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How Funding Mix Changes Impacted the National Mental Health Inclusion Network

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ABSTRACT

Changes in funding over the past 20 years have had a major impact on nonprofit consumer disability organizations. We focus on one organization, the National Mental Health Inclusion Network (NMHIN), to understand the impact of changing funding structures and to analyze how individuals and the organization respond to these changes. Neoliberal assumptions in funding arrangements resulted in a net decrease to NMHIN funds, including recent years of zero government funding, while engendering competition with larger, more established nonprofit organizations in the race for grants. Concurrently, it has also been increasingly difficult for consumer organizations to engage in meaningful policy development with government officials. Our argument is that funding changes are truly changes in the relations of ruling, aimed to position small disability organizations as a recipient rather than as initiator of policy ideas. We discuss the implications of these funding changes and the underlying relations of ruling.

RÉSUMÉ

Des changements de financement au cours des vingt dernières années ont eu un impact majeur sur les OSBL de défense des consommateurs handicapés. Dans cet article, nous nous focalisons sur un organisme en particulier, le National Mental Health Inclusion Network (NMHIN), pour comprendre l'impact de changements aux structures de financement et pour analyser comment les individus et l'organisme lui-même ont répondu à ces changements. Des partis pris néolibéraux envers la manière d'organiser le subventionnement ont entraîné un décroissement net dans les fonds du NMHIN (y compris lors d'années récentes où il n'y a pas eu de subventions gouvernementales du tout), tout en instaurant une compétition avec des OSBL plus grands et établis pour l'obtention de subventions. En même temps, il devient de plus en plus difficile pour les organismes de défense des consommateurs de s'engager auprès de représentants gouvernementaux pour développer des politiques significatives. Nous soutenons que les changements en financement sont vraiment des changements de rapports de pouvoir dont le but est de positionner les petits organismes dédiés aux handicapés comme sujets plutôt que comme initiateurs d'idées pour les politiques. Dans notre article, nous discutons des implications de ces changements de financement et des rapports de pouvoir qui y sont sous-jacents.

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of funding-mix changes in recent years has been a significant challenge for the nonprofit sector. As co-chairs and the executive director of the National Mental Health Inclusion Network (NMHIN), an advocacy organization run by people with psychosocial disabilities, we faced significant challenges due to changes to federal funding. One of us (executive director) has been involved with NMHIN for more than 20 years. Facing significant changes to federal funding and their impact on the organization, we describe how we navigate these changes. We outline how we respond to the lost funding and the process of re-establishing funding.

A key capacity for survival is being able to adapt to the changing context of public policy engagement in Canada. The implications of advocacy for public participation and for shaping public policy is considered based on shifts in federal funding models for nonprofits in Canada. We also discuss how we both operate within and critically challenge the neoliberal funding and policy assumptions.

FUNDING REGIMES

Funding of the nonprofit sector has been summarized in two ways by Phillips (2016). The first is the old story of cutbacks: "Beginning in the 1990s, propelled by fiscal restraint and by neoliberalism that favoured smaller government, market-based instruments, and stricter accountability, government funding for nonprofits was reduced dramatically" (Phillips, 2016, p. 3). Long-term funding was replaced by fee-for-service contracts, competitive bidding that led to instability, competition between nonprofits, and burdensome administrative loads (Phillips, 2016). Larger multiservice organizations are better able to endure the changes than smaller advocacy organizations such as the NMHIN. The second narrative focuses on the potential for private philanthropy, entrepreneurship, self-marketing, and new forms of social finance (Chan, in print; Phillips, 2016). This narrative often diminishes the role of government in the future of nonprofit funding.

For the disability consumer movement, we seem to be governed by ourselves as much as by the policy directives and formal legislation of government, in the self-conduct of conduct (Foucault, 1982; Tremain, 2015). Governments set up a model of funding that we, as activists, acquiesce and accept, as notions of limited government and shared responsibility are taken as common sense and as contiguous, complementary to the principle of the market and private wealth acquisition. In the practice of organizations, we often do not critically challenge the underlying values of both activists' social liberalism and the neoliberalism of government (Prince, 2012). So, according to this narrative, we are caught in a trap of fulfilling the wishes of a model that systemically constrains our own freedom (while the model purports to increase our entrepreneurial acumen) and limits our critical policy engagement (while being encouraged to participate in government discussions).

