

Perspectives/Initiatives

Renewing Funding Relationships: Certifying First Nations Social Service Administrators

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Governments have been key funders of both social economy (SE) organizations and First Nation communities, yet the relationships between them have not necessarily been easy to negotiate. Challenges abound for government funders and SE and First Nation recipients in building respectful relations. Some of the key factors contributing to the challenges include:

- Increased demand for accountability in government spending
- Differing perceptions between the parties as to the appropriate roles of each
- SE organizations and First Nations may perceive government-determined funding eligibility criteria and/or priorities as obstacles to responding to community need
- Fear that difficulties in program administration may result in loss of funding or cooptation by funders of programs away from community need

In this article, using a case study approach, we argue that a renewed relationship between government funders and First Nations and SE organizations can be based on an improved understanding of one another's perspective.¹ Without such a renewal, vital programs and services shall be left floundering without the crucial input of community-based knowledge and needs assessments. We will conclude this article with a number of recommended directions for the development of such a renewal.

Government Funding, Social Economy Organizations, and First Nations

Since significant cuts to social spending throughout the 1990s, SE organizations are facing growing needs in communities and greater challenges in accessing government funding. In response, in the early 2000s practitioners united to obtain federal government support to grow the social economy (Guy & Heneberry, 2009) and found a sympathetic ear in Prime Minister Paul Martin. Recent literature on financing of the SE reveals significant concerns that the substantial cuts in social spending generally, and to voluntary organizations specifically (Elson, 2011), have compromised the sector's capacity to respond to community need. Additionally, the

¹ Both of the authors were engaged in developing and delivering the program outlined in this article. Data was drawn from ONWAA's extensive annual reports to funders, as well as regular surveys of its membership, conducted between 2001 and 2011, to determine training and educational needs. These unpublished reports are referred to throughout as ONWAA Archives.

government's own inability to track funding allocations due to reductions of staff in the public sector, have resulted in SE organizations having "... paid a high price for accountability in terms of below-cost project funding and excessive reporting requirements" (Elson, 2011, p. 102). Elson (2011) points out that underfunded and short-term projects are inadequate to address underlying social issues. Choudry and Schragge (2011) raise concern that policy changes may adversely impact SE organizations' engagement in dissent and advocacy. Indeed, a federal policy change during the 1990s denies charitable status to organizations engaging in advocacy (Elson, 2011).

For First Nations, relationships with government funders are even more complex, particularly since the provision of social services often involves some combination of both the federal and provincial governments. Reporting requirements can be onerous and successful funding proposals must align with government-identified priorities (Frideres, 2011) which are often at odds with First Nations' identified needs (ONWAA, 2011). Further, government's priorities are constantly shifting and programs and funding are rarely in place long enough to achieve the stated objective(s):

In 2008, the First Nations Student Success Program and the Education Partnerships Program were touted as the programs that would solve some of the problems with First Nation students staying in school and graduating from secondary school. Yet these programs only have a shelf life of three years and then they will be abandoned. (Frideres, 2011, p.195)

Frideres further outlines how government funding policy to First Nations is one of control, not respect for autonomy:

...four federal departments....required nearly 170 reports annually from each First Nation community. Indian Affairs alone obtains more than 60,000 reports a year from over 600 First Nation communities. This represents a report from each community almost every three days of the year. (Auditor General's 2006 Report, as cited by Frideres, 2011,196)

This emphasis on accountability obfuscates the fundamental underfunding of many First Nations programs and the well-documented need for increased government funding to address numerous First Nation issues, including education and training (Wuttunee, 2009).

Despite these challenges, First Nations, like many SE organizations, are obligated to rely on governments for much of their program funding as a result of a lack of independent financing and limited wealth resulting from colonization and its disruption of Indigenous economies (Wuttunee, 2009). Further, small populations in remote areas isolated from waged economies result in high unemployment rates, contributing to up to an 80% reliance on social assistance programs in some communities (ONWAA, 2011). These circumstances require that First Nations sustain relationships with government funders that can help them meet the many needs identified within their communities.

First Nations and Ontario Works: A Difficult Relationship

The Ontario Works Act was implemented May 1, 1998 and largely ignored First Nations' concerns (ONWAA, 2011). Eligibility requirements include residency in Ontario, documentation of need, and a willingness to participate in activities that help the applicant find a job. Once eligibility is determined, OW Financial Assistance (FA) helps cover the costs of basic needs and housing, while OW Employment Assistance (EA) offers clients access to training, skills development, supports to basic education, addiction services, and volunteer experiences (Ontario Works Act, 1997).

In 1999, the Mushkegowuk Cree Council initiated court action to challenge the imposition of the Ontario Works Act within their territory. Although the Ontario Court of Appeal dismissed the action in 2000, the Province was found to have contravened requirements to properly consult with First Nations regarding changes in social assistance legislation. This has left many First Nations questioning the Ontario Works legislation's usefulness as a tool to address the social assistance needs of their members, while the Ontario Native Welfare Administrators Association² (ONWAA) continues to advocate for a more culturally responsive social assistance delivery mechanism (ONWAA, 2011).

