

# Voluntary Sector Organizations and the State

Building New Relations

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To Magalie, Alexi, and Colin

# Contents

List of Illustrations / ix

Acknowledgments / x

List of Abbreviations / xi

- 1** The Changing Relationship between the State and the Voluntary Sector / 1
- 2** Theorizing the Relationship between the State and the Voluntary Sector / 12
- 3** Laying the Foundation for Collaboration: The Canadian Case / 26
- 4** Building Identity and Agency in the Voluntary Sector: From Strategy to Action / 49
- 5** Designing a Blueprint for Collaboration: Looking at the Big Picture / 73
- 6** Organizational Dynamics and the Impact of Collaboration / 96

**7** Conclusions / 124

Appendices

- 1 Characteristics of voluntary organizations engaged at a macro scale / 133
- 2 Characteristics of national organizations in the field of children and family services / 136
- 3 Characteristics of provincial organizations in the field of children and family services / 138
- 4 Characteristics of local organizations in the field of children and family services in the Ottawa region / 140
- 5 Characteristics of local organizations in the field of children and family services in the Montreal region / 142

Notes / 144

References / 148

Index / 161

# Illustrations

## Figures

- 1 Multiple nested areas of analysis / 8
- 2 Conceptualizing scales of action / 22
- 3 Strategies for action across scales / 24
- 4 Voluntary Sector Initiative flow chart / 83

## Table

- 1 Allocation of resources under the Voluntary Sector Initiative / 84

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## Abbreviations

ADM	Assistant Deputy Minister
CHST	Canada Health and Social Transfer
CRA	Canada Revenue Agency
HRSDC	Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
NAC	National Action Committee on the Status of Women
NCA	National Children's Alliance
NSNVO	National Survey of Nonprofit Voluntary Organizations
NVO	Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations
PAGVS	Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector
PRI	Policy Research Initiative
SUFA	Social Union Framework Agreement
VSF	Voluntary Sector Forum
VSI	Voluntary Sector Initiative
VSR	Voluntary Sector Roundtable



Voluntary Sector  
Organizations  
and the State



# The Changing Relationship between the State and the Voluntary Sector

# 1

## **Moving Up the Policy Agenda**

In the early 1990s, there was little talk of the voluntary sector in Canadian policy circles. In fact, one could argue that the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector in Canada was at an all-time low. The federal government was cutting back core funding to voluntary organizations and criticizing their involvement in policy making on one hand, and offloading significant responsibility to them in areas of service provision on the other. Not surprisingly, voluntary sector organizations were going through a major crisis of identity and confidence.

Within the span of a few years, however, the policy environment had shifted significantly. To many observers, voluntary organizations appeared to have growing influence in the policy realm. The voluntary sector was routinely mentioned in key speeches at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. Furthermore, in 2000, the federal government dedicated \$95 million to the sector over five years through the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI).<sup>1</sup> In an unprecedented collaborative effort, the VSI mobilized 170 senior civil servants and voluntary sector leaders with the specific purpose of strengthening the voluntary sector so that it could better serve Canadians. At the height of the initiative, there was even talk of creating a voluntary sector policy lens for federal decision-making, through which all policies would be assessed on the basis of

their impact on the voluntary sector. Many provincial governments also identified voluntary and community action as a government priority and were increasingly attuned to the important role of voluntary sector organizations in political life.<sup>2</sup> It was a time of great opportunity and hope for renewal within the sector as the terms ‘partnership,’ ‘cross-sectoral collaboration,’ and ‘relationship building’ reverberated through policy discourses, reflecting a new era of governance.

Sceptics may question whether the efforts put forth by the voluntary sector in this context of promise and partnership had any lasting and significant policy effects. After all, despite the energy invested in the VSI, the election of a Conservative federal government in 2006 not only put an end to many of the policy initiatives supporting the voluntary sector, but also began another wave of funding cuts, leaving the sector in a precarious state yet again. Back to square one, some would say. But to look solely at funding cuts and disjointed policy changes would be to disregard some of the important broad governance dynamics that have unfolded since the 1990s. These left an imprint on the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector that has lasted up to the present day.

Indeed, closer consideration of these governance dynamics reveals that there has been a broader and more deeply rooted political structuring of the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector in the past decade. Over its three-year lifespan, the VSI set a framework for collaborative action across policy areas that significantly reshaped the policy-making playing field. The VSI opened discussion on the parameters and rules of policy making and moved these issues starkly into question; expressed a vision of how social relationships between the state and the sector could be reformed; and helped to identify principles and practices that now guide the working relationship between the federal government and the voluntary sector in Canada (Basok and Ilcan 2004; Laforest and Orsini 2005; Phillips 2009; Smith 2005). Further, this new higher-level vision of how the relationship would work cascaded down to affect policy communities and voluntary organizations in their daily practice. This discourse had material consequences.

For the actors engaged in these discussions about power sharing and policy making, opportunities for change were real. They made choices

and formed their strategies on the basis of their understanding of such possibilities. Certainly, the biggest, and perhaps most important, contribution of the period leading up to the VSI was to position the ensemble of organizations as a legitimate political constituency called the voluntary sector,<sup>3</sup> which tried to make sense of the emerging conditions of governance. The language of collaboration and partnership empowered voluntary sector organizations because it reaffirmed their contribution to the policy process, gave them a concrete expression for their continued relevance in that process, and formed the basis of how they made sense of their place and role in policy making.

