

Envisioning the future of nonprofit data

IM  GINE
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Executive Summary



Previous research points to **four significant data gaps** for the nonprofit sector in Canada over the last 25 years

- 1) **Data:** Missing easy access to a focal point for timely, relevant data
- 2) **Capacity:** There is a need for more technical and human capacity to do research guided by the sector's perspective and priorities
- 3) **Leadership:** Absence of sustained collaborative leadership from government and the sector to maintain investments in data products and initiatives
- 4) **Policy:** Lack of comprehensive and coordinated policy development within the federal government

This vision requires investments **now and into the next 25 years** on short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons to mitigate these gaps

SHORT-TERM

Ongoing investments into new and existing projects that support specific sectoral data needs and gaps.

MEDIUM-TERM

Investing in foundational infrastructure that will alter the nonprofit sector so that data gaps are removed, rather than ameliorated.

LONG-TERM

Sustainable actions to ensure the resilience of the foundational infrastructure so that it is better able to proactively respond to changing conditions, including future technical changes.

Addressing the data gaps requires **a fundamental shift** in how the nonprofit sector data file is approached at a sectoral level. We need shifts in resourcing, new partnerships developed, a new appetite for making risky investments, and a more entrepreneurial mindset. It will require a cross-sectoral response that includes nonprofits, government, funders, and academics.

Introduction and Background

Context

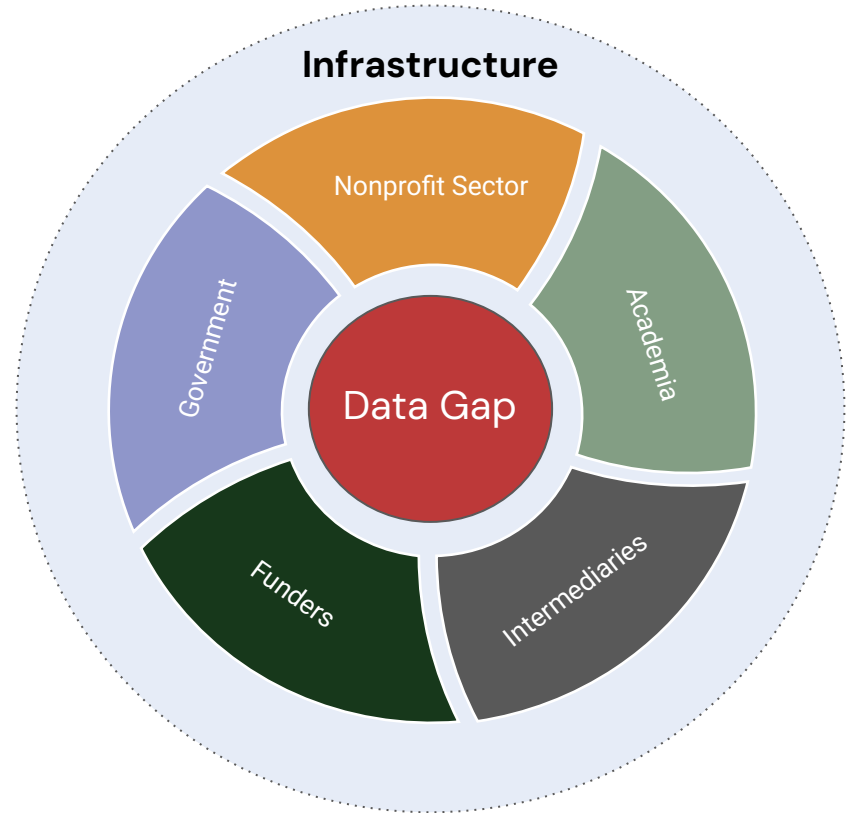


The future of nonprofit data requires focus at a **sectoral level**, not at an organizational level

The Nonprofit Data Gap is real – there is a dramatic difference between the data provided for the nonprofit sector when compared to the for-profit or government sectors.

Addressing the data gap cannot be achieved solely by one-off projects. Connective tissue is needed: **the infrastructure that allows for projects to flourish and succeed.**

Infrastructure solutions won't be found in isolation, as no one group of stakeholders has all the answers. **Nonprofits, academia, funders, government, and intermediaries all have a role to play.**





What is data infrastructure?

