

**Grassroots and governance: Exploring informal  
learning opportunities to support  
active citizenship and community-based  
organizations within Canada**

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January 2010

This work was funded by a contribution from the Canadian Council on Learning

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper explores an applied research study on lifelong learning, citizenship, and participation in community-based organizations in Canada. It considers the possibilities and challenges of developing a more networked approach towards governance to support an active and engaged citizenry by examining the informal learning experiences of adults around citizenship regarding their involvement with community based organizations.

### **Research Questions**

Some of the questions that have guided the research study are:

- What contributions do grassroots organizations make to Canadian society?
- What kinds of relationships exist between grassroots organizations and government and other CBO's?
- Does volunteer participation in CBO's lead to active citizenship and greater participation in electoral politics in Canada?
- What are the gender differences in citizen participation?

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this study includes a) literature review, b) ethics approval, c) case studies of six community based organizations across Canada (Eastern, Central, and Western regions), d) semi-structured interviews with “key informants” - individuals working in government, the policy sector, and the volunteer and funding sector (from across Canada), a review process and feedback from participants and community members (including a community networking workshop), and e) analysis of data using a

computer program called Atlas-ti that helps a researcher categorize the results of the study.

## **Results**

Family, work, and community, as well as different expectations according to life stages all shape the involvement of individuals and their participation in informal learning contexts (such as volunteer organizations and community groups). There are concerns that volunteerism may be declining. The identity of what it means to be an “active citizen” may be taken up differently by government, organizations, and individual Canadians. Many citizens are ‘active’ in terms of making contributions to the community through volunteer work and fundraising, but they do not usually become engaged as ‘active citizens’ in campaigning for broader social and political changes unless the organization has an advocacy mandate.

Grassroots CBO’s must develop an assortment of strategies to survive within an increasingly difficult environment, ranging from reliance on government funding to social entrepreneurship. The intensification of competition often undermines opportunities for cooperation between organizations. While some individuals would like to see stronger linkages between government and grassroots organizations, and acknowledge the importance of advocacy around policy development, this does not seem to be a central focus for most CBO’s.

## **Implications of Research for Adult Educators and Policy Makers**

Initial results from this study indicate that creating a more networked approach towards governance is complicated by different organizational mandates, local interests, and competition around funding and volunteer support. There needs to be consultation

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between government, CBO's and citizens, to discuss supports, barriers, and opportunities for supporting CBO's and volunteerism in Canada.

## **Introduction**

In this applied research study on lifelong learning, citizenship, and participation in community-based organizations in Canada, the possibilities and challenges of developing a more networked approach towards governance to support an active and engaged citizenry is explored by examining the informal learning experiences of adults around citizenship regarding their involvement with community based organizations.

The paper begins with an overview of the research questions. A review of related literature on citizenship and governance and a detailed overview of the methodology and research process are then provided. A summary of the key findings is presented, supported by quotes excerpted from the interview transcripts. A brief analysis is made regarding current contexts for citizenship participation in governance in Canada and exploring the impact of this on community based organizations. The paper concludes with some recommendations for developing a more networked approach towards governance and supporting learning opportunities for active citizenship across the lifespan.

## **Research Questions**

This research study explores some of the challenges, benefits, and supports that impact upon involvement of Canadian citizens at the local, regional, provincial, national, and international level. It considers issues around inclusion and considers barriers that create exclusion for members of diverse and marginalized populations, taking into account factors such as gender, race, age, and ability. The study investigates opportunities

and challenges around fostering stronger networks between grassroots organizations and government to develop a more active and engaged citizenry.

While recognizing that each of these studies could be a study on their own, some of the questions that guided this research study were:

- 1) What contributions do grassroots organizations make to the broader Canadian society, culture, sense of identity, and economy?
- 2) What are the factors that motivate and deter citizens around becoming volunteers in community based organizations (CBO's)?
- 3) What are the linkages and what are the constraints that impact on creating connections between grassroots organizations and government?
- 4) What are the linkages and what are the constraints that affect a more networked relationship between different CBO's?
- 5) Does volunteer participation in grassroots organizations lead to “active citizenship” and/or greater participation in electoral politics in Canada?
- 6) Are there gender differences in citizen participation and what are the implications of this for governance?

## **Literature Review**

This section provides a concise summary of some of the existing literature on citizenship and governance, within the fields of lifelong learning and adult education, focusing particularly on the concept of learning for “active citizenship”. There is limited empirical research on citizenship in the field of adult education within Canadian contexts, thus providing a rationale for research such as this study to investigate strategies for

supporting learning and citizenship participation throughout the lifespan. Since prior research (Johnston, 1999; Mündell & Schurgurensky, 2008; Welton, 2001) indicates that learning in civil society organizations and the voluntary sector is an important component in fostering an active and engaged citizenry, it is important to examine the contributions of these organizations, the challenges that they face, and the supports that sustain them.