This is not to say that the voluntary sector's involvement in the VSI did not lead to conflicts and controversies over which strategies should be pursued. Organizational claims were more salient than identity-based claims. While some voluntary organizations gained growing influence in the policy realm as a result, others lost their footing. Moreover, the concerns and grievances of small, locally based community organizations differed substantially from those of large, well-established charitable organizations, creating potential rifts within the sector. Not surprisingly, the constellation of actors involved in political processes changed significantly over this period as competing frames jostled with each other for legitimacy. The politics of recognition of the Canadian voluntary sector epitomizes the fact that shifting and unequal power relations exist within the sector, given the great diversity of organizations. Ultimately, the discursive frames and meaning systems around which voluntary organizations constituted their collective identity impacted their political agency.

In this book, I tell the story of the ascendancy of the voluntary sector on the policy agenda from the 1990s to the present. I detail how voluntary sector organizations became engaged in collective political struggles around governance and how they carved out a space for themselves in an environment that had been relatively closed to them a couple of decades ago. As I chronicle the strategies launched on behalf of the sector, I also assess the significance and impact of that activism. The story is not a simple one of harmony and unity within the sector. Instead, it is a complicated account of how voluntary organizations came together for the first time in Canadian history and struggled to define,

express, and mobilize their collective interests in the face of increasingly collaborative governance.

The intended audience for this book is academics, activists, policy makers, and leaders of the voluntary sector in Canada and abroad, particularly those who are interested in Canadian politics, public administration, public policy, and more general issues of governance. While a number of articles and chapters have been published on this topic (Phillips 2006; Smith 2005), this book provides a unique example of a rich, sustained, empirical examination of these significant shifts in Canadian governance in recent years. In examining the broad political structuring of the relationship between the federal government and the voluntary sector and how this institutionalization of norms and practices impacts political agency, I provide a nested analysis that moves beyond the broad state-voluntary sector relationship to examine the impact on day-to-day praxis. The result is an intricate portrait of the current public policy arena for the voluntary sector in Canada that sheds light on a widely overlooked period.

### **Studying the Voluntary Sector**

The voluntary sector in Canada is distinct for its breadth and its scope. It is composed of a rich array of organizations, institutions, and associations, including charities, cooperatives, interest groups, community organizations, health and social services providers, social clubs, self-help and mutual aid groups, religious groups, and research-oriented organizations. It is estimated that the sector encompasses over 180,000 organizations that differ in their mission, organizational structure, size, and resources (National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations 2004b). Over 80,000 of them are charities registered under the Canada Revenue Agency, while the remainder are incorporated nonprofits. These figures, however, exclude organizations that are not formally incorporated or registered with a provincial or territorial government or the federal government because these organizations are hard to identify (McMullen and Schellenberg 2002). Factoring in informal and unincorporated groups, Michael Hall and Keith Banting (2000) estimate the total number of voluntary sector organizations at 870,000.

By nature, the voluntary sector is sectarian and organized by field of activity – such as arts and culture, sports and leisure, health, social services, family and children services, education, and religion – each of which has its own internal dynamic. Organizations may sometimes span policy and program areas, but these too often operate as silos. The diversity in the sector is further complicated by the fact that its member entities range in size from small, community-based organizations, relying on a limited number of volunteers, to large national umbrella organizations, relying on paid staff to carry out their work, and in type from sophisticated and staff-led organizations, such as hospitals and museums with volunteer boards, to organizations started by a group of volunteers around a kitchen table. The National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations (NSNVO) notes that the organizations with revenues in excess of \$10 million – which constitute only 1 percent of all voluntary organizations – receive 59 percent of total revenues and employ 46 percent of the staff (National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations 2004a). This implies that there are significant differences in organizational structure, staff, and resources between large and small organizations.

Large quantities of data have been collected on the size and scope of the voluntary sector in Canada through initiatives such as the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, the NSNVO, the Satellite Account of Non-Profit Institutions and Volunteering developed by Statistics Canada's System of National Accounts, the Canadian Council on Social Development's Funding Matters research report, and the Canadian Policy Research Networks Research Series on Human Resources in the Non-Profit Sector. While these data sources provide an important snapshot of the voluntary sector over time, little information is available on the dynamic nature of transformations occurring within the voluntary sector and how its relationship with the state is being redesigned. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of research on the voluntary sector is its lack of theoretical or conceptual frameworks (Hodgkinson and Painter 2003).

Over the last fifteen years, the concept of 'voluntary sector' has become important in the study of civil society. While voluntary organizations have been a part of the landscape for a long time, the voluntary

sector as a political entity is fairly new. What is more, identity within the voluntary sector is often taken for granted. In many respects, speaking of a 'voluntary sector' is problematic as it assumes a unitary identity of belonging and misses the rich and complex dynamic of power relations within the sector. The voluntary sector comprises a variety of actors, with distinct interests and identities, all vying to be represented and heard. Because of this plurality, the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector is a very complex one; who gains access to the state, on what grounds, and through which mechanisms is never easily determined. The challenge is to explain how these diverse organizations came together collectively to define and act on their interests. The question of identity within the voluntary sector needs to be placed at the foreground of the analysis, for it is both a source and a product of political action.

