

A historical perspective on the nonprofit data deficit

IM  GINE
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DARO

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A quick look



A lack of progress

Two steps forward, one step back over the last 25 years



A period of stagnation

No continuity between 2006–2015



No established infrastructure

Any developments are subject to shifting political climates and governmental priorities

Introduction

25 years of research and policy asks point to the ongoing need for better data about the nonprofit sector.

*Four themes **interconnected by data** are recurrent:*

1. Missing easy access to timely, relevant data



2. Need for more technical and human capacity to do research guided by the sector's perspective and priorities



3. Absence of sustained collaborative leadership from government and the sector to maintain investments in data products and initiatives



4. Lack of comprehensive and coordinated policy development within the federal government



Introduction

*What about
recommendations?*



Establish a Federal Home for Nonprofits and Prioritize Data Collection



Enhance Sectoral Leadership



Improve Data Provision and Access

Introduction

Methodology

1

Discovery

Sector experts were consulted on relevant reports, policy asks, and initiative reports on sectoral and regional data strategies

2

Desk Research

We wrote report summaries and created a timeline of **identified gaps** and **proposed solutions**

3

Synthesis

We used this overview to identify recurrent themes and analyse the proposed solutions, show how the **asks remain unfulfilled** and what should come next.

What We Read

- **1999:** A Government of Canada/Voluntary Sector Joint Initiative
- **2000:** National Voluntary Sector Research Report
- **2000–2009:** Reports from the Voluntary Sector Initiative
- **2003–2005:** Reports based on the National Survey of Nonprofit & Voluntary Organizations
- **2015:** ONN's *Data Strategy*
- **2018:** Mowat, NPC & Imagine's *Data Ecosystem*
- **2018:** ESDC's *Recommendations of the Social Innovation and Social Finance Strategy* & the Senate's *Catalyst for Change: A Roadmap to a Stronger Charitable Sector*
- **2021:** Reports from the Advisory Committee on the Charitable Sector
- **2019–2024:** Powered by Data; PolicyWise; PFC; Trillium; DISC/DEAL; Federal Nonprofit Data Coalition Pre-budget Submissions

Introduction

Limitations

This presentation & research paper are a *retrospective* of sector priorities.

Our current knowledge, opinions, and biases alter the lens through which we read and understand papers from the past.

We are presenting a mix of outputs: *proactive* strategies and *reactive* policy asks.

Context matters. As does the context in which we present this research: at this point in time, which is all part of the story.

The Gaps



Gap 1:

Easy access to
timely, relevant
data

Why it matters

- Quality data provides insights to effectively address community needs and emerging issues.
- Existing data on the sector is limited to snapshots.
- Data access barriers prevent the nonprofit sector from leveraging systems like Statistics Canada's Research Data Centres.

Challenges

- No commitment to maintaining long-term data sources.
- Statistics Canada does not have a explicit mandate to collect data about the nonprofit sector.
- Lack of alignment hinders a complete understanding of the sector's financial ecosystem, along with the risk of duplicative work.
- Lack of technical and internal capacity to handle data strategically.



Gap 2: Capacity

Why it matters

- Many nonprofits lack the technical skill sets and/or organizational capacity to manage and analyze data.
- Sectoral capacity gap doesn't allow the nonprofit sector to get strategic value from data.
- Research bodies & institutions can facilitate capacity & advocacy.

Challenges

- Building capacity requires financial and human resources.
- Building capacity requires collaboration: sector efforts at the provincial level are often not replicated at the federal level.
- Different interpretations of building capacity: basic skill sets vs. advanced expertise.
- Concerns regarding research dissemination, accessibility, and relevance to inform decision-making processes.



Gap 3: Sustained Collaborative Leadership

Why it matters

- **Building Buy-in:** Momentum often stalls when projects end.
- **Coordination and Collaboration:** Unify initiatives and maintain progress.
- **Financial:** Funding has been inconsistent and project-focused.

Challenges

- A complex and diverse sector makes it difficult to coordinate goals and approaches across organizations, funders and sectors.
- Funding and grants dictate staff commitment and cohesive strategy development at nonprofit/voluntary level.
- Lack of financial commitment limits sustainability.



Gap 4: Comprehensive and coordinated policy development

Why it matters

- Government provides ongoing funding and an enabling policy & regulatory environment.
- Effective collaboration results in positive outcomes – **and vice versa.**

Challenges

- Lack of impact data restricts our ability to understand the effectiveness of government collaboration & support of the sector, as well as potentially reduce the sector's reliance on public funding by attracting diverse funding sources.
- Lack of sustained funding and mandate for Statistics Canada for nonprofit data collection.
- Different perspectives of public and nonprofit sectors.
- Need for continuity and sustained funding of infrastructure rather than initiatives.

The Way Forward

Recommendations for moving forward



1

Establish a Home in Government and Prioritize Nonprofit Data

- Address systemic issues & societal progress.
- Create a place for comprehensive & coordinated policy development.
- Establish a data priority (e.g., an explicit mandate to Statistics Canada) to support sector success.



2

Fill Capacity Gaps with Intermediaries and Sectoral Leadership

- Facilitate dialogue and coordination with an initial top-down approach.
- Secure investments and drive collective action.
- Address complex relationships & challenges to navigate a diverse sector & effectively align goals.



3

Provide More Data and Better Access to Existing Data

- Facilitate data linkage & access to existing data sets, across & beyond the sector (e.g., Business-Linkable File Environment and Social Data Linkable Environment).
- Align data priorities to efficiently allocate resources.

Conclusion

Conclusion



This is not a new issue

We mostly have the same needs as 25 years ago – now more urgently.



There is momentum

Funders are coming together; surveys are being conducted; there are several examples of innovative sector collaboration with the federal government.



There are examples of sustainable infrastructure

The Business Data Lab is a model of successful collaboration. A Nonprofit Data Lab could address the three recommendations.

Q & A