### ***Learning for Active Citizenship***

Citizenship is a complicated concept that is taken up and understood in different ways. In the fields of adult education and lifelong learning, particular interest has been developed around notions of learning for “active citizenship”. Johnston (1999) argues that “active citizenship involves learning by doing across a wide spectrum” (p. 186). Active citizenship can include activities such as campaigning or advocating for social change, running for office, or participating in civil society organizations. Through active citizenship and involvement in the voluntary sector, individuals can foster their own learning while working collectively to create beneficial social changes. Often this learning is linked to volunteer work, such as serving on a board of directors for a local not-for-profit. Eldston (1995) points out the importance of learning in the voluntary sector. Putnam’s (1996) well known work around the importance of fostering civic engagement through active citizenship participation indicates that vibrant participation in the volunteer sector is an essential component in sustaining a healthy democracy. Johnston believes that “learning for active citizenship has the potential to be an important counter-point to the more individualistic, economic, and controlled aspects of Lifelong Learning” (1999, p. 185). Learning often occurs through nonformal activities, such as

board training programs, or informal learning, such as having older activists mentor new members of an environmental advocacy group.

### ***Participation in Governance***

In this research study I focus on citizen participation in governance, which has a broader meaning than government. Citizens can be involved in governance not only through participation in the formal political system (ie. voting, running as a candidate for political office) but also by being active in their communities through volunteer associations, writing to politicians to express their views, joining in advocacy groups to initiate social change, or to in other words participate within the realm of what critical theorists term “civil society” (Habermas, 1996). Brookfield explains that “civil society essentially comprises all those forms of human association not directly controlled by the state or corporations” (2005, p. 234). In his discussion of Welton (2001) and Habermas’s (1996) work, Brookfield argues that they both believe that “efforts at resistance [or social change] must be located in social movements and grassroots activism across a range of issues” (2005, p. 222). Critical adult educators see that participation in grassroots organizations may lead to learning around active citizenship and encourage a more networked approach towards governance by fostering capacities such as the ability to debate ideas, argue points effectively, and collectively advocate for social change.

Saint-Martin (2004) draws upon Pierre and Peters (2000) to discuss the concept of *governance*. He argues that “part of the appeal of governance as a concept is its capacity – unlike the narrower term government – to cover the whole range of institutions and social relationships involved in the process of governing” (p. 14). Saint Martin notes that

traditionally, governance is presented as having three possible orientations; a) a top-down approach, so control is exerted by the government over the public b) control through the marketplace, so global corporations are responsible for most decision-making or c) a networked approach, which fosters linkages between government and CBO's, as well as enabling connections between CBO's themselves.

The last model is perceived to have more opportunities for fostering an active and engaged citizenry. However, often the reality is a complicated mixture of these different kinds of models. Understanding the various factors that impact upon CBO's and the challenges of creating a more networked approach to governance can provide insights into the learning opportunities and barriers around supporting greater political engagement for Canadian citizens

### ***Adult Education and Citizenship***

Jarvis (2002) argues that adults need to understand the complexities of broader global and social forces in order to be able to participate fully as citizens. Lister (2003) argues that education for citizenship often addresses preparing students to become future workers rather than taking wider social and political concerns into consideration. However, unlike our European and British counterparts (Martin, 2003; Lister, 2003; Johnston, 1999) there has not been much empirical research around citizenship, governance, and lifelong learning within Canada. In teacher education research there is some discussion around "active citizenship" with regards to schooling for youth (Cook & Westheimer, 2006), but there have been few empirical studies conducted on adult learning experiences around citizenship within the Canadian context.

There has been some research looking at the role of community based organizations and volunteerism, most notably Mündell and Schurgurensky's (2008) recent work on the informal learning of volunteers in community based organizations, which groups learning into three different categories; "instrumental skills related to their organization, learning to work with others, and learning about the role of volunteering in society" (2008, p. 50). At a more theoretical level, scholars such as Welton (2005) and Grace (2007), help to frame the social contexts in which lifelong learning around citizenship occurs in Canada. For example, Grace is critical of Canadian educational policies that tend to stress the "value of a knowledge-based economy, technology, and skill development" (2007, p. 86) while paying lip service to broader learning objectives within the context of lifelong learning policies. Welton (2005) points to the important learning opportunities that exist in fostering the realm of civil society, which includes grassroots organizations, for citizenship engagement and learning around deliberative and participatory forms of democracy. Feminist scholars, such Clover (2005) and Butterwick (2003) have conducted research on women's learning in community, by exploring radical pedagogical activities in theatre and arts-based programs that are often linked with a social justice orientation and intended to help effect social change. They found that women in marginalized locations were often able to learn to effectively communicate their concerns through arts-based activities to the broader community. This can be seen as a form of "active citizenship" in that the women were able to bring their personal concerns to a more political level in drawing public attention, and hopefully be able to initiate social change from this work.

