very understanding is sorely lacking. Further, gaining that understanding is not currently a priority of either the sector or the grantmakers. All of which is rather interesting in that so much conversation when ENGOs and grantmakers get together is about social change and policy making. Environmentalists seem to realize that policy change is the be all and end all of success. Yet that has not driven the sector to becoming massively pre-occupied with learning how to play the policy influence game or to investing significant resources in it.

The reluctance to make advocacy a priority is common among registered charities. Many believe that their charitable status is at risk if they do advocacy and so run from any hint of it. This is not exactly true. Even registered charities are allowed to devote a percentage of their resources to advocacy/lobbying without compromising their charitable status with CCRA. For the 59% of ENGOs that are not registered charities, there are no restrictions on them being advocates or lobbying.

If we do the math here we find that only 6% of funding from grantmakers went into advocacy and input to public policy combined in 2002. That number should be increased at least 4 times, to about 25% of funding. That takes it from \$7.4 million annually to \$33 million based on 2002 data. (Where would that money come from, you may ask. I would immodestly suggest that the 15% now going to land acquisition could be secured from private donors and remind everyone that the federal government alone has recently given \$225 million to the Nature Conservancy of Canada for exactly this purpose.)

This dramatic increase in funding for advocacy/public policy is just a start, however. To ensure that it is effective it needs to be deployed for maximum impact and influence. That means a new approach to advocacy. It means developing a clear, concrete agenda for policy change, a logic of address that can generate significant buy in across the sector. It means developing an advocacy action plan that integrates public engagement, stakeholder engagement and government relations into one coherent, dynamic program. It means rallying the sector into a chorus of common concern, commitment and purpose, a strategy that builds critical mass and momentum, reaches out to and engages new constituencies in new ways and demonstrates political clout and savvy to the powers that be. It means doing all this with a sense of urgency commensurate with the situation, being committed to action above all else and progress as an imperative not a pipe dream. Only once the sector gets its act together can it hope to get the society to do the same on environment issues.

Grantmakers can make this happen. Certain of them have already demonstrated the ability to be effective as policy change agents, working directly and effectively with government. The time has come to build a bigger, faster more powerful advocacy machine. Only grantmakers have the freedom to do just that. With private/family foundations and community foundations deploying private money, there is no need for these funders to be accountable to outside forces or interests. There are a number of foundations, leaders in Canada, who have shown the courage of their convictions in taking such big, bold leaps in funding. More are needed.

Having worked on advocacy efforts of similar scope, scale and complexity in other issue areas, I can offer the assurance that new approaches can generate major results. In order to achieve policy change we need to play the political game in a new way. It is not enough for us to prepare factual, well argued briefs to present in meeting rooms to bureaucrats and sometimes to politicians. Nor is it effective for us to go public with loud and angry protests in response to what the government is or isn't doing. Rather, we need a three-pronged plan through which we change the climate (social and political), change the game (by no longer playing someone else's game but instead by writing our own rules by which

others will have to play) and change the conversation (from morally superior pronouncements and lectures from us on what governments and business are doing wrong today and what they failed to do yesterday – blame and shame – to meaningful public discussions of what we can do together to shape a positive future that benefits all through practical, actionable solutions.)

All this requires the proverbial paradigm shift. Funders will have to see themselves differently, as agents of change in their own right rather than simply as funders of the services of grantees. A mechanism will be required to execute this work. Of course a new one could be created but there is little reason to do so. CEGN has all the elements required: the right players, the right motivation and the necessary resources. All that is needed is for the leaders to determine that the time is right and to show a willingness to commit resources to the cause. Rest assured that \$33 million per year over the next three years, strategically deployed, could make a huge impact on policy change and resource allocation.

It is hard to see what the rationale would be for grantmakers to maintain the status quo. As I think all would agree, it isn't working, at least not fast enough to make the necessary difference. With the environment so hot as an issue, it makes sense to see now as the time for a quantum leap: new ways of seeing the way forward, new ways of thinking about strategies for change and new ways of acting to determine priorities, allocate resources and get results.

There's no downside to making a bold move. There's plenty of upside. Moving major new resources into advocacy and policy change has the potential for the greatest impact. Do the right thing right now and we can expect to reap major societal dividends for the environment in the years ahead. What a wonderful prospect, so different from the stoic resignation that comes from hoping for the best but seeing the worst unfold year after year.

Grantmakers have the power and the influence to change the sector and in the process change the world, both for the better. What a wonderful prospect. If not now, when? If not us, who? 🌱

Mark Sarner is the President and founder of Manifest Communications. A leading national authority on social marketing for over 30 years, Mark has created some of Canada's most influential social change programs on a wide array of issues – from AIDS to addiction, safe sex to substance abuse, child development to climate change, drug abuse to disabilities, and more. His work for clients in the public, private and non-profit sectors has won numerous national and international awards. Mark is an Associate of the University of Toronto Centre for Health Promotion. He is a member of the Canadian Society of Association Executives, Association of Fundraising Professionals, Imagine Canada and the Toronto Board of Trade. He is on the Board of the Canadian Journalism Foundation, on the Advisory Board of the Literary Review of Canada and on the editorial board of *Canadian Fundraiser*. Mark holds a B.A. and M.A. in English Literature from York University.

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215 Spadina Avenue, Suite 360
Toronto ON M5T 2C7

T 416-961-1273
E ktownshend@cegn.org
W www.cegn.org