At the same time, a number of challenges confront First Nations who are attempting to competently deliver OW (ONWAA Archives, 2001-2011):

- Over 75 % of the 10,000 OW cases are located in Northern Ontario, a vast geographic area characterized by small, difficult to access communities
- First Nation administrative structures are small, often only one person
- Administrators have greater variations in their experience and educational profiles as compared to their municipal counterparts
- There was a 55% staff turnover in the five-year period ending in 2010

These high turnover rates, combined with reduced access to training, have led to comparatively inexperienced administrators, a lack of familiarity with OW Program Directives, and a resulting tendency for more administrative errors (ONWAA Archives, 2001-11). Additionally, First Nations' Ontario Works sites receive considerably less administrative funding than municipal offices, although they are expected to deliver the same program and achieve similar outcomes. First Nation administrators are therefore less able to benefit from experienced peers with in-depth knowledge of program and administrative best practices.

Despite these many challenges, ONWAA envisioned an accredited training program that could respond to its membership's needs. The training would have three objectives: (a) to provide administrators with the skills to competently administer Ontario Works within their communities, (b) to respond to the cultural needs of communities which have experienced social and economic colonization and related impacts, and (c) to provide administrators with peer support by building a network that could share experience and best practices (ONWAA – Algoma University Partnership Agreement, 2009). ONWAA's management also saw an opportunity to increase the educational credentials of the administrators by partnering with a post-secondary institution.

Renewing Government Relations

An ambitious effort at social innovation required funding both for ONWAA and its educational partner. ONWAA's Executive Director³ recognized the tensions between ONWAA and its provincial line Ministry funder, heightened by First Nations' resistance to the enactment of Ontario Works on-reserve. Nadeau began a concerted effort to improve the relationship after being advised by government officials in 2001 that it would be "some time" before ONWAA could expect to obtain funding again. Nadeau took every opportunity to meet with funding

² ONWAA is a professional association of Social Service Administrators in 105 First Nations across Ontario. ONWAA is primarily focussed on providing professional development, policy training and personal support to its members. ONWAA is committed to providing professional, quality social services to First Nation communities while respecting local needs and realities. (*see* www.onwaa.com)

³ The information contained in this section is drawn directly from his experience acting on behalf of ONWAA in rebuilding the relationships with funders, upon Micheal Nadeau assuming the position of Executive Director.

officers, keeping them abreast of ONWAA's work and "in the loop" even when there was no obligation to do so. By 2003, ONWAA had "mended its fences" sufficiently so that it was able to secure a small grant of \$15,000 and undertook a two-part strategy to ensure funder satisfaction with the results of the grant that: (1) every expenditure was detailed and recorded, and copies of all receipts and cheques were photocopied and submitted to the Ministry in the final reporting; and (2) every action proposed was implemented, documented, and, in several instances exceeded, with outcomes clearly identified (ONWAA Archives, 2006-11). This strategy built a solid foundation and ONWAA established its reputation as a reliable and successful community partner by consistently exceeding government's requirements both in accountability and outcomes.

Gradually, the Ministry's trust in the organization grew and larger grants were obtained. In 2004 ONWAA began to seek a funder for the development of an accredited First Nation Social Service Administrator Certificate program. By the end of 2005, ONWAA had presented its vision to more than five federal and/or provincial government offices (ONWAA archives, 2001-11). In 2006, Nadeau created an opportunity to strengthen ONWAA's relationship with a new provincial manager by providing a ride to an event held at a First Nation located two hours' drive away. This unusually uninterrupted period in the car afforded Nadeau the time to detail the training needs of the administrators and the benefits of ONWAA's proposal. In this time, the new manager recognized the inherent value of an accredited program tailored specifically to address the communities' needs. A joint ONWAA/Ontario Ministry proposal was written seeking funding from a pool established to explore innovative solutions to systemic problems. The first submission was denied. In 2007 the proposal was strengthened and resubmitted, this time securing substantial resources to implement the vision over a 36-month period (ONWAA Archives, 2001-11).

When ONWAA and its Ministry partner met with the funding agency (Ministry) in 2007 it was clear that ONWAA's relationship-building strategies had resulted in gaining substantial credibility with both its partner Ministry and the funding Ministry, and attitudes had shifted in favour of the project. Neither Ministry attempted to influence the project other than to ensure it stay on target and budget as outlined in the original business case. The Ministry partners viewed the business plan as a roadmap to achieving the proposed results. They did not, however, perceive the proposed targets identified in 2007 as necessarily achievable: ONWAA was told, "This has never been done before, the targets are meant to be worked towards, not necessarily achieved." ONWAA was also provided with substantial flexibility in the project's implementation – the funders were focused on project success, not on micro-managing the activities or methods used (ONWAA Archives, 2001-11).