### ***Rationale for this study***

There are numerous applied learning challenges to be considered in assessing the barriers, supports and motivators that impact upon adult learners regarding their participation as active citizens. Interviewing leaders in the non-profit and government/policy sector helps to provide additional insights into strategies for creating a more networked approach towards governance. Although limited in scope, this study serves an important purpose in exploring possibilities for adult learning opportunities around citizenship and governance.

### **Methodology**

This section overviews the methodology and research process for this study, that includes a) literature review, b) ethics approval, c) case studies of community based organizations, d) semi-structured interviews with “key informants”, e) review and feedback from participants, and f) qualitative analysis of data.

### ***Literature Review***

The study began with a content analysis of related academic literature and policy documents around citizenship, governance, and the significance of learning within community-based contexts. The primary journals that were examined included *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *Convergence*, *The Canadian Journal for Studies in the Education of Adults*, *Studies in Continuing Education*, and *Adult Education Quarterly*. In addition, a search was conducted on EBSCO, a large academic database, around related topics regarding citizenship and learning. Government documents such as reports from

the UNESCO and OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) were also reviewed. The journals that were selected are amongst the most commonly read journals in the fields of adult education/lifelong learning. Over the years I have read countless articles relating to issues around citizenship, lifelong learning, civil society, volunteerism, political activism, and informal learning, in a wide range range of journals in the fields such as Cultural Geography, different areas of Education, Women's Studies, and Sociology and Political Science. For the purposes of the literature review for this report, however, I selected a few articles that had been published in the last ten years or so that overviewed existing research on related topics. As mentioned previously, there has been very little empirical work done on citizenship and governance in Canada in the specific fields of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning, so these were the areas that were included primarily to indicate both the background context for this study and the limited research that had been done in this area. I am only fluent in English, so only English language journals were included in this literature review.

### ***Ethics Approval***

All university based research that involves living human subjects is required by the *Tri-Council* (comprised of the Medical Research Council of Canada, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) *Policy on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* to undergo a rigorous ethics review prior to the collection of any data from participants. This entails preparing a detailed ethics submission that overviews the research study, provides a clear rationale for the study, discusses any potential harm that may befall

participants and measures for addressing this, and includes copies of all the information that will be sent out to participants about the study, as well as the letters of informed consent. The selection process of participants is explained and information is provided about the storage and security around data.

### ***Case Studies***

Six case studies of community-based organizations (CBO's) across Canada were conducted to examine citizen participation within communities, as well as interconnections between CBO's and government. These CBO's were examples of "grassroots" organizations in that they were created through citizenship involvement rather than government initiatives.

The organizations were selected to obtain as much diversity as possible within the small scale of the study by using a purposive sampling technique. Using a purposive sample technique meant that I looked for specific criteria in trying to attain as much diversity as possible within the small scale of the study by making sure that some organizations came from rural areas while others were in urban settings. I wanted to include francophone participants, so one organization was located in a francophone community. I did not include a First Nations organization simply because I was informed by my University Ethics Committee that I would have to pass a separate ethics approval process through the First Nations community if I wanted to do any research with Aboriginal communities, and there simply was not sufficient time to do this in a sixteen month grant. I included Canadians from different ethnic backgrounds, and selected one organization that focuses primarily on working with New Canadians (the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County in Ontario). I also included organizations that

were “stand alone” (such as FareShare Food Bank), while others were branches of national/international organizations (such as Oxfam). One reason I chose the Chilliwack Hospice was that it has established partnerships at different levels with both government and other community based organizations. The Chilliwack Hospice is connected to the the provincial hospice association, works with the local hospital authorities, and has partnered with a local service organization that provides funding support.

The case studies involved personal interviews, an examination of websites, annual reports, and other printed materials, and a site visit. The case study sites included the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County in Ontario, the Fareshare Food Bank in Oakville, Ontario, the Chilliwack Hospice Society in British Columbia, the Ability Society in Calgary, Alberta, the local chapter of Oxfam in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the Association des Acadiennes de Chéticamp (a collective of Acadian cooperatives) in Chéticamp, Cape Breton (Nova Scotia).

Since this is a qualitative study, rather than a quantitative study, I did not collect or analyze statistics from each of the organizations that are included in this study, so I do not have specific information as to the number of full-time/part-time employees or number of volunteers. From discussions with the participants, these statistics would also no doubt fluctuate depending upon activities at any given time. For example, most of the organizations that relied upon funding from government received short-term grants for different projects, so they might hire staff for the duration of a project on contract. Many organizations noted that they had volunteers who provided occasional assistance – ie. helping out at a one-time fundraiser, or assisting with a food drive. However, I can provide a table that overviews the names of the organizations, the location, and the focus

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of the organization below. Note that although each of the organizations is located in a city or town, some of these tend to serve more rural citizens than others ie. Cheticamp is a small francophone town located in a rural area in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Chilliwack is a small city with a population of around 80,000, but Oakville is considered to be a town, even though its population is twice that (over 160,000 residents) and it is located in one of the more urban corridors in Canada along the shores of Lake Ontario. Windsor is a small city but is surrounded by a large rural area in Essex County. Halifax is a mid-sized city of around 300,000 people in the HRM (Halifax Regional Municipality) area.