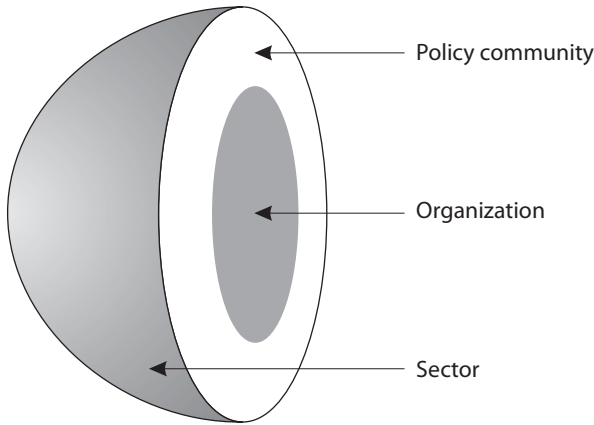
Understanding the interaction between the state and civil society has been a continuing focus in the work of both interest group and social movement scholars in Canada since the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Each strand of research provides important insight into group dynamics. Interest group scholars have centred their analysis on organizational dynamics. They define interest groups as "organizations whose members act together to influence public policy in order to promote their common interest" (Pross 1986, 13). The key variables affecting action strategies in this framework are the organizational structure, the aggregation and articulation of members' interests, and the resource base. These scholars also recognize that state structure has a role to play in setting the boundaries for engagement in policy. In the 1990s, they turned their attention to policy communities and networks in an effort to better capture the institutional setting within particular policy fields and its effect on collective action (Coleman and Skogstad 1990; Howlett and Ramesh 1996; Montpetit 2003). In interest group theory, organizational strategies are shaped by the practices and historical interactions between public officials and other groups within particular policy fields.

Social movement scholars, on the other hand, have centred their analysis on the process of collective identity. They view social movements as agents of change in contemporary societies (Castells 1997). In

this approach, organizations and individuals are included in a broader network that is bound together by a shared understanding of the world. The strength of this framework lies in the analytical tools developed to capture the interplay between structure and agency. Social movement theory also accounts for variables such as ideas, interests, and organizational strategies by linking research on political opportunity structure with that on resource mobilization theory. While social movement theory has generally evolved separately from interest group research, scholars are increasingly using the social movement framework to capture group dynamics and theorize collective action efforts (see Phillips 2004; Smith 2005).

In this book, I draw on both of these strands of research. In my theoretical approach, voluntary organizations have multiple interests and are embedded in multiple institutional settings. As a result, their strategies are complexly interwoven. I suggest that voluntary organizations define their interests and articulate their identities in and through three distinct institutional settings. First, internal organizational dynamics are important. When strategizing, an organization factors in the interests of its constituents, its organizational purpose, its structure, and its resource base. Organizations are also influenced by their trajectory, history, and repertoire of basic strategic moves. Second, policy sector dynamics are significant. The policy community literature has shown that relations between government departments and organizations are mediated differently depending on the policy community. Within a given policy field, certain practices and forms of behaviour are regarded as legitimate, and are even expected of organizations, while others are discredited. Third, the broad 'voluntary sector' identity itself is fundamental for analysis. This sectoral identity creates a new space for collective action in which broad norms are defined, practices established, and strategies activated. Voluntary organizations must navigate these multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory identities in order to construct a collective identity through which to articulate sectoral interests.

The ability of organizations to shape their relationship with the state and to affect policy is therefore mediated by a variety of complex,

**FIGURE 1****Multiple nested areas of analysis**

interactive, and contextually specific organizational and institutional factors. All perspectives are necessary to a thorough conceptual understanding of voluntary sector agency. Figure 1 provides an illustration of these relationships.

This book examines the process of governance through three different lenses: the voluntary sector, the policy community,<sup>5</sup> and the organization. Each of these lenses represents an identity around which constellations of organizations articulate common interests and make claims. Because voluntary organizations identify themselves not only as organizational entities but also as belonging to a policy community and as part of the voluntary sector as a whole, it is not sufficient to view their strategizing and collective action efforts on a one-dimensional plane. When organizations strategize, they represent simultaneously their own interests and the interests of social spheres to which they belong. Furthermore, each social sphere constitutes a source of shared norms, values, attitudes, and behaviours. If this story were told purely as one of broad state-voluntary sector relations, we would miss the richness of the dynamic and multilayered way in which voluntary organizations have been transformed through their struggles.

### **Methodology**

Methodologically, this book uses three main tools of analysis: a thorough review of existing secondary documents; a series of open-ended interviews (ninety-two in total) with voluntary sector leaders of national, provincial, and local organizations and with government officials; and in-depth and interpretive case studies of organizational change in four organizations. This research was conducted from 2001 to 2004.

In the first stage of research, I examined the dynamics between the federal government and the voluntary sector from 1995 to 2006 with a broad, horizontal lens – that is, on a macro scale. I analyzed government documents, including speeches, official policy statements, and websites. Further, I examined archival documents from the Voluntary Sector Roundtable and the Voluntary Sector Steering Group, including meeting minutes, correspondence, and newsletters. Based on these documents, I identified the players centrally involved in building collective identity and strategy for the voluntary sector as a whole, as well as key civil servants in the process leading to the VSI. I then conducted open-ended interviews with fourteen executive directors of national organizations, four staff members of voluntary sector umbrella groups (for example, the Voluntary Sector Task Force and the Voluntary Sector Steering Group), nine senior civil servants, and three academics.