“Data infrastructure consists of:

- Data assets, such as **datasets**, **identifiers**, and **registers**
- Standards and technologies used to **curate** and **provide access** to data assets
- **Guidance** and **policies** that inform the use and management of data assets and the data infrastructure itself
- Organisations that **govern** the data infrastructure
- The **communities** involved in contributing to or maintaining it, and those **who are impacted** by decisions that are made using it”

From: Dodds, L. & Wells, P. (2019) Issues in Open Data – Data Infrastructure. In T. Davies, S. Walker, M. Rubinstein, & F. Perini (Eds.), [The State of Open Data: Histories and Horizons](#).

Context



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, created a timeline of **identified gaps** and **proposed solutions**, and mapped out relevant case studies

3

Output

We wrote and incorporated feedback from sector experts in: (1) a report on the last 25 years of data in and about nonprofit sector, (2) a series of four case studies, and (3) this presentation



What We've Written

Report

- Addressing The Nonprofit Data Deficit: A 25 Year Review

Case Studies

- The Investment Readiness Program (IRP) and Statistic Canada's Linkable File Environment
- The National Center for Charitable Statistics
- Policywise
- The Canadian Chamber of Commerce's Business Data Lab (BDL)

Presentations

- A Historical Perspective on the Nonprofit Data Deficit
- Envisioning the Future of Nonprofit Data

Looking Backwards: The Nonprofit Data Gap



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 a focal point for 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





Gap 1:

Easy access to a focal point for 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, that funders may not want to fund at the organizational level, as they focus on programs.
- 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 & their support of the sector; reduces sector's ability to attract diverse funding sources.
- Lack of sustained funding and mandate for Statistics Canada for nonprofit data collection.
- Different perspectives/approaches of public and nonprofit sectors.
- Need for continuity and sustained funding of infrastructure rather than initiatives.

Looking Forwards: The Future of Nonprofit Data

Addressing the Data Gap



Successful treatment requires investments **now** and **into the future** on short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons

SHORT-TERM

Band-aids to heal

- **Data** – fund new and ongoing research and data projects
- **Capacity** – fund new and ongoing intermediary, sectoral-level projects that build the capacity of nonprofit organizations to access, analyze and interpret data



MEDIUM-TERM

Medicine to cure

- **Invest in infrastructure:**
 - **Take advantage of what already exists:** ‘hard’ infrastructure such as Statistic Canada’s linkable environments, and ‘soft’ pieces like Imagine Canada’s Federal Nonprofit Data Coalition, funder data collaboratives, and existing government relationships and partnerships;
 - Then, **fill in the gaps with Data Lab infrastructure that connects**, such as the Business Data Lab



LONG-TERM

Prevention

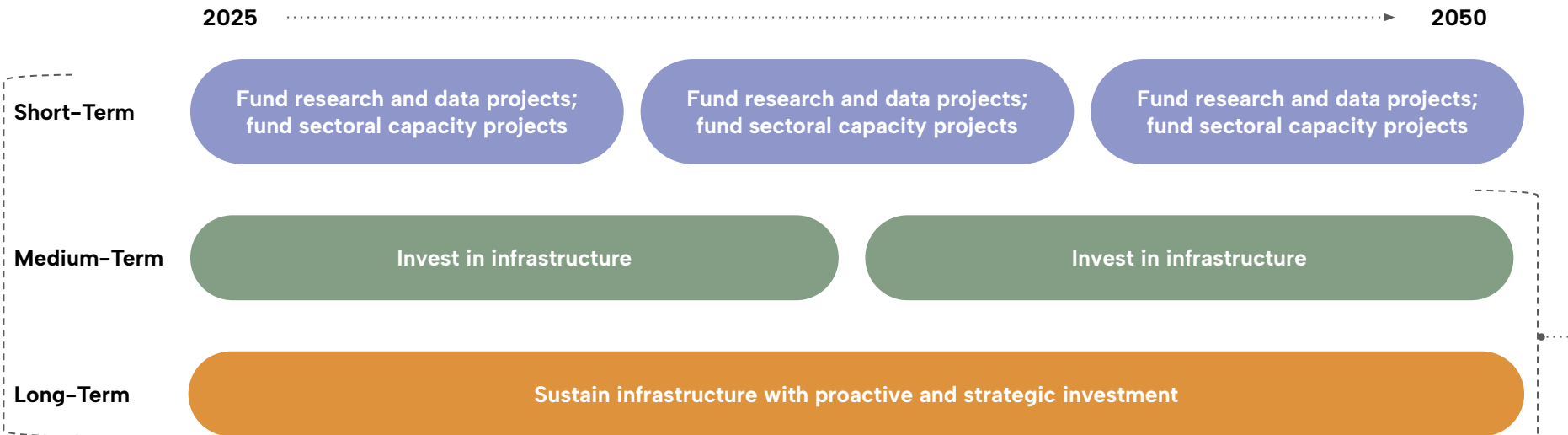
- **Sustained investment in infrastructure** to ensure longevity and a lasting relationship with Statistics Canada
- **Proactive and strategic investment into leading-edge data priorities** so the data gap isn’t just eliminated; instead, the nonprofit sector is a leader in innovation