Name of Organization	Location	Focus
Oxfam	Halifax, NS	Advocates for human rights at a global level
Association des Acadiennes de Cheticamp	Cheticamp, NS	Supports rural economy and sustains cultural traditions and language
Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County	Windsor ON	Supports New Canadians transitioning into Canadian society
Fare Share Food Bank	Oakville, ON	Provides food and clothing for low income members of the community
The Ability Society	Calgary, AB	Supports mentally and physically challenged

		citizens with both program supports and by lending assistive technologies
Chilliwack Hospice Society	Chilliwack, BC	Provides palliative care for terminally ill people and emotional support for family members

***Interviews with “Key Informants”***

In addition to the case studies that were completed, interviews with “key informants” – individuals working in government, the policy sector, and the volunteer and funding sector were conducted in three different regions in Canada; the Western, Central, and Eastern provinces to provide insights into policies, practices and resources to foster active citizenship. Identities of key informants have been kept confidential, as well as details of the associations and the government/policy offices that they occupy so that the individuals cannot be identified. There were a variety of types of positions that key informants occupied. These included elected politicians working at different levels of government, government employees working in the policy sector in areas that connected with volunteerism or citizen involvement, leaders or coordinators of volunteer networks, and government or non-government employees of departments/organizations that provided funding to CBO’s. The key informants came from the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. A total of eleven key informants were interviewed. As a part of the ethics approval for this study, I noted that

the identity of the key informants would be kept confidential. In order to do this, I will not be providing a table with information about the key informants, their location, and the types of positions that they held, as I believe that this would compromise my ability to keep this information confidential.

The idea of using “key informants” built on a prior successful research strategy that I used in my earlier SSHRC and CCL grants. The purpose of interviewing key informants is twofold. First, it brings in information from an alternative perspective (in qualitative research this is considered beneficial as “triangulation” of sources – using existing literature, case studies, and interviews from a different group of participants enhances the validity and reliability of the findings). Secondly, as I noted in an earlier publication (Gouthro, 2007a), this strategy engages individuals in the policy sector at an early stage in the research process, thus providing better opportunities for effective communication and dissemination of research findings.

### ***Participant and Community Feedback***

Interviews from both key informants and the community organization participants were transcribed and sent back to participants for review. An additional feedback loop was included in the design of the study whereby a summary report of initial findings was circulated to participants for their assessment. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, there was limited feedback – just a couple of brief emails that acknowledged the results were interesting but did not provide substantive additional insights. I have used a feedback loop in a follow-up study for another research project where I have found that in order to obtain good quality feedback you need to have more time to make personal

contact with research participants and in most instances, do a follow-up interview rather than rely upon the participant taking the time to write out a response.

In addition, a public lecture and community networking workshop provided opportunities to obtain additional feedback from other community groups to explore in greater depth the issues of active citizenship and participation in governance. Honourable Fellow, Ian Martin, from the University of Edinburgh, was brought in to Mount Saint Vincent University to deliver the public lecture and co-facilitate the community networking workshop. He has written and researched extensively on the topic of citizenship (Martin 2003; 2005; 2007). The Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (ALKC) and Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/ L'Association pour l'Etude de l'Education des Adultes (CASAE/ACÉÉA) partnered with these events, thus helping to draw in a larger number of participants from the community. Both the public lecture and workshop were well attended and provided opportunities for feedback from members of the public about this research and discussion around the related topics of active citizenship, community based organizations, and governance. Notes from participant responses were taken and incorporated into the analysis of the findings, which are discussed in more detail later in the report.

### ***Qualitative Analysis***

The final, edited copies of all the transcripts were uploaded into Atlas-ti, a qualitative software based upon grounded theory. Grounded theory is used in qualitative analysis to explore how themes emerge from the data (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). This is done by reading and reviewing the data repeatedly. This constant review of the data

allows for a deeper reading and understanding of the responses. From this, themes begin to emerge from the data, sometimes clearly linked with the questions that were asked in the study, sometimes providing insights that might not always be expected. From this repeated review of the data, themes emerge, which are then coded (categorized) and used for discussion and analysis of the findings.

## **The Findings**

Although in qualitative research, the process of determining the results is not as straightforward as asking a question and then having an immediate, clear-cut response, a reviewer for this report thought that there should be a more specific explanation of how the questions that guided my research were answered. Therefore, I reorganized my presentation of the results to do this. The findings are presented according to the following headings, each of which is connected to one of the guiding research questions: 1) Contributions of CBO's, 2) Volunteerism, 3) Connections Between CBO's & Government, 4) Connections Between CBO's, 5) Active Citizenship, 6) Gender Differences.

