

Book Review

By Julie Zatzman



Funding Policies and the Nonprofit Sector in Western Canada: Evolving Relationships in a Changing Environment. Edited by Peter R. Elson. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 296 pp. ISBN 9781442637009.

Funding Policies and the Nonprofit Sector in Western Canada: Evolving Relationships in a Changing Environment is an invaluable resource to those new to the world of social enterprise in Canada, as well as to those who study it and work within it. Well researched, referenced, and indexed, it provides insight into how grants, contribution agreements, contracts, and other variants of funding instruments work, as well as a roadmap of the bewildering array of government departments, policies, and acronyms that characterize this sector in Western Canada. Overarching

themes in the book include the need for greater collaboration within the nonprofit sector, more professional development, and more empirical research to support advocacy and future planning. At the same time, there is an implied caution against lifting solutions directly from the book's pages. The impact of neoliberalism on the nonprofit sector has been all-pervading, but the responses described here are products of specific provincial cultures and histories.

Why a book specifically focused on Western Canada? Editor Peter Elson doesn't directly answer this question, but points out that economic growth in the West, particularly in oil extraction dependant Alberta, has dominated the interest of economists, politicians, and job seekers in recent decades. Nearly one third of Canadians now call the West (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan) home. Elson tells us that Alberta's economy has the third highest percentage share of national gross domestic product (GDP) and the highest provincial per capita GDP. However, the boom and bust nature of resource-based economies comes with consequences. Growing income inequality sits in stark relief against the backdrop of Western corporate wealth and power, and volatile economic conditions in the West have, at times, led to some of Canada's more extreme political climates. Combined, these two factors make case studies of Western nonprofit sectors valuable subjects of analysis for those interested in how these agencies adapt to ever-changing conditions.

The book includes eleven chapters by scholars, practitioners, experienced government representatives, and, in many cases, authors who are both scholars and practitioners. Discussion of the nonprofit environment in each of the four provinces begins with a historical overview that provides context to the present situation and allows readers to understand influences that have shaped government policy and nonprofit sector responses to it. These are followed by case studies of individual nonprofit agencies and organizations and include how local conditions have shaped their trajectories. For example, in British Columbia, the province's nonprofit housing sector created a shared-purpose statement that has been valuable to the process of developing new funding agreements in changing economic circumstances. In Alberta, the non-

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profit sector has responded to challenges by increasing marketing and public relations, strengthening collaboration within the sector, and adding significant commercial ventures to the funding mix.

One helpful contribution of the book is its explication of the concept of “funding regimes.” More than the size of budgets allocated to specific programs, the concept includes how relationships and interactions between government funders and recipients are characterized and how nonprofit agencies deliver their services, including who they serve and how work is carried out and reported. Underpinning any funding regime is the set of beliefs and attitudes guiding governments toward the provision of social services. For example, in the 1990s, Ralph Klein ushered in a mode of governance in Alberta based on business values and practices, free market capitalism, and entrepreneurship. This dramatic shift to neo-liberalism was soon followed by governments led by Mike Harris in Ontario and Gordon Campbell in British Columbia. The objective was to “increase administrative efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability, more so than to maximize the pursuit of public good” (p. 74–75). The Klein policy changes impacted agency workers’ “autonomy and creativity” and resulted in reduced advocacy and “citizen education capacity” (p. 90). Contrast this with the approach of the Saskatchewan government which devolved most of its responsibilities for sport, culture, and recreation to the province’s lottery system. In her case study, Lynn Gidluck found that this funding regime “empowers people at the community level to shape public policy and develop innovative programs that meet the unique needs of individual communities” (p. 200) with both civil servants and community volunteers feeling a sense of ownership of the system they helped create.

By definition, a book focused narrowly on government policy will have limitations; political and economic landscapes change constantly making it impossible for such a book to be current for very long. Also, the analyses the book contains are not inherently critical. There are alternatives to the socio-economic structure of Canadian society that create the growing need for more community-centred social services, but the emphasis in this collected edition is on advocacy rather than activism for change. And the nonprofit sectors profiled here are service providers, rather than, for instance, worker or multistakeholder cooperatives or other forms of nonprofits that arguably have greater potential to transform society.

Overall, the impression of how nonprofits operate is one of an unchoreographed dance in which provincial governments—the largest source of government revenue for nonprofits—have the lead, leaving agencies scrambling to demonstrate corresponding, but effective, responses. The result has been an inconsistent patchwork of frameworks under which nonprofits must operate. As the book’s authors point out, funding relationships vary not only across provincial borders, but across and within government departments. And therein lies the problem: the piecemeal, short-term, often inadequate funding that results from these conditions makes it difficult, if not impossible, to plan for the future. As Susan Phillips notes in her introduction, current funding instruments are “too standardized, and not equipped to support rapidly changing service delivery models or evolving government-nonprofit relationships. The need ... is to modernize and reinvent these funding arrangements and relationships” (p. 4).

In essence, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Change, and the need to adapt to it, are constants in the nonprofit world. While the nimble and proactive responses detailed in this book concern Western Canada, they should inform and encourage the nonprofit sector throughout Canada.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR / L’AUTEUR

Julie Zatzman is an independent journalist and PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Email: julie.zatzman@mail.utoronto.ca