Karen Soldatic (2011) suggests that this new funding regime is comparable with neoliberal workfare. Within activist organizations, workers are positioned as being amendable to part-time, casual, flexible, precarious labour that is ideally influenced by a private fundraising imperative (Chan, 2019; Soldatic, 2011). Our labour is seen in this narrative as disposable and at the whim of our government funders. We might employ our Otherness within activism (as the disabled, as psychiatric survivors) as evidence of the state’s claims of inclusion and our Otherness to recruit disabled people into the circle of respectability (Voronka, 2015). This narrative emphasizes a neoliberal politics of recognition, and the process occurs at a relatively bargain price.

OUR CASE

The National Mental Health Inclusion Network, originally named the National Network for Mental Health, is the only non-diagnostic mental health consumer network incorporated as a nonprofit since 1992. Directed and operated by people with lived experience of psychosocial disabilities, it is inclusive, working at the intersection of the LGBTQI2S, Indigenous, racialized, marginalized, and disability communities. We promote the social inclusion of all persons with disabilities.

Since 2015, we have shifted our focus to the disability community, *from our previous mental health,* playing a pivotal role in bridging the mental health community with the larger disability movement and sharing knowledge of disability in the mental health sector. Despite the loss of funding, this shift into the disability community has enabled us to become actively involved in human rights, social justice, and system change.

In 2020, inclusion was the reason behind our renaming to National Mental Health Inclusion Network. As an organization, our mission is to have a critical role in mainstreaming inclusion through human-centred design that considers people of all abilities. The National Mental Health Inclusion Network acts to advocate, educate, and offer expertise and resources for an inclusive intersectional framework for mental health.

CONSTRAINED POLICY ENGAGEMENT CONTEXT

Over the last decade, nonprofits have increasingly found it difficult to engage in meaningful public policy development collaboratively with government officials (Thompson & Morton, 2017). Public policy advocacy has evolved over recent decades to be an unsympathetic landscape, dominated by increased governmental surveillance and ongoing, cyclical rounds of government cutbacks (Desantis & Mulé, 2017). Charities in Canada are uniquely positioned to contribute to advocacy and law-making as driven by grassroots community involvement. Yet, legal and regulatory restrictions related to advocacy and lobbying make it increasingly difficult for grassroots charities to meaningfully engage in policy and law-making (Parachin, 2017). Grassroots charities find it difficult to connect with elected officials and senior bureaucrats due to an ever-changing and challenging legislative and regulatory climate.

At NMHIN, we find that governments consult with us for policy discussions, but governments overlook major structural gaps (e.g., poverty linked to disability) and emphasize their own limited role, consciously not acting on further measures (Prince, 2012). The latter is in accordance with neoliberal assumptions. With our own funding limited or non-existent, it is difficult to muster the capacity to challenge government priorities while at the same time asking them for money.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT OF FUNDING MIX CHANGES

Funding to nonprofits from all levels of government transitioned from stable funding to fee-for-service contracts (Phillips, 2016). These funding mix changes have caused enormous instability for nonprofits (Phillips, 2016). Until 2015, the disability component of the Social Development Partnerships Program (SDPP-D) provided stable annual funding (approximately CDN$11 million) to support nonprofit grassroots organizations tackling barriers faced by persons with disabilities. Historically, this core funding was directed to 30 grassroots disability organizations, including ours.

In 2010, the Harper government opened the funding process to a wider not-for-profit audience: universities, hospitals, and other large multiservice nonprofit organizations. Competing with large organizations such as universities and hospitals put the NMHIN at a significant disadvantage. In 2015, the Trudeau Liberal government maintained the previous government's plan for the re-distribution of SDPP-D funding. The Liberals stated they would continue to support the disability community, but the funding mechanism remained basically unchanged.