### ***Contributions of CBO's***

In answer to the first research question as to what kinds of contributions do grassroots organizations make to the broader Canadian society, culture, sense of identity and economy, the answer appears to be that the health of our communities is often dependent to a large extent upon the contributions made by grassroots community based organizations. Community based organizations are important for providing practical

psychological, employment, educational and cultural supports and assistance around transition for New Canadians, through organizations such as the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County. Organizations such as The Ability Society support the most marginalized members of society, such as those who are mentally and physically challenged, by providing them with educational and employment opportunities, technical supports so that they are not as excluded from social participation (ie. through enhanced reading devices), and they provide educational and emotional support for family members. They provide basic necessities through groups such as the FareShare Food Bank, which provides food for the hungry when our social services provide an insufficient income for our poorest citizens. Organizations such as the Chilliwack Hospice bolster our overtaxed health care system, provide dignity and support for the dying through palliative care, and emotional support for family members. Grassroots organizations such as Oxfam sometimes evolve into global networks that advocate for basic human rights such as health, safety, freedom for citizens across the globe. Other grassroots organizations, such as the Association des Acadiennes de Chéticamp (a collective of Acadian cooperatives), support endangered rural economies and help to maintain unique cultural traditions, language and arts that are integral to Canadian society. These organizations also provide rich opportunities for Canadians to be involved in making their communities and their country a better place to live by sharing their time, talents, and energy with others.

One of the aspects of qualitative research is that the topics under investigation are looked at in a holistic manner, rather than by being sorted into specific categories ie. asking the organization to “tick off” the boxes around different categories that apply to

them – economic, social, political contributions, etc. Therefore, in the analysis, the findings tend to be presented in a holistic way as well, rather than being organized into numeric charts under specific categories.

Each of the organizations that were involved in this study provides supports to members of the community that can be valued in different ways. For example, the Acadian Association for Cooperatives provides employment in a rural area where there is high unemployment rates. At the same time, by choosing to use French as its working language, the organization is helping to preserve francophone language and culture. In addition the craft cooperative retains valuable knowledge that is often gendered (the patterns and techniques used to reproduce the hooked coasters are passed down from one generation of women to the next). By providing localized services in the francophone community, such as a local radio station and a cooperative senior's residence, stronger community ties are sustained and the use of the French language and local events are promoted.

### ***Volunteerism***

In response to my second research question, “what are the factors that motivate and deter citizens about becoming volunteers in CBO's”? it became clear that numerous pathways lead to citizen involvement in both community-based organizations and in governance. Personal circumstances, such as a change in health or employment, connection to an individual with a particular illness or need, or a transition point in life, such as reaching retirement or moving to a new place, were all examples of the types of factors that participants named as motivators for becoming involved as volunteers. For

example, a personal crisis, such as a family member's illness or a personal disability, may lead to involvement with a particular community-based organization, such as a hospice or the Ability Society. One person said, "*I wouldn't be where I am if it weren't for volunteering after my accident.*" Another participant said, "*my mother had just been diagnosed with dementia and I... didn't want to go to the Alzheimer's Society as that was too close to the issue and the hospice just intrigued me.*" Transition points in life, such as a move to a new area or retirement may also spark an interest in volunteer involvement.

Given the importance of volunteer contributions to sustain CBO's, it is worrisome that one of the most significant findings of the study was the consistent feedback that the nature and extent of volunteer commitments seems to be changing because of stress around time commitments. Concerns were voiced by many participants about the difficulty in getting sufficient volunteers, and worries that volunteerism may be declining. Increasingly, many citizens choose short-term, intermittent volunteer commitments, such as fundraising for a particular event to accommodate busy schedules. One participant said, "*[I'll] sell tickets or be an usher at a theatre ... sure, I'll do that for that one night...or even for the weekend...but not on an ongoing basis.*" One member of a different organization reflected on the large number of volunteers that they had and explained, "*all we require is an hour a week*" so people were more willing to make that sort of minimal commitment than the several hours a week required by other organizations. Some participants noted that many people who do volunteer also choose to spend their time with activities that benefit people that they are closely connected to, such as coaching their children's sports teams, rather than assisting with organizations that

serve the broader community. Other participants noted that it was increasingly difficult to find people willing to take on leadership roles that required a long term time commitment and sustained interest in maintaining the organization.

In addition to concerns around volunteerism, there were also a number of issues that came up around support for CBO's from government and other organizations. This leads to considerations around how a more "networked approach" towards governance can be developed.

Once again, I do not have a summary chart to present my findings, as I did not seek information to be organized in this manner as a part of this study. Qualitative research relies more on description than on statistics to represent the findings.

In an earlier study, I found that many of the barriers to full citizen participation such as having difficulties being accepted fully into Canadian society. Lack of employment opportunities or facing discrimination and/or racism served as a motivating factor for some of women involved in that study to decide to become "active citizens" in terms of joining a grassroots community organization or participating in governance at some level, whether it was on a community board or by running for political office. Similarly, in this study within some of the organizations that dealt specifically with marginalized groups, such as the Multicultural Society and the Ability Society, some of the volunteers mentioned their own experiences of marginalization as being a motivating factor for their involvement. For example, people who had gone through the experience of being a New Canadian wanted to ensure a smoother transition for others coming to this country.