Certificate in First Nation Welfare Administration: Implementation and Results

After tendering to educational institutions, a four-module certificate was developed in partnership with Algoma University's Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) program. The First Nation Social Service Administrators' Certificate program (FNSSAC) consisting of 132 classroom hours, is offered in four courses delivered in an intensive one-week format⁴ to accommodate the administrators' absence from work. ONWAA developed and conducted the first 60 hours of the classroom program with a focus on the OW legislation's

⁴ Pre- and post-course assignments are both required, and instructors are available to students through on-line methods both before and after the course delivery, but all of the face-to-face, instructor-student time is contained within the one-week format.

eligibility criteria and financial accounting. These modules were delivered first with the rationale that the administrators would be more comfortable engaging in university-level courses after successful mastery of the legislative requirements.

Algoma University then delivered two, three-credit, university recognized courses specifically designed to increase the capacity of the administrators to deliver OW in a culturally appropriate manner within a holistic community development framework.⁵ ONWAA worked closely with the CESD program in the development of the learning objectives and the course syllabi and participated with CESD in its final selection of the instructors. Peer networking was encouraged through small group discussions and assignments, and following the administrators' successful completion of the first university course, ONWAA encouraged CESD faculty to "raise the bar" for students' reading materials and assignments. One hundred and forty-nine administrators from First Nations across the province successfully completed all four modules, with graduates obtaining a Certificate in First Nation Social Service Administration.

To the knowledge of ONWAA and the CESD administrators, this is the first accredited First Nation income assistance-training program in Canada. ONWAA has also developed products to ensure sustainability of the training and provide access for more than 300 more administrators and new hires. Modules I and II have been transformed into an e-learning format accessible across the province, with 89 currently registered students. In addition, a DVD was created to deliver consistent OW key messaging in a culturally appropriate format to income assistance recipients, community members, non-OW program managers, and Chiefs and Councillors. Finally, an interactive website providing immediate support and disseminating program changes and administrative policy and procedures is now available to administrators and caseworkers who can log into a secure site to network with their peers, share best practices, problem solve and ask/answer questions (ONWAA Archives, 2001-11).

When ONWAA began the project in 2008, 26 First Nations (out of 110) were providing the Employment Assistance component of Ontario Works to their community. As of September 2011, 49 communities are now implementing the program within their territory, with another three communities currently negotiating contracts for delivery. At inception, only 58 administrators and caseworkers had obtained any post-secondary instruction, whereas today there is a 133% increase in workers possessing some postsecondary certification; and finally, 49 additional administrators and caseworkers will take the program in 2011/2012.

The project has facilitated improved Ontario Works program delivery by First Nations Social Assistance Administrators. ONWAA has profiled local community practices and solutions with the province, and increased welfare administrators' understanding of OW program directives while helping them structure program delivery to suit their distinctive socio-cultural environments. To advance the latter goal, the training improved the ability of administrators to assist people in finding meaningful and lasting opportunities at the local level. Opportunities included economic development, increased employability, increased community engagement, and/or increased cultural understanding.

Finally, the turnover rate for administrators is falling, with 93.6% of all Certificate graduates still employed with the OW program in their community. Given the tools and support they have acquired, administrators are more comfortable and confident in their positions and are staying longer. Five graduates have left their jobs to enrol in university as full-time students, the Certificate course having given them the confidence to pursue an education they may not have believed possible.

⁵ See <http://www.algomau.ca/departments/community-development-and-social-work/community-economic-and-social-development> for further details.

Discussion and Conclusions

This case study demonstrates the positive impact of building trusting relationships between communities and governments, and the value of governments providing opportunities for innovative projects which reflect community-identified needs and priorities. First, ONWAA rose to the challenge of re-building a damaged relationship by responding to government's increasing emphasis on financial accountability by exceeding demands, and then strictly adhering to obtaining the outcomes promised in funding applications. Although this created substantial paperwork and much effort for the organization, it demonstrated ONWAA's ability to understand the funder's needs, and re-established the organization's credibility with government funders.

Second, ONWAA engaged program officers in identifying and understanding the community's needs by seizing opportunities to illustrate, educate, and bring officers to the community. The resulting greater understanding of the cultural and community context motivated one program officer to advocate for innovative and responsive funding from higher levels of government. Potentially, this type of advocacy role could bridge the current distance between organizations' fear of government involvement and government's desire for partnerships with community-based organizations.

Finally, clarity of vision in program goals and objectives, together with appropriate measurable outcomes, can dispel the fear of many community-based organizations that government funding will either co-opt the organization or distract it from its mission. In this case, the funding took longer perhaps to obtain than going through the more usual route of applying to specific programs, but in the end it was highly successful and stayed true to ONWAA's mission and mandate.

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