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## **Building a Collective Action Plan for the Charitable and Nonprofit Sector in Canada**

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### **THE OPPORTUNITY**

Canada has one of the largest charitable and nonprofit sectors in the world. Perhaps because it is so diverse, the sector is often underestimated. Charities and nonprofits provide critical social, family and community services, often in concert with government. Among their many other activities, they help build our quality of life through sport and recreation, arts and culture, health, educational, environmental and philanthropic pursuits. And let's not forget the role they play in supporting people in developing countries around the world. They are the third pillar of Canadian society alongside governments and business.

These organizations are part of an intricate system of societal supports that make us a country that actually works, despite our many economic and social challenges. Without them, those challenges would be much worse and the quality of life of all Canadians would be profoundly diminished. Take charities and nonprofits out of the equation and we would not have the Canada that we know and value.

The sector is of strategic importance to the future of Canada. But for us to play our role even more effectively, we need to find ways to come together and capitalize on our collective strength. We have an unprecedented opportunity to learn from each other, to share knowledge and to create a strong collective voice for the sector so that we can truly influence future directions for Canada.

There is tremendous diversity of organizations – mission – size – geography, which has presented difficulties in seeing ourselves as a sector. But things are changing. Increasingly charities and nonprofits, large and small, across the country are acknowledging that regardless of our differences, we will accomplish so much more by learning from each other and by building a collective voice around issues that compel us all.

Consensus is building and we need to capitalize on it now. We will, through this process, develop in partnership a collective Action Plan for the sector.

### **THE PROPOSITION**

With the support from the Margery J. Warren Endowment of the Agora Foundation, Imagine Canada has embarked on an ambitious pan-Canadian convening and engagement strategy with charities and nonprofits in Canada.

The objective is to create a platform to:

- strengthen the collective voice of the sector to advance common issues
- foster knowledge exchange and innovation to build capacity
- create and support linkages, networks and partnerships to enhance our effectiveness as a sector

This strategy is about the whole sector but it will focus on reaching those smaller organizations which have not in the past had the opportunity or capacity to be heard or to benefit from collective action. These organizations are the core of the sector and represent who we are.

We recognize that reaching the smaller organizations represents a significant challenge, but we are committed to trying.

There are three principal components to the strategy:

1. A pan-Canadian Summit staged every two years in a different city across the country. **Because** there is still a need and desire for people to come together in a pan-Canadian way.
2. Regional gatherings in the alternate years beginning in 2010. **Because** we want to build momentum for the pan-Canadian Summit and because we want to ensure follow-up and take-up from the Summit so that momentum continues to grow and action taken at the local level.
3. A social networking strategy. **Because** we want to broaden the reach and allow more people to participate and because we want to take full advantage of new ways of engaging and connecting.

## **PARTNERING AND WORKING TOGETHER**

The engagement strategy provides Imagine Canada with an opportunity to work differently and to look at new ways of partnering and collaborating and at breaking down barriers that have too often in the past prevented real collective action and learning.

The response to this has been overwhelmingly positive.

At the national level, Imagine Canada is working with leadership organizations such as the **HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector**, **CanadaHelps**, and **Volunteer Canada**.

At the provincial level, Imagine Canada is building strong relationships with a number of key organizations. Moreover, local organizations across the country are partnering with Imagine in hosting the provincial forums.

A key partnership has also been developed with ***The Philanthropist***, an important on-line journal that has recently reinvented itself. *The Philanthropist* that is now an online journal is seeking to broaden its reach and its relevance. It is publishing columns, articles and think pieces that will help set the stage for the regional gatherings and encourage debate of some of the common issues facing organizations across the sector.

These strategic and far-reaching partnerships are a strong testimony to the importance, the relevance and the timeliness of this collective action.

Things are indeed changing.

## CHECKING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

In the summer and fall of 2009 Imagine Canada embarked on a series of Community Conversations across the country. Each one of these - more than 20 events reaching more than 300 participants, bring together organizations in areas as diverse as social services, arts and culture, environment, international development and health - was all organized through a local partner. The purpose of these events was to:

- assess the interest in and desire for a collective action plan
- test some of the issues that we identified as important challenges that the sector will need to address in the years to come;
- hear what the experience was “on the ground” so that it could inform our next steps.

We are capturing what we are hearing across the country through our new dedicated BLOG: <http://blog.imaginecanada.ca>.

Through that process we heard clearly that the sector needs to come together around a common agenda. And that we need to take ownership of that agenda in a way that we have not in recent years. It is time that we step back, lift up our heads and prepare for the challenges ahead.

Based on input from the Community Conversations, along with discussions with its Board and committees, Imagine Canada has developed a draft **Framework for Action** to facilitate engagement and debate around the major challenges that we will be facing in the years to come and ways that we can collectively address those challenges.

Central to this work has been the identification of seven principal drivers of change that we see as having a significant impact on how we do our work in the future.

## THE DRIVERS OF CHANGE

- Overarching Driver: The changing demographics of Canadian society
- The increasing importance and influence of social innovation in Canada
- Structural shifts in the revenue base which supports the work of charitable and nonprofit organizations
- Shortage of talent to strengthen and lead charitable and nonprofit organizations
- Lack of growth in the number of volunteers to govern, support and promote civic and community organizations
- Heightened demand for transparency, accountability, communication of impact and public policy engagement
- Growing need for transformative partnerships among charities and nonprofits and with other sectors
- Increased use of social media and new technologies for community engagement, outreach to youth and networking

## **WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

The **Framework for Action** will be the focus of discussion and debate at the regional forums to take place across the country in 2010. Direction from these events will begin to set priorities for collective action and shape the approach for the Pan Canadian event in the fall of 2011.

In addition, there will be opportunities for in-depth learning and capacity building on the critical challenges facing the sector. All the while, linking back to the identified **Drivers of Change**.

## **AND THE LONGER TERM**

This is a new, bold and ambitious initiative which we hope will grow and change over time. As a sector we have much to learn about how to do this. It is a "work in progress" and will be adjusted as needed. At Imagine Canada we have already made important adjustments to our original thinking based on input from our numerous partners and our community conversations.

This will continue and that's a good thing.

This is a critical time for charities and nonprofits in Canada. Let's capitalize on the growing consensus that our collective action will not only help us to do our work better but will also strengthen our country.

This is a challenging and exciting time. I invite you to join us on this journey.

For further information please contact Brenda Cameron Couch, Director, Community Outreach, ([bcameroncouch@imaginecanada.ca](mailto:bcameroncouch@imaginecanada.ca) / 613.238.7555 x236) or me directly.



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