At the same time, although one of the “key informants” who was a politician spoke about her own experiences in growing up on a poor family as motivating her to work on behalf of citizens who were disadvantaged, she also acknowledged that especially in the formal political system there were still many barriers that prevented equitable gender representation. Amongst these were issues around self-esteem and confidence amongst women, family “unfriendly” hours in government, and a political environment that was not easy for women to navigate. She noted that few people in government even acknowledge the problems with current gender imbalance in political representation.

### ***Connections between CBO’s and Government***

My third question looked at what kinds of relationships exist between CBO’s and government, examining what can be done to foster linkages, and what are the constraints. I found that CBO’s vary in their interest in government support and involvement. When asked about their relationship with government, two main factors came up. The main one was around the dependency upon government for financial resources. A secondary concern was around influencing policy, which most of the organizations did not see as an integral aspect of their day-to-day mandate. In terms of fostering the capacities of citizens to be more actively involved in government by deciding to run for an elected position, this seemed to be something that was more of an individual decision rather than something that was commonly discussed within the context of the CBO’s.

A number of concerns were raised around being dependent upon government support in financially sustaining an organization, including problems with short-term

funding, too much paperwork, and a lack of interest in supporting administrative capacities that facilitate the effectiveness of an organization and provide much needed leadership. A member of one organization explained, “*Funding... it’s always a challenge... you never know from one year to the other how much money you’re going to get*”.

One organization decided to completely opt out of appealing to government for assistance, since as one of the members noted dismissively, the government usually “*messes up*.” The perception was that government is overly bureaucratic and would not allow the organization to have the sense of autonomy that the leaders valued. Instead, they chose to go directly to the community for support and within the limits of their mandate (and the dedication of a strong core of volunteers) were able to remain self-sustaining. The leadership of this organization expressed concerns, however, with the decline in volunteerism, noting that most of their leadership was getting elderly and it was not clear that there would be a new generation of committed volunteers who would step up to take their place once they were gone.

Another organization was striving for financial independence by developing a social entrepreneurship model for service delivery. A participant explained, “*Three years ago we were probably 60 percent dependent, today about 90, 92 percent of our revenues are self-generated.*” In a social entrepreneurship model, the organization is often still connected to government, but as an organization that provides needed services that the government contracts out. However, although there is a sense of greater autonomy in this kind of arrangement, the government is still the main source of revenue for the organization.

### ***Connections Between CBO's***

In response to the question, “What are the linkages and what are the constraints that affect a more networked relationship between different CBO’s?” it appears that government leaders often advocate that CBO’s work together in a cooperative way, and avoid duplication of services. However, the relationship between different CBO’s varies, and is often tenuous because of the scarcity of resources, both in terms of recruiting volunteers and seeking government funding or engaging in fundraising events in the community. One of the key informants noted that when it comes to allocating grants, “*it’s a competitive process*”. Another key informant stated, “*There’s a competition for dollars in the community for fundraising*”. Although some cooperative initiatives were made between different CBO’s such as creating area level boards where they could discuss shared concerns, often a zero-sum perspective, whereby if one organization benefitted, another was disadvantaged, served to hamper collaborative efforts and create a more competitive environment.

### ***Active Citizenship and Participation in Governance***

In response question 5 which raised the question “Does volunteer participation in grassroots organizations lead to ‘active citizenship’ and/or greater participation in electoral politics in Canada?” it became very clear that many participants do not see that their role or the role of volunteers in their organization was to be involved in activist work, or in advocating for any kind of government or policy changes. Therefore, volunteers or employees in CBO’s may be responsible and socially conscious citizens, interested in providing supports to others and making their communities better places to

live, but that does not necessarily mean that they are motivated to make political or social structural changes.

There were a number of reasons for this. Most CBO's were focused immediate, everyday concerns, sometimes because of limited resources such as time and money, sometimes because of lack of political interest, and sometimes because of fear that there would be repercussions if volunteers were critical of government, since government was often the main source of funding. Most CBO's in Canada remain almost completely dependent on government support. Often the focus on meeting short-term, localized goals, as well as dependency upon government assistance, meant that advocacy was not perceived to be a part of the mandate of the organization. One key informant shared stories of CBO's who lost their funding when the members were publicly critical of changes in government policy.

A participant from Oxfam, which is the one organization included in this study with a specific mission linked to advocacy, argued that it was beneficial for CBO's to have dialogue with formal governments to initiate change, as "*it is appropriate to engage in social policy*". In this case, the participant did not view formal government as something that was removed from the organization, but rather as a group of representatives who should engage with citizens and CBO's to responsibly determine avenues for societal growth and change.

However, the majority of organizations and key informants did not support this view. For example, the difficulties around sponsoring organizations involved in advocacy work were noted by one key informant involved in the funding process who explained "*we don't really fund something that would strictly be called lobbying or advocacy as*

*defined by Revenue Canada*". The key informant acknowledged that this policy is particularly problematic for some organizations, such as environmental groups, since teaching sound environmental practices might be interpreted by some as "lobbying" or "advocacy". From the perspective of the community based organizations, one person explained that [we] "*will not endorse one candidate or the other mainly because we are dependent on funding.*" The survival of the organization is perceived to be linked with maintaining a neutral stance with members of government.