In the second stage of research, I focused on voluntary sector and federal government relations in a specific policy field – that is, the meso scale. The dynamics within the field of children and family services – which operates at the national, provincial, and local levels – are embedded within broader shifts in governance. I first conducted an analysis of official government documents, reports, and websites in the field of children and family services. I examined the key policy developments in the field and the ways in which various voluntary sector organizations had been involved in policy debates and discussion. I also conducted a parallel examination of documents, reports, newsletters, and websites of national voluntary organizations working in the field. Once I had a broad overview of the key events, I conducted open-ended interviews with five executive directors of provincial organizations in the field of children and family services. In addition to being a leader in this field, each informant was involved in the development of broader state-sector

relationships through the VSI. I also conducted in-depth interviews with fourteen executive directors of national organizations that were involved in collective action in the field of children and family services but not directly involved in the VSI. These interviews were important for demonstrating how the unique experience and strategies of the voluntary sector in a particular policy field are also embedded in broader shifts in governance at a macro scale.

Not only do broad shifts in voluntary sector and federal government relations at the macro scale infiltrate a particular policy area such as child and family services, they also affect practices at an organizational level – that is, the micro scale. Up to this point, my interviews had focused on groups at the national and provincial levels. To better understand the micro scale, I delved more deeply into specific organizations in the field of child and family services. I conducted interviews with seven executive directors of provincial organizations working in the field in Ontario and with ten in Quebec. I also conducted interviews with thirteen executive directors of local organizations in Ottawa, and with thirteen in Montreal. Altogether, I interviewed informants from sixty-two voluntary organizations in order to gather data on dynamics in the field of children and family services. I specifically probed organizational characteristics and how these were transformed over the period from 2001 to 2004. I kept the questions open to allow the interviewees to articulate how organizational factors had affected their choices and experiences, feeding back into meso, or policy-level, dynamics. Coupling these qualitative data with a review of the documents on the organizations' websites, I explored the extent of organizational change around four axes: sources of funding; program goals, objectives, and client base; staffing and volunteers; and emerging patterns of inter-organizational relationships.

Because I relied on official documents to identify key actors at all scales of action, the analysis presented in this book is very much one of insiders. The time constraints and extensive data gathering that I performed in order to capture multi-scalar dynamics limited my ability to explore the dynamic of exclusion embedded in the governance process. When there is inclusion, there is also exclusion. I tried to acknowledge those exclusionary dynamics in the analysis when they were signalled

by the respondents. However, it would be valuable in the future to extend the analysis in order to explore more explicitly those boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

### ***Outline of Contents***

In Chapter 2, I review the relevant existing literature and theoretical frameworks for analyzing the nature and impact of the voluntary sector, including contemporary governance, social movements, and political opportunity structures. In Chapters 3 to 6, I examine the complex transformations that have occurred in state-voluntary sector relations in Canada over the past decade and a half. First, I detail attempts to foster horizontal frameworks across the federal government to operate over and above state-sector relations. I document the unique experiment and groundbreaking work of the VSI, which mobilized 170 senior federal officials and voluntary sector representatives in an effort to discuss their relationship at a macro scale. I then illustrate how these dynamics also influenced vertical structures and relationships within numerous social policy fields by combining an analysis of large-scale transformations in state-sector relationships with an in-depth investigation of relationships and organizational practices within a particular social policy field, that of children and family services. In the concluding chapter, I situate the research in the contemporary context of governance theory and practice. Drawing on the Canadian experience, I identify important themes in governance and related research issues. Then, I synthesize the critical insights in the book and suggest implications for further research, as well as for strategies and practice in the voluntary sector.

## Theorizing the Relationship between the State and the Voluntary Sector

# 2

The changing political status of the voluntary sector has been one of the most striking aspects of the transformation of politics in contemporary democracies. It is not coincidental that this development is taking place now. The newfound interest in voluntary sector issues in the political discourse is closely related to broad shifts occurring in the realm of governance. The purpose of this chapter is to set out the theoretical framework that underlies the analysis in this book. This framework provides a basis for understanding the challenges, constraints, and opportunities for voluntary sector organizations in a changing governance context.

### **The Context of Governance**

Over the past decade, discourse concerning how to manage the public sector has undergone a profound transformation. Until the 1990s, hierarchical command-and-control modes of governing guided the way that programs were implemented and delivered; subsequently, networked structures of governing redefined the contours of authority, accountability, representation, and decision-making. It is clear that traditional modes of governing under which governments make policy and bureaucrats execute it are increasingly misleading.

The discourse of governance has gained influence across a variety of disciplines as a key analytical tool for capturing a wide range of transformations occurring in the realm of governing (Chhotray and Stoker 2009; Daly 2003; Newman 2007; Pierre 1998; Rhodes 1996, 1997). The term ‘governance’ is used in contrast to that of ‘government’ in order to problematize issues that relate to a process of governing no longer done exclusively or primarily by governments. It is now widely held that the public, private, and voluntary sectors increasingly need to share responsibilities and work collaboratively on complex social, political, and economic issues; no single actor possesses sufficient knowledge or resources to tackle policy problems on its own.

