

Perspectives from the Ground

Where does the "Third Pillar" Stand?

Vanessa Reid, Executive Director, Santropol Roulant
January, 2002

International Year of the Volunteer initiated a great deal of discussion on the role of the voluntary sector and volunteers in Canadian society. **With a frightening decrease in the number of people volunteering in and giving to the sector, the sustainability of the so-called "third pillar" of society is in question.**

"Pillar" connotes permanency; it necessitates a strong base in order to stand upright and the right materials to remain structurally sound. As a third pillar, civil society is where individuals and groups come together to do what they think is important. This is where citizens build associations and organizations; they take initiative, believe their communities can work, and want to ensure government and corporate sectors are working the way they believe is good. It is where democracy happens. We wonder if the pillar is crumbling, and why. Let's look at the strength of the structure, the mechanisms that hold it together, the foundation on which it stands, and the people by whom it has been, and is being, imagined and built.

This perspective is from the ground, from young people who are doing just that – imagining and building.

Keeping "the Voluntary" in the Voluntary Sector

Valuing the voluntary sector means **valuing** the people who make it work, primarily **those who volunteer and those who co-ordinate and train those volunteers**. Without those people - volunteers and co-ordinators - there would be no "voluntary" in the sector. Funding mechanisms within the government, philanthropic or corporate sectors do not demonstrate, nor do they adequately promote, this value. For example, the Federal Government's Accord on the Voluntary Sector clearly states that government departments will be better co-ordinated in the funding (or cutting) of programs for the voluntary sector, but there is little to indicate that there is a cohesive direction for funding that which is at the core of the sector: the people who make it happen.

Santropol Roulant engages **close to 100 young volunteers a week, who do close to 2000 hours of volunteer work a month**, in the health care and community sector. Allison Griffith, our co-ordinator is not only under-paid for the amount of work she does, but the program runs on a tiny but very "creative" budget. Despite this, the impact and rewards on individual and community are substantial and unquantifiable. We could not recruit, train and retain the 15 young people we need every day, 6 days a week to make and deliver both food and social contact to isolated seniors without a competent and dynamic person(s) co-ordinating both the people and the program. If this were a properly funded program, the immediate and long-term impacts would be even more significant.

This leads into **the discussion on government funding to the voluntary sector**. It is important, as outlined in the Accord, that government departments are co-ordinated in their funding practices and principles, but the larger issues are:

- *What are they funding?*
- *Why? And what is left out, and why?*
- *And what is the impact on the organizations applying for and/or receiving this funding?*

The ways in which government funds voluntary sector organizations directly impacts those organizations' mission, direction and internal cohesion. Since organizations need the money and resources, they will often create a program or project in order to get the funds (and possibly to try something new), but those sources are short-term and not renewable, and I would argue, they often side-track the organization from their original mission or vision. The government should develop a funding mechanism which ***funds the capacity of organizations to recruit, train, sustain and co-ordinate volunteers, volunteer programs, and volunteerism***. The results would be a stronger capacity for organizations to innovate and deliver because of a solid human resource base.

The sustainability of community and voluntary organizations depends on stable sources of funding. **If the government's goal is to work with the sector so that it is truly a strong "third pillar" of society, then its goal must be to help build capacity in and of the sector, and to strengthen and not dilute the goals and mission of its *organismes***. There needs to be a balance between funding for new and innovative projects, capacity building of voluntary organizations and their core activities and, equally important, inspiring volunteerism and citizen engagement.

Trends in Volunteering or Kids These Days

Recent statistics show that there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of people volunteering in Canada over the past four years, and that the volunteering population is an aging one (NSGVP, 2001). Over and over, in all the health sector, aging networks, meals-on-wheels committees, volunteer organization meetings, I hear "we need to find young volunteers". Often "young" for these groups means 50 years old. I'm often asked how Santropol Roulant gets so many young people to volunteer and particularly to volunteer with seniors. In our case, **it is not the specific issue that we address, it is the way in which we do it**.

Ninety percent of our volunteers are between 16-35 years of age; they are from all over Quebec, Canada and the world. We offer them an environment where they learn, contribute, exchange. We offer an open environment, opportunities to grow and develop both professional and life skills, and get involved in the community, one which is multi-cultural and multi-generational. The Roulant is **youth-initiated and youth-run, and so there is a strong feeling of identification and ownership**. For those volunteers who are older (in age), they feel young and stimulated by the environment.

The spirit of the Roulant is inclusive and dynamic, and its location at the heart of Montreal attracts people right off the street who may not even be looking to volunteer. As I mentioned at the Volunteer Canada conference in Vancouver, it is that we offer concrete and meaningful engagement - through cooking, delivering, social contact and much more. We are not the youth-wing of another agency, and we do not ask volunteers to do what we ourselves would not do.