A 25-year Horizon



The time horizons are **not** sequential – they are individually and collectively ongoing



These horizons **support each other** through sustained investment

Solutions to the identified gaps in **Leadership** and **Policy** are part of and result from the **medium-** and **long-term** solutions

Short-Term

The Short-Term Horizon



Definition: Funding and enabling data projects to address pressing ad hoc data issues and gaps in the nonprofit sector. This time horizon never ends; rather, immediate data needs are constantly being identified that will need funding and enabling. **The “short-term” represents an ongoing need to fill immediate gaps in the nonprofit data ecosystem.**



SHORT

MEDIUM

LONG

What does this look like?

Investment in filling data gaps

Supporting projects working to fill in missing data and research pertinent to the needs of the nonprofit sector now.

Investment in sectoral data capacity

Supporting sector leadership and intermediaries will ensure the sector as a whole has the capacity it needs to meet its immediate data needs and provide support to individual organizations

Longer-term

As investments into medium-term infrastructure and long-term sustainability advance, what the short-term investments will look like will likely change; i.e., there may be fewer data gaps if sustainable infrastructure is built. However, there is always going to be a need for immediate investments to meet emergent data needs.

The Short-Term: Filling the Data Gap



SHORT

MEDIUM

LONG



Status Quo

Data Deficit

The data we need to effectively strategize and advocate is limited in its existence, accessibility, and timeliness

What's Needed

Investments to increase the existence, accessibility, and timeliness of data for and about the nonprofit sector

Timeline

These investments need to be ongoing so that we are always able to meet data gaps in the sector as they arise, or increase in importance

Where Are Investments Needed?

To start, this could look like investing in current data and research projects across the sector, including:

- [Charity Insights Canada Project](#)
- Community Foundation Canada's [Vital Signs](#)
- [Community Data Program](#)
- [Canadian Index of Wellbeing](#)
- [Common Approach to Impact Measurement](#)
- Imagine Canada's [Sector Monitor Survey Program](#)

The Short-Term: Filling the Capacity Gap



SHORT

MEDIUM

LONG



Status Quo

Data Capacity Deficit

Some nonprofits have the skill sets, capabilities, and technology to make effective use of the data at their disposal, but many other organizations don't.

What's Needed

This gap exists both within organizations and at the sectoral level. This sectoral capacity gap is the place where more investment is needed.

Rationale

Not all nonprofits need to become experts at data, but the sector as a whole should have the capacity to support & enable strategic data use.

What Should Be Invested In?

- 1) **The capacity of individual organizations to better use, but more importantly, consume data and research.** They should be able to utilize available data and research to inform their strategy (e.g. planning, programming, fundraising, service offerings, etc.)
- 2) **Building out a larger and better financed data intermediary sector** – the intermediaries who provide expert data skills, access to needed data, and research capacity to turn data into meaningful and actionable insights.
- 3) **Data leadership** – including sectoral leaders who can use available data for policy advocacy and sectoral strategization and prioritization.

Medium-Term

The Medium-Term Horizon



Definition: Investing in foundational infrastructure to link data will alter the nonprofit sector in ways such that many currently identified gaps no longer exist.



SHORT

MEDIUM

LONG

What does this look like?

Using what already exists

Statistics Canada already has much of the data the nonprofit sector needs. We just need access. Linking datasets can help answer sector questions and reduce resources spent on data collection.