It follows that one of the key features of governance is the need for coordination (Peters 2001; Stoker 1998). This interdependence among actors places horizontal relationships at the centre of governing as an integrated way of managing policy (Newman 2001; Rhodes 2000). It also means that voluntary organizations have the potential, at least in theory, to become active participants in the governance process. More than ever before, voluntary organizations are important players and partners in both policy making and service delivery.

### ***Governance as Process: More Than Mere Rhetoric***

Many observers, particularly in Canada, have questioned whether the shift in governance is more than rhetoric (Saint-Martin 2004; White 2004). Many experiments in partnership have been less substantiated in practice than theory suggests (Casey and Dalton 2006; Phillips 2006; Taylor 2007; Teisman and Klinj 2002). While not rejecting the concept all together, these observers caution that partnership may carry normative assumptions that depict collaboration as the end point and ideal form of governance. They also warn against attributing too much novelty to the idea of collaboration and partnership. To a certain extent, these features of governance are not new; they are only heightened.

Governance is better conceived as a process than as a set of outcomes. It requires the coordination and collaboration of actors with different interests and levels of accountability. The process is, by its very nature, full of tension; inevitably, any attempt to understand it involves the

question of power and how it is negotiated (Kooiman 1993, 2000; Rhodes 1994, 1997). It may serve as a mechanism through which existing power relations are reproduced or through which they are forcefully challenged. In this book, I conceptualize governance as an ongoing process that is constructed and given meaning by actors through their social relations and interactions. In that sense, I view it as always still becoming. Governance is a contradictory and contested process, for it is constituted out of political struggle (Bevir and Rhodes 2000, 2003; Newman 2007).

While there is a burgeoning literature on governance, most of the research to date has been state-centred. Scholars have generally neglected the fundamental question of how local, provincial, and national voluntary organizations work upward to affect how governance unfolds. Yet, the newfound policy focus on the voluntary sector that we are currently observing in Canada, and elsewhere, is itself in part a product of the mobilization of voluntary organizations, which have pushed for new spaces for involvement in policy.

My analysis is based on the premise that the governance process is influenced not only by state policies and the discourse that they create, but also by the nature of voluntary sector mobilization and the networks of organizations that the process engages. The interaction between the state and the voluntary sector is not unidirectional. The state does play a central role in delimiting spaces for political action, determining who has access to these spaces, and, ultimately, privileging certain actors at the expense of others. However, whether, how, and by whom these opportunities are exploited is also important (Burstein 1999; McAdam 1982; Staggenborg 1991; Walker 1991). Voluntary organizations need to be regarded as potential agents of change, capable of making deliberate choices in the face of opportunities and constraints. Their actions, whether intentional or unintentional, can have a real influence on the shape and direction of governance.

The analytical approach that I propose in this book therefore contributes to the rich literature on governance by de-centring its lingering focus on government and taking as a starting point one of the state's emerging 'partners': the voluntary sector (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000;

Kooiman 1993, 2000, 2003; Rhodes 1997). This analysis is important because something crucial is at play in the governance process; the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector is being reconfigured and recalibrated.

### ***Institutionalizing Broad State-Voluntary Sector Relationships***

The state and the voluntary sector are increasingly interdependent, and this has created a need to restructure the institutional forms and practices that regulate their social relations (Jessop 1999; Pierre 1998). Relationship building has become an important part of the public sector strategy and discourse through which these social relations are constituted in a variety of settings (Pierre and Peters 2000; Rhodes 2000; Stoker 1998). At the heart of the governance process lies the “institutionalisation of coordinating mechanisms between state and civil society and the nature of state intervention in civil society to promote its objectives” (Pierre 1998, 3).

Two features of the institutionalization of relationships between the state and the voluntary sector are especially relevant for my analysis of governance. First, there is considerable emphasis on the development of a whole of government/whole of voluntary sector lens to guide concurrent policy decisions (Agranoff 2006; Bryson, Cosby, and Stone 2006). The discussion and debate around governance is thereby elevated to a new spatial playing field. This institutionalization has been manifest in sustained efforts in Canada, as in many other countries, to formalize a new partnership between the state and the voluntary sector through the development of broad agreements known as compacts or accords (Larner and Craig 2005; Phillips 2002; Toftisova 2005).<sup>1</sup> These agreements generally outline shared visions, values, and general principles, as well as a mutual commitment to building a positive relationship and pursuing common purposes. As such, they embody and reflect particular representations of the role and responsibility of each actor in the policy process.

Second, this institutionalization is an emergent and dynamic process, forged in the interaction between the state and the voluntary sector. As voluntary organizations engage with the state and institutional actors,

the question of identity and interests – of *who we are* – emerges. Identity is built through a process of interest articulation, mobilization, negotiation, and representation. To speak on behalf of the voluntary sector, voluntary organizations need to develop mechanisms and processes to achieve intra-sectoral coordination and communication. The extent and nature of their involvement in governance is shaped by and reflects the construction of a collectively shared meaning system. Laying these collective claims is important because:

- it delineates which claims are deemed important and which are not
- it positions the actors in the political arena in relation to their allies and opponents
- it involves securing strategic resources (both financial and human)
- it has an effect on the strategic avenues or channels that organizations will select in order to circulate their claims (both within and outside of the system).

Thus, the *politics* of governance is important.