The impact on the NNMH was substantial and almost resulted in the end of the organization. Given the pressure to conform to market-based instruments, funding applications would require professional support. It is difficult for a small volunteer-run nonprofit to compete with corporations and foundations that can employ a full staff of grant writers and accountants. For a few years, between 2015 and 2019, NMHIN received no funding, until neighbouring disability organizations provided us a CDN$20,000 loan.

The loss of funding just as the pandemic hit was very difficult. With collective planning and support from partners in the disability community, the organization persevered, eventually, in obtaining federal funding in building our capacity and for much-needed research for the sector. We work with other disability organizations in critiquing Canada's mental health laws and advocating for disability rights in healthcare. We are currently engaged in research projects involving gaps in peer support, Indigenous leadership in the disability movement, the wellbeing of climate activists, and the intersection of leadership theory and disability theory. Some of this work was initiated prior to the resumption of robust funding.

We also challenged the government by asserting that NMHIN was one of the few actors available to bridge divides between the psychosocial and physical disability communities (National Network for Mental Health, 2021). Also, we work with intersectionality and human rights, particularly the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Thus, we asserted, if government ignored our funding needs and NMHIN ceased to exist, a significant area of policy development would be negatively impacted. We challenged Ottawa on its spurious assumption that disability organizations ought to rely on private donations and corporate grants.

The reality facing NMHIN began to significantly improve. From 2019 to 2022, NMHIN received CDN$30,000 per year in federal funding to prevent the organization from disappearing. In 2020, NMHIN facilitated and led the Mental Health Disability COVID-19 & Beyond committee for an intersectional mental health conversation for the disability community across Canada. In 2020–2021, we obtained a CDN$21,600 federal grant to provide online Emotional-CPR training to the Canadian disability community. Emotional-CPR, developed by persons with psychosocial disabilities, is a trauma-informed public health approach to crisis intervention (Myers, Collins-Pisano, Ferron, & Fortuna, 2021). From 2023 to 2026, in a three-year federal grant, we will receive CDN$600,000 in total for various projects, research, and community capacity building, through the second competitive process. Once again, it will be for project funding, not core funding. As well, we work hard to fulfill Ottawa's funding model and reporting requirements.

CONCLUSION

In our opinion, civil society is essential to a functioning democracy and nonprofits such as the NMHIN play a significant role in the social economy, supporting the capacity of persons with disabilities and mental health conditions to be involved in the labour market (Thompson, 2011). Stable funding for core operations is necessary to avoid significant economic disruptions in the lives of the people our network serves.

Organizations at the bottom of the economic scale cannot realistically compete for private sector funding with large corporations or foundations. Nor should nonprofits serving the most vulnerable be required to take on private sector goals, which commonly stand in contrast with civil society goals. Supporting the most marginalized is a large enough goal.

Grassroots nonprofits require stable funding to reliably and consistently represent people living on the margins, specifically those facing the intersections of physical disabilities and mental health conditions. It is telling that NMHIN's work continued without funding, engaging with other disability organizations and initiating research projects, as a precursor just to be in a position to apply for funding. In other words, governments seem to expect civil society organizations like ours to work for free (or nearly so) until funding trickles down. We also walk a fine line between adhering to government priorities and procedures while challenging those oppressive policies of government. We use those windows of opportunity to critically challenge intersectional oppressions while resisting inducements in using our Otherness to further recruit people on the margins into the neoliberal fold.

On a broader level, from our experience, Prince's (2004) prognostication on disability policy remains prescient: the relative powerlessness of the disability community remains, and the constraints of economic thinking and public finances continue to structure how governments rule over grassroots organizations, while influencing these organizations to restrain themselves accordingly. Canadian disability policy remains frustrating and full of gaps (Stienstra, 2020). With little political and economic clout, organizations such as the NMHIN depend on the government to survive. Our advocacy can only go so far when the political opportunities available to us are limited within the neoliberal ruling class, and we have limited capacity to agitate, recruit, or fundraise into a more advantageous position, possibly because our disability and health intersect ongoing structural violence and intergenerational trauma (Voronka, 2015). In short, we advocate for stable funding to disability organizations, but we should be equally comfortable with biting the hand that feeds us because our goal is not funding. Our goal is moving the dial in human rights and remaking the system so that disability policy goals are reached rather than continually missed (Prince, 2004).

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