Providing national infrastructure

A data lab for the nonprofit sector, using the example of the [Business Data Lab](#), provides the national-level infrastructure needed to improve the quality, quantity, availability, and use of data and research about and for Canada's nonprofit sector. A data lab bridges the gap between the nonprofit sector and government, and provides capacity for advanced data analytics expertise for the sector.

Longer-term

A nonprofit data lab will improve decision-making within the sector and create a more robust evidence base that will help policymakers at all levels make informed decisions about the sector. Furthermore, ongoing investment will lead to the the creation of deeper, more meaningful datasets through linkages with other relevant data sources across sectors.



Relevant data and linkage tools exist within StatsCan

SHORT

MEDIUM

LONG



Tools*

- **Business Linkable File Environment (B-LFE)**
StatsCan environment to link organizational-level data
- **Social Data Linkage Environment (SDLE)**
StatsCan environment to link individual-level data



Data*

- Data on every single charity in Canada
- Data on all businesses - including all nonprofit entities
- Survey data on charity and nonprofit behaviour
- Lifetime financial data of nonprofits and charities
- Demographic data on all Canadians
- Nonprofit program outcome data (e.g. education, incarceration, income, etc.)

Positioning of CaNDL



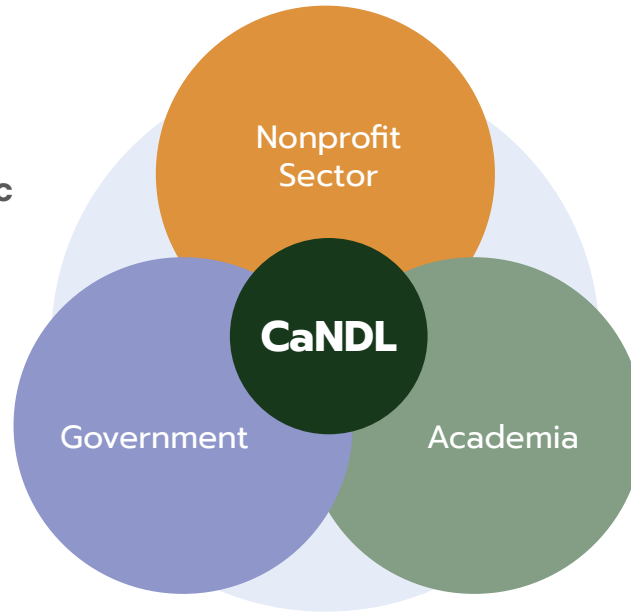
SHORT

MEDIUM

LONG

The Canadian Nonprofit Data Lab (CaNDL) would act as a **forum for government-nonprofit-academic research cooperation.**

It would consist of experts from organizations across Canada with unique perspectives on nonprofit activities, data, surveys, and government programs for social impact.



Nonprofit Sector

- Equity seeking groups
- Philanthropy
- Volunteerism
- Subsector representation
- Provincial leadership

Academia

- Research Data Centres
- Research Assistants
- Academic-Nonprofit Partnerships

Government

- Statistics Canada
- Innovations, Science and Economic Development Canada
- Department for Women and Gender Equality
- Employment and Social Development Canada

What CaNDL could do



SHORT

MEDIUM

LONG



Research

Conduct and enable research that is relevant for the nonprofit sector.



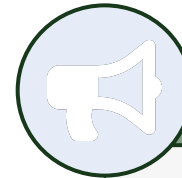
Capacity

Build, and supplement, data and research capacity in the nonprofit sector as a first stop for sector data.



Partnership

Steward relationships between the sector, academia, and government in relation to data and research.



Advocacy

Insights for advocacy and advocacy for data.

Long-Term

The Long-Term Horizon



Definition: Until now, short-term and intermittent support has undermined progress made to achieve meaningful, long-lasting outcomes. Continuity & sustained funding in infrastructure rather than initiatives will move the needle for the nonprofit sector.



SHORT

MEDIUM

LONG

What does this look like?

Scalable & sustainable infrastructure

Infrastructure that can grow with the sector and adapt to emerging trends like AI, predictive analytics, and real-time data insights.

- i) E.g. Sector-specific data portals, such as community dashboards or benchmarking tools, that consolidate information across issues and geographies.
- ii) Modular, flexible systems that don't require costly overhauls.

Showcasing leading edge technology

Statistics Canada's tools (e.g., B-LFE, SDLE) are already unique in scope and utility within Canada and abroad. They can be leveraged in an ongoing way to showcase the potential of Canada's nonprofit sector and the technology itself.