Time is also an important constraint. At the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County, one person explained, "*we would like to work with immigrant policy makers, or the Immigration Minister...But we haven't had the time to take it on as a regular board.*" Day to day concerns at the grassroots level, in providing practical and immediate supports for immigrants took precedence over negotiating for long term changes to policy developments.

Members of some organizations simply did not see that advocacy was part of their organization's mandate. One participant stated, "*our volunteers are not lobbyists. They're not interested in that.*" Engaging with government and policy might be seen as more appropriate, if the organization was linked with a larger network, for offices at the provincial level. For example, the hospice in Chilliwack explained that while their own role in terms advocating or lobbying on behalf of clients was limited, "*we do have a provincial organization, BC Hospice and Palliative Care, who do advocacy work for care of patients and families.*"

At the level of individual citizens, there also appears to have been multiple reasons why they became involved with different CBO's, as was mentioned earlier.

Participation in governance and becoming what would be termed an ‘active citizen’ is linked in some instances with participation in CBO’s, but often other factors (ie. keeping busy in retirement) were stronger motivators. Decisions around participation were often linked with individualized interests and personal experiences rather than broader social objectives, although some individuals were conscious of the possibilities for political engagement through their work with CBO’s. Some of the key informants who were now politicians began their careers through involvement in CBO’s. They explained that their interest in running for elected office sometimes emerged after having spent time working in grassroots organizations and then deciding that they could be more effective at making change by becoming a politician. However, it appears that while many politicians and activists have extensive involvement in CBO’s, being a volunteer at a grassroots organization is not always a conduit to becoming a more ‘active citizen’ in the sense of being engaged in either political advocacy or in deciding to run for electoral office.

### ***Gender Differences***

In response to my final question, “Are there gender differences in citizen participation and what are the implications of this for governance?”, it appears that women are often the mainstays of many CBO’s in terms of providing a large share of volunteer hours, although there are many men (appeared to be about a 50/50 gender split in this study) in leadership roles within these organizations. In fact, as a reviewer of this report noted, Stats Canada shows that women contribute more time than men do in terms of volunteer labour in Canada. However, one of the reasons why some participants thought volunteerism might be decreasing is because women are now so pressed for time

because of their multiple commitments to paid work, domestic labour, and childcare, it was difficult for them to make longer term commitments to the volunteer sector. A lot of the volunteers that supported the CBO's included in this study were older, and many were now retired. For example, as one woman explained, "*my kids are now grown...[so] I can spend more time doing volunteer work*". While women are working, however, it is difficult for them to make the kinds of time commitments that they might have made in the past when not as many women were employed in the paid labour force.

In terms of the political sphere, there are serious concerns around gender differences in participation. Women are still poorly represented at all levels of government. As one key informant noted, in Canada we still only have "*a twenty percent representation of women in the House of Commons*". Another key informant from a very ethnically diverse city noted that women and visible minorities still had lesser representation according to their percentage of the general population (approximately 30%) on the city council.

## **Analysis**

There are numerous ways in which adult learners determine their learning pathways around participation as citizens. Building on my previous research on Active Citizenship for Women in Nova Scotia, it is clear that many people become involved in community based organizations because they believe that their contributions can make a difference to the quality of life for people in their communities and in the broader world. Clover's (2005) research on environmental activism and Roy's (2004) research on the Raging Grannies would also support this. In this study it was clear that family, work, and

community, as well as different expectations according to life stages all shape the involvement of individuals and their participation in informal learning contexts (such as volunteer organizations and community groups). For example, a crisis or a life change, such a serious illness, a divorce, or a move to a new place might lead to a decision to become involved in a CBO. There are concerns that volunteerism may be eroding, and changing to become a fragmented and incidental activity. The identity of what it means to be an “active citizen” may be taken up differently by government, organizations, and individual Canadians. It is unclear whether many citizens become aware of these broader social and political concerns through localized volunteer work, unless the organization has an advocacy mandate.

Feedback from participants from the public lecture and the workshop that I coordinated with Ian Martin raised concerns around how to support grassroots organizations and address challenges in encouraging ‘active citizenship’ in an increasingly competitive environment. A number of participants drew upon their own experiences with CBO’s to note the inequalities and challenges that grassroots organizations face in struggling to survive and provide services. Some participants suggested that the field of adult education, which has a rich tradition of learning in community based contexts, could provide greater supports for members of CBO’s to become politically aware and capable of participating in initiating social change through advocacy. Even providing spaces for these conversations to take place, such as at the workshop and public lecture, was an important means of creating learning contexts for citizens to share ideas and explore alternative strategies and possible solutions to problems in attempting to create a more networked approach to governance.