The theoretical framework that I adopt strives to make the link among action, identities, strategies, and the broader institutional context. I acknowledge that political strategies are partially crafted by actors, but they are also constrained and shaped in significant ways by institutions, structures, and context. Although voluntary organizations make deliberate choices, not everything is possible through agency. Context matters.

### **Social Movement Theory**

Governance provides a framework for and useful language to describe the main characteristics of the changing process of governing. It also provides a frame of reference in which to situate and interpret the behaviour of voluntary organizations. A shift in the governance process generates new opportunities for voluntary organizations to seize. However, governance theory lacks the analytical tools to theorize how collective action developed around voluntary sector issues. Social movement theory, on the other hand, has made great strides in analyzing the nexus between civil society organizations and the state. Its analytical

framework is particularly helpful in terms of linking transformations in the institutional and discursive context to strategies and tactics of organizations. Taken together, the governance framework and the social movement framework provide an analytical basis for examining how voluntary organizations came together to influence and shape the governance process in Canada.

Social movement theory generally seeks to explain *why* social mobilizations occur, *how* they manifest themselves, and *what* effects they have on the social and political context in which they are embedded. It effectively links the institutional, political, and discursive environment of social movements to the processes of collective action. If we adopt a broad definition of collective action, this theoretical framework can prove effective in explaining a wide range of social phenomena (Princen and Kerremans 2008; Smith 2005).

My analysis of the mobilization of voluntary organizations usefully draws on the social movement framework because my central focus is the articulation of a collective identity and interests in the name of the voluntary sector. Examining these developments through the social movement framework allows for broader insight into the following questions of fundamental importance to political scientists, sociologists, and public policy scholars:

- How has the institutional context in Canada both enabled and constrained the engagement of voluntary organizations in the governance process?
- How have resources, political allies, and alliances made some collective action strategies of the voluntary sector feasible and others less so?
- How have voluntary organizations, in turn, exploited political opportunities in a reflexive way to shape and influence the governance process?

To answer these questions, I make use of two main approaches to social movement analysis: resource mobilization theory and the concept of political opportunity structure. Resource mobilization theory attempts to explain how resources affect social movements' success or

failure. Scholars in this field identify financial resources, leadership, networks, and organizational skills as potentially decisive strategic resources at the disposal of social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977; Zald and McCarthy 1979). Clearly, organizational structure and internal dynamics are important factors in the process of strategizing.

However, internal dynamics alone cannot explain collective action efforts. Attention must also be paid to external factors – specifically, the relationship between movements and the political environment within which they are situated. The concept of political opportunity structure was first developed in order to address this gap. The political opportunity structure can be defined as “consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action” (Tarrow 1998, 77). This definition typifies the nexus of exchange between state and organizations. According to Sydney Tarrow (1998), the political context enables or constrains social movement activity in a variety of ways, through:

- the relative openness of access to participation by new actors
- the stability or state of flux governing political alignments
- the presence or absence of possible allies within governing elites
- a decline in the state’s capacity or will to repress dissent.

A number of dimensions of political opportunity structures need to be elaborated. First, they are the product of a specific setting and historical context (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1998). As such, they need to be problematized contextually. Second, social movement theorists remind us that organizations do not merely respond to openings in the political structure, but can create opportunities for themselves and for others. Third, political opportunities and constraints are not simply given, they are mediated by perceptions. Thus, political opportunities need to be understood as such by the respective actors before they can be acted on (Brockett 1991; Della Porta and Diani 1999). As Doug McAdam, Sydney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (2001, 43) note, “No opportunity, however objectively open, will invite mobilization unless it is a) visible to potential challengers and b) perceived as an opportunity.” Because political opportunities do not constitute an objective reality, they cannot

be ascertained objectively by the researcher. Consequently, opportunities can be identified only relative to an organization's own evaluation of the context.

Whereas the concept of political opportunity structure originally focused mainly on institutional factors and resources, Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, and Mayer Zald (1996, 6) argue that frames and discursive practices should also be considered important dimensions. These authors define framing as "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action." Framing processes have now come to be widely regarded as central elements in the political opportunity structure (Benford and Snow 2000). As a result, the concept of political opportunity structure now effectively captures both external and internal resources, both material and symbolic, as determinants of political action.

### **Governance and Political Opportunity Structure**

By combining the framework of political opportunity structures with that of governance, I identify a number of collective action dynamics that are particularly salient in the governance process. First, the process of governance reorganizes the universe of political discourse by stimulating debate over the role that voluntary organizations may play in governance and creating awareness across the political spectrum of the importance of that role.<sup>2</sup> These framing processes generate discourses, ideas, and understandings of the role of the voluntary sector in policy. Competing discourses will proliferate as a variety of actors try to make sense of the emerging conditions of governance in an effort to better represent themselves and their interests.

Second, the governance process reorganizes the political opportunity structure. The political system is relatively open to voluntary sector mobilization. Opportunities emerge for government and voluntary sector representatives to collaborate closely with one another over a sustained period of time. New institutional arrangements are established within which dialogue can take place. While some actors are invited to participate, others may be excluded. It is therefore particularly important to pay attention to these lines of inclusion and exclusion. With

shifting opportunities come potential new allies within the political system for voluntary sector organizations. For example, from the civil service may emerge champions who lead the implementation of the voluntary sector agenda both within their departments and across government, and new voluntary sector leaders may emerge as the sector's agenda comes to the fore. What is more, in most jurisdictions, resources are made available to sustain and strengthen the collaboration between the state and the voluntary sector. The allocation of these resources is generally determined jointly. This dynamic creates opportunities for actors to present competing projects and ideas about how resources could best be spent. There will be winners and losers.