Our experience with volunteers is the *reverse* of the current trend of decreasing numbers and increasing age of volunteers. One of the main points brought up with Minister Lucienne Robillard at the Accord meeting I attended in Montreal was that "we have to start them young" or else there will be no one volunteering in the decades ahead, and organizations and their services will expire. **"We have to start them young" means we have to offer an environment and an experience that will inspire and equip young people to take on a role in the public or voluntary sector over their lifetimes.** When schools offer "mandatory community hours" we in the voluntary sector have a responsibility to give students the tools and inspiration to continue after the 40th hour. This is where one of Santropol Roulant's main strengths lies - in offering an environment beyond the immediate "work" which allows young people to self-actualize, to take a leadership role, or simply to stay involved in a meaningful way.

The lessons and learnings of Santropol Roulant, after our first six years, are actually core lessons relevant to much larger issues in the voluntary sector. We are now being asked to be part of long-term solutions for the challenge here in Montreal (and across North America) of:

- the "aging" meals-on-wheels model;
- an aging volunteer base; and,
- managing the aging of our population.

Similarly, we are being asked to share our learnings and best practices for our success with a young volunteer population. **Santropol Roulant is an award-winning organization, voted one of Canada's ten best-run charities by the Globe and Mail (Dec, 2000), and winner of the Peter F. Drucker Award for social innovation, yet we receive no core funding.** How are young people's good ideas made into great organizations if there is no core support? What we do not see is a **co-ordinated approach among sectors** to address the root causes of the above-mentioned trends, and to build the capacity - or at least fund - the sustainability of organizations like ours.

Solutions & Social Innovation

- *Why aren't young people attracted to working or volunteering in the social sector?*
- *Are they truly the materialistic, individualistic products of a consumer society or is the social sector not able to receive them and give them the kinds of work and volunteer experiences that are meaningful to them?*

It is the role of the voluntary sector to be innovative in its responses to community and social issues - a hard thing to do with decreasing financial resources and therefore human resources. High burnout, low pay, insecurity... these are not the elements of an inspiring career move for a young person... If there is truly a concern about current youth (non)-participation in the social sector then there needs to be an articulate vision and action plan which includes *all sectors* to address this - because the issue is really a long-term one.

Framed in a broader scale, a strong civil society is based on an inspired and committed public, and citizen engagement and the responsibility of "citizenship" is everyone's regardless of what one does for a living. **Young people need to take their place in civil society, be part of building it, and not according to the models and paradigms that already exist** - "you cannot solve the problems of the present with the solutions that produced them" to paraphrase Einstein.

But existing mechanisms insist that we fit into existing models for funding - and we wonder why youth are so-called disinterested and not involved.

Santropol Roulant's role is to remain relevant to our community and not take our direction from government or other funding sources - but to address community issues as they arise and partner with the right (re)-sources. **Santropol Roulant has an unconventional model, one that was imagined and created by young people, and one that works.** It is our responsibility to do our work with creativity, spirit and imagination -- so that beyond achieving goals like new and transferable skills for young people or feeding isolated seniors, are the intangibles such as "being connected to something larger than myself."

A Strong Civil Society

Santropol Roulant is framing its vision around building social capital, *drawing young people into the social sector through innovation to build the skills, confidence, and networks necessary for the long-term health and sustainability of communities.* We are taking a leadership role in mobilizing a generation of young people to identify and address *any* social issue relevant in their community, creating the ability to address deep community issues and social challenges with confidence - and have a lot of fun while doing it.

An organization like ours is an incubator for social innovation, cultivating young people's potential and a place that helps them find direction in their lives. Whether their involvement is altruistic or "vested interest", the reality is that in **building the capacities of individuals, we are strengthening the capacities of the community.** To do this with young people as they cultivate their identities and formulate their desires is to invest in the long-term strength of our social fabric and civil society. That they do so at Santropol Roulant, specifically, means that they are building a network across many generations, and being part of and aware of individual and societal lifecycles.

We need to look at the existing systems and mechanisms, ones which value young people as full and equal members of civil society; believe youth are and should be active members of and leaders in their community; and build the sustainability of youth-initiated and driven organizations in Canada. Traditional funding mechanisms have yet to catch up to the solutions that young people are coming up with; we don't fit into existing categories because we see the world - and our place in it - differently. Creating the world we want to live in includes voting once every four years, but it also means being aware and active on a daily basis. If that is not citizenship - what is?

Youth-driven solutions and initiatives in the voluntary sector are crucial to a **long-term goal of an engaged and conscious citizenry and healthy third sector in Canada.** Their perspective also adds an important and often overlooked voice to policy development. Young people's skills, imagination and passions will evolve unconventional models which will not fit into existing funding structures - and nor should they - the funding structures should apply to these models. It is here that the potential for innovation in, and the sustainability of, the voluntary sector lies.

Santropol Roulant

Young people building a dynamic community

“Perspectives from the Ground:
Where does the “Third Pillar” Stand?”



Vanessa Reid
Executive Director

Santropol Roulant
4050 rue. St. Urbain
Montreal, Quebec
H2W 1V3

514.284-9335 (ph)
514.284-5662 (fx)

roulant@generation.net
www.santropolroulant.org