Within the research study, it became clear that there are pressures on CBO's to develop an assortment of strategies to survive within increasingly difficult circumstances, ranging from reliance on government funding to social entrepreneurship. The intensification of competition undermines opportunities for cooperation between organizations that makes it difficult to develop or sustain a more networked approach to governance. While some individuals would like to see stronger linkages between government and grassroots organizations, and acknowledge the importance of advocacy around policy development, this does not seem to be a central focus for most CBO's.

A climate of uncertainty and fear erodes some of the possibilities for creating a more collaborative, networked approach towards governance. Many of the community based organizations indicated a sense of vulnerability and raised concerns over long term sustainability. In some instances this was due to the uncertainty created by a lack of core funding. In other cases it was worries around finding volunteers willing to make long term commitments and dedicate the amount of time that they believed was needed to continue to offer the same services as the organizations now provide.

As my previous SSHRC research on women's lifelong learning trajectories and CCL study women as active citizens indicates (Gouthro, 2007b), gender is an important variable that shapes individual life courses and citizenship participation. Women's lives often do not follow the same pathways as male lives. With the increasing level of participation of women in the paid labour force, many women who often served as the mainstay of volunteer organizations are now pressed for time and unable to contribute the number of hours of labour that they did in the past. Women are still responsible for most of the unpaid labour in the home, and often have the same demands as men do in the paid

workplace. Although women often feel a strong sense of commitment to community, they may not be able to be as actively engaged as they would like because of these gendered expectations on their labour. As a consequence, they are more likely to make short-term commitments that involve fewer hours of work.

Most government policies around lifelong learning in Canada place greater emphasis on the needs of the marketplace than on other factors (Gouthro, 2007b; Grace, 2007). This study suggests the need to develop informal learning opportunities around citizenship by considering what supports can be made to CBO's and the voluntary sector if we are to encourage the development of active citizenship across the lifespan.

## **Implications for Adult Educators and Policy Makers**

Initial results from this study indicate that creating a more networked approach towards governance is complicated by different organizational mandates, local interests, and the reliance on government funding for many CBO's. While some individuals and organizations see advantages and benefits to creating partnerships and exploring opportunities for collaboration, all too often competition for scarce resources makes it difficult for organizations to establish close networks. As mentioned, the relationship with government is complicated by the issue of funding and concerns around whether this might be adversely affected if an organization becomes overtly engaged in advocacy. The lack of time for many people is limiting their willingness to volunteer, particularly if the work involves a long term or time consuming commitment.

### ***Recommendations***

The long term viability of CBO's is linked with both financial security and volunteer support. There is insufficient space in this report to include quotes from a number of different participants, but to summarize some of their ideas there are a number of policies that could be put into place to provide additional support to CBO's. The implementation of core funding for organizations that are primarily dependent upon government funds to survive would be helpful in terms of ensuring salaries for organizational leaders and core staff. Within short-term grants and projects there could be a set percentage that can be used for administrative support to provide opportunities for organizations to ensure that salaries for Executive Directors and other administrators are sustainable. In addition, this funding could also build in support for the time that must be spent doing paperwork and writing new grant proposals. Better tax incentives for individuals who make contributions to community organizations and to community trust funds might also increase long term financial supports.

Regarding volunteerism, some suggestions were made by participants around supports that could be given by providing funding for training and recruitment of volunteers. Some CBO's thought that it would be valuable to have educational opportunities for board members, and participants mentioned better connections between schools, universities and CBO's might be beneficial. Current programs, such the requirement in Ontario that high school students must complete a set number of volunteer hours, or community based academic options (ie. in our program we have a practicum that involves volunteer hours) are a way to introduce people to volunteer work, and may lead to a willingness to participate in the community over the lifespan. Recognition of the

learning that occurs in volunteer organizations by both employers and educational institutions could be one way of supporting and sustaining volunteerism in the community. Some other thoughts include providing tax cuts for higher income volunteers and revenue supports for low income volunteers might also serve as an incentive (ie. a person who is retired and on a limited pension or someone who is on disability might receive additional financial benefits for volunteer labour hours).

Mündell and Schugurensky's (2008) note volunteers may develop skills around grant writing, learn to work cooperatively with others through the decision making process entailed by participating in voluntary boards, and reflect on their role as citizens by connecting with other volunteers and volunteer groups. Participants in this study spoke about similar learning experiences and how these had had a positive impact on their lives. They discussed how these types of learning experiences could be further supported through initiatives such as grant writing workshops and mentoring opportunities, training opportunities for board members, and opportunities to network with other volunteer organizations who might also assist with developing effective strategies for advocacy and consultation on policy development.

### ***Conclusion***

In order for these changes to occur, there needs to be consultation between different levels of government, community based organizations, and local citizens, to create opportunities for more open dialogue around the supports, barriers, and opportunities for supporting civil society organizations. In doing so, it may be possible to develop learning

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opportunities for Canadians to engage actively in developing a stronger democratic society and more networked approach towards governance.

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