The enhanced strategic importance of these struggles should not be ignored. They produce broad organizing and legitimizing principles with repercussions in many places – across government departments and agencies, within policy communities, and within voluntary organizations. Through the opportunities provided by the broad framework of relations between the state and the voluntary sector, more specific departmental policies about the role of voluntary organizations in policy development are affected. The ideas and practices that emerge are therefore deeply entangled in organizational and policy community dynamics. A key step in understanding governance dynamics, and their impact, is therefore to articulate their embedded nature in the theoretical framework.

### **Looking through a Scalar Lens**

Over the past decade, a growing body of theoretical and empirical studies has emerged, inspired by the work of urban geographers on the embedded nature of social relations across different places and spaces. The term 'scale' is often used to describe spatial or analytical dimensions of social and political processes. Earlier studies tended to describe scale in ontological terms – focusing on the local, national, and international scales (see, for example, Taylor 1993, 1999, 2000). Recent studies, however, have begun to contest this narrow, geographical vision of scale and suggest the need to understand scale as socially constructed (Herod 1997; Marston 2000, 2004).

These analyses generally acknowledge the importance of actors in the reorganization of social relations (Herod 2001; Jonas 1994; Leitner 1997). For example, Richard Howitt (2003, 150) suggests that “The social and political construction of scale is precisely social action – the concrete processes of organizing a political response, a vehicle for participation, recognition and change. This is always ... a matter of linking within and across scales to provide opportunities for transformation of existing power relations.”

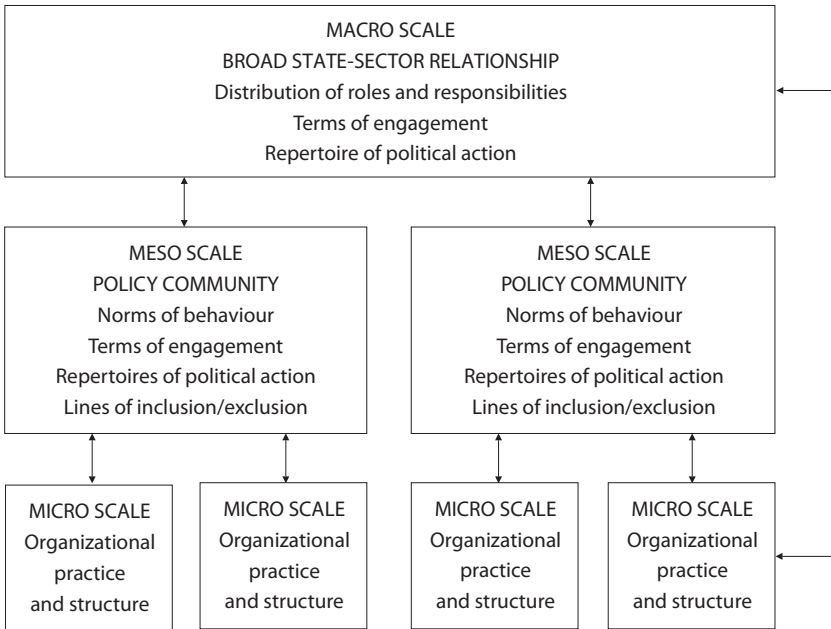
The concept of scale can add to our understanding of political opportunity structures, and several social movement scholars have begun to adopt the concept of scales of action (Masson 2006; Sewell 2001; Tarrow and McAdam 2004). In their book *Dynamics of Contention*, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, 331) use it to link international and domestic scales of action and define the process of scale shift as “a change in the number and level of coordinated contentious action leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claims and identities.” This definition enables them to capture the processes by which organizations develop frames, networks, and repertoires of action on an international scale. However, in this approach, scale is essentially linked with processes unfolding over geographical spaces.

In this book, I use the concept of scale in a more metaphorical way to encompass new governance relations unfolding at different levels of analysis, from the macro to the micro. The scalar lens draws attention to the relational and embedded nature of processes that shape and constitute social relations (Marston 2000; Swyngedouw 2000). As Anssi Paasi (2004, 6) suggests, “We should pay more attention to such scales of human life as the spatial constitution/manifestation of social groupings based on gender, generation, ‘race’; private social relations within the family, home and voluntary associations, or personal experience and collective expressions of spatial identity and consciousness.” The emergence of a new collective based around the voluntary sector identity reflects a new scale of organizing and mobilizing for voluntary organizations. This spatial dimension of mobilization cannot be overlooked.