Proactive innovation leader

Communication of demonstrated effective actions using data will position Canada as a leader in innovation. A more data literate sector can respond proactively to changing environments rather than reactively, and with greater capacity for different kinds of data.

Making This A Reality

Summary of Needs



What we need to achieve these short-, medium-, and long-term goals



Financial Investment Securing Essential Resources

A more resilient financial model requires diverse funding sources tapping into multiple channels—including government support, philanthropic organizations, private donations, and even market-driven solutions.



Collaboration and Policy Prioritization Working together for impact

The nonprofit sector needs to collaborate with a supportive government so that the sector's needs are front and centre. By working across silos and sectors, academia, government, and the nonprofit sector can cohesively advance this work with complementary skills and expertise.

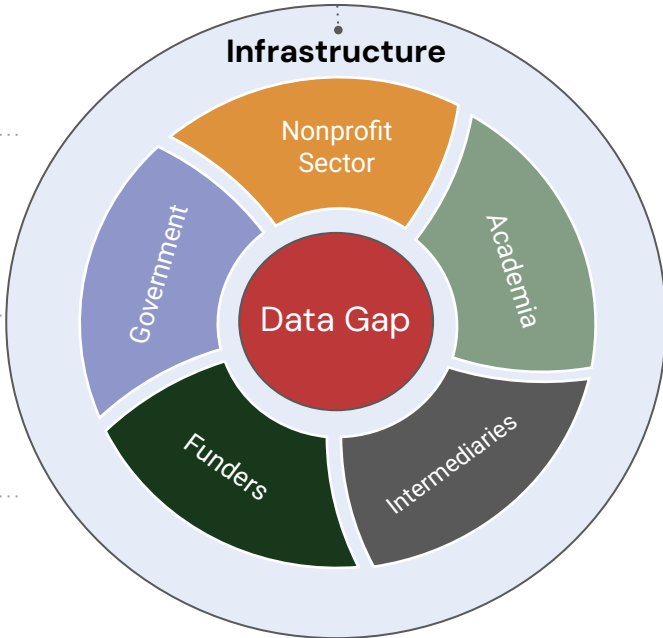


Entrepreneurial Approach Embracing failure

Try new approaches, acknowledge when things don't work, learn from failures, and continuously improve. We must embrace an iterative process of innovation, experimenting with new tools and methodologies while remaining adaptable. This approach can drive the creative solutions needed to address complex data needs and lead to long-lasting improvements.

Immediate Next Steps

All stakeholders have a role to play in supporting infrastructure solutions to the data gap



Nonprofit Sector

- Use and promote shared infrastructure;
- Contribute anonymized data to collective platforms, when appropriate;
- Commit to responsible data collection, storage, and use;
- Co-design governance & solutions for data infrastructure.

Government

- Allocate funding to support nonprofit data infrastructure;
- Continue to support open data initiatives;
- Create an explicit mandate for Statistics Canada to collect and share data on the nonprofit sector.

Academia

- Lead studies on nonprofit data trends, challenges, and opportunities to inform system design;
- Offer tailored training in data management and analysis.
- Continue to partner with nonprofits on research projects.

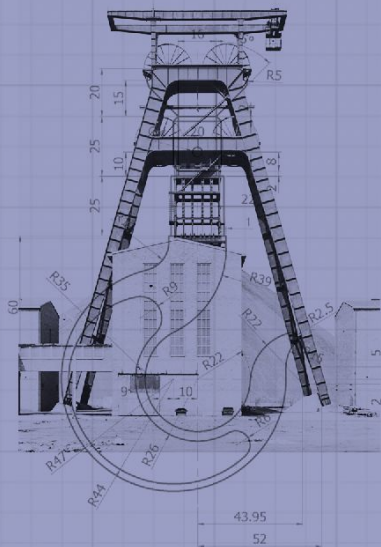
Funders

- Provide funding for data infrastructure projects;
- Commit to multi-year funding;
- Develop ongoing partnerships with government, academia, and intermediaries.

Intermediaries

- Champion the adoption of common metrics, reporting standards, and interoperability frameworks;
- Pilot and test new approaches to nonprofit data use and scale proven models;
- Convene cross-sector dialogue on data infrastructure.

Q & A



The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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