To this end, I include in the theoretical framework the various scales at which social action take place (Herod 2001): the micro scale, the meso

**FIGURE 2**

**Conceptualizing scales of action**



scale, and the macro scale. The micro scale encompasses organizational dynamics and focuses on processes intrinsic to organizational structures. The meso scale captures the dynamics of groups interacting within the context of a policy field or policy community – that is, a localized setting (defined by particular norms and a specific history that shapes the political environment). Finally, social interaction between these contexts is modelled at the macro scale and embedded in broader social processes – in this case, the interaction between the state and the voluntary sector. Figure 2 provides an overview of this basic conceptualization of the various scales of action. The macro scale is important because it indicates that voluntary organizations are identifying themselves as belonging to a *sector*. This collective identity is embedded in “social ties that accumulate their own shared understandings” (Tilly 2002, 76). Although not all organizations may feel part of the sector, the notional concept of a

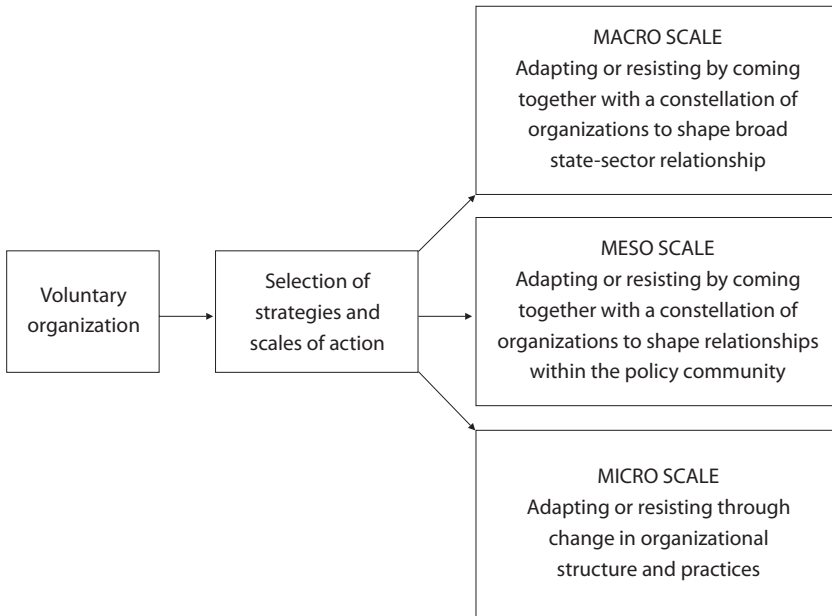
sector is critical because it implies that organizations are devising strategies for representing themselves to the state and articulating their common interests. Out of these collective actions emerges a particular representation of the sector.

The concept of scale is critically important for understanding the strategies of voluntary organizations. In the governance process, scales of action are always shifting. Governance creates opportunities for new initiatives, which take the form of networks of organizations using the ‘voluntary sector’ identity as the basis for making claims. The institutionalization of broad state-voluntary sector relationships has become a predominant site of political struggle and of social regulation.

The governance process also operates across scales. National, provincial, and local voluntary organizations help to construct the overall framework for collaboration between the state and the voluntary sector. Actors make strategic decisions not only in light of broad national policy issues and debates, but also in relation to their experiences and, ultimately, in light of how they understand governance dynamics at other scales, such as within their policy field or their organization. Strategies are constructed around issues that are important to the organization, to dynamics within its policy field, and to dynamics across the sector as a whole. These interwoven and mutually constitutive dynamics are critical.

The concept of political opportunity structure can be effectively used to think about collective action across scales of action because it is transformable and socially constructed. Dominique Masson (2006, 7) has demonstrated how “different scales of government and governance offer different opportunity structures at a particular time, and movements make strategic decisions about them based on their own logic and evaluation of the context and possibilities for action.”<sup>3</sup> Just as micro- and meso-scale dynamics underlie sectoral processes, sectoral dynamics may constrain or enable action at the micro and meso scales. Figure 3 provides an overview of organizational strategizing and how I conceptualize these possible scales of action.

The tensions and conflicts that the demands of governance exert on voluntary organizations are not isolated from one another. The dynamics at one scale can transform the forms of political struggle at another.

**FIGURE 3****Strategies for action across scales**

They may be taken as discrete events but in fact they can have a cumulative effect on future capabilities of the voluntary sector.

The literature on scaling also reminds us that place matters – that relationships and outcomes play out differently in different locales. Just as scales of action vary across policy fields, they may vary across geographic space (from one province to another, from one city to another). Thus, the governance process is a scalar phenomenon, both domain specific and context specific. Because struggles at the meso scale translate across spatial scales, my analysis delves further into dynamics within provincial and local networks. I compare the dynamics in the field of children and family services across two provinces, Ontario and Quebec, and in two large cities, Ottawa and Montreal. Both provincial governments launched policy initiatives to discuss their governance relationship with the voluntary sector in the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> This comparison

provides an interesting lens through which to examine how the discursive and institutional processes unfolding at the federal level might be influenced by those at the provincial level.

### **Conclusion**

My analysis of the governance process is informed by the focus in the concept of political opportunity structures on the structure/agency nexus and is conducted through a multi-scalar lens. This framework enables us to explore how strategies and events are shaped not simply by both agency and structure, but by *multiple, nested* interacting structures and contexts. By demonstrating how voluntary organizations shape, and are shaped by, the governance process, this conceptualization represents an important departure from existing theoretical approaches that focus exclusively on the state. While the story of the restructuring of the welfare state and the downloading of social services has been told before (Browne 1996; Rekart 1993; Salamon 1995; Smith and Lipsky 1993), no previous account documents the multi-scalar dynamics set in motion by a shift in governance and the impact of those dynamics on the voluntary sector. These developments are of interest not only for understanding the domestic Canadian scene today but also for the study of homologous transitions in relations between civil society and the state that are occurring around the world.

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