

A Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue

*Building on An Accord
Between the
Government of Canada
and the
Voluntary Sector*

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October 2002

Developed by the Joint Accord Table of the Voluntary Sector Initiative

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1. Why a Code?

Signed in December 2001, *An Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector* describes the key elements of a strengthened relationship between the two sectors. It sets out common values, principles and commitments that will shape the sectors' future practices as they work together for the benefit of all Canadians.

This Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue fulfils the Accord's commitment to take measures to put its provisions into action. As such, the Code is a tool for deepening the dialogue between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector at the various stages of the public policy process in order to achieve better policies for Canadians.

1.1 Link to the Accord and Purpose of the Code

Specifically, this Code has been developed in accordance with the provision in the Accord calling for “*codes or standards of good practice to help guide interactions between government departments and voluntary sector organizations on aspects of the relationship such as policy dialogue, funding, and other issues as identified.*”

As summarized below, the Accord also contains a number of commitments by the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector related to policy dialogue:

- *The Government of Canada recognizes the need to engage the voluntary sector in open, informed and sustained dialogue in order that the sector may contribute its experience,*

expertise, knowledge, and ideas in developing better public policies and in the design and delivery of programs. It also recognizes and will consider the implications of its legislation, regulations, policies and programs on voluntary sector organizations including the importance of funding policies and practices for the further development of the relationship and the strengthening of the voluntary sector's capacity.

- *The voluntary sector is committed to serving as a means for the voices and views of all parts of the voluntary sector to be represented to and heard by the Government of Canada, ensuring that the full depth and diversity of the sector is reached and engaged.*
- *Both the voluntary sector and the Government of Canada recognize that sharing ideas, perspectives, and experiences contributes to better understanding, improved identification of priorities, and sound public policy, and agree that dialogue should be open, respectful, informed, sustained, and should welcome a range of viewpoints.*

In addition, the Code builds on the values of democracy, active citizenship, equality, diversity, inclusion and social justice, and the principles of independence, interdependence, dialogue, co-operation and collaboration and accounting to Canadians, which are the basis for the Accord (see Appendix 1).

As set out in the Accord, this Code is designed to strengthen and improve the relationship between the voluntary sector and the Government of Canada. It confirms that the two sectors are committed to deepening their dialogue in order to create better public policies for the benefit

of Canadians. The Code also affirms the importance of a respectful, transparent and inclusive policy dialogue that acknowledges the independence and interdependence of both sectors.

While the voluntary sector and the Government of Canada share a long tradition of joining forces to achieve common goals, formalizing their relationship will help promote mutual understanding and more co-operative ways of working together. This Code is about building that relationship, seeking common ground and accepting one another's differences. It is about cultivating a strong civil society and a federal government connected to citizens by encouraging broad engagement and inclusiveness to ensure that the voluntary sector – including marginalized groups – knows its views are both heard and considered.

In adopting the best practices outlined in this Code, both sectors will be seeking to improve public policies by achieving the following positive outcomes:

- increased co-operation between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector;
- increased opportunity for dialogue throughout the public policy process;
- systematic review by the federal government of major policy and program proposals using a voluntary sector “lens” or analytical framework designed to ensure appropriate and adequate consideration of the impacts and implications for the voluntary sector;

- development and use of mechanisms to engage in dialogue about the issues and concerns of the diverse voluntary sector, including harder-to-reach groups;
- information that is more readily available and accessible; and
- better understanding of one another's broad policy objectives and the role that each can play in furthering these objectives.

1.2 Definitions

The Code uses the following working definitions:

- **Public Policy:** a set of inter-related decisions, taken by public authorities, concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them.
- **Public Policy Dialogue:** interaction between governments and non-governmental organizations (in this Code, the voluntary sector) at the various stages of the policy development process to encourage the exchange of knowledge and experience in order to have the best possible public policies.
- **Public Policy Development:** the complex and comprehensive process by which policy issues are identified, the public policy agenda is shaped, issues are researched, analyzed and assessed, policies are drafted and approved and, once implemented, their impact is assessed.

1.3 The Importance of Policy Dialogue Between the Two Sectors

Policy dialogue between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector is essential to ensure that policies benefit from the sector's experience, expertise, knowledge and ideas.

The voluntary sector plays a crucial role in representing the views of its stakeholders to the Government of Canada, in particular, those of unheard and minority voices. In fact, much of the voluntary sector's strength derives from the diversity of its membership and sources of support. Reflecting the many faces of Canada, the people who work and volunteer in the sector are drawn from a range of backgrounds and bring with them a wealth of unique abilities and experiences. To be effective, the public policy process must recognize and value this diversity.

Another strength of voluntary sector organizations is that they are close to the experience, interests and concerns of their constituents, a connection that gives them an important perspective on policy issues affecting the lives of Canadians. They also play an important role in raising awareness, building common ground and achieving consensus. This process of dialogue and deliberation is one in which participants can feel confident that their views have been heard and taken into account.

Informal dialogue on a day-to-day basis is a vital dimension of the public policy process at all stages, especially before policy options are identified and developed. One of the aims of this Code is to encourage interaction between

the voluntary sector and the Government of Canada, especially at the earliest stages, before options have been determined.

The government ... "will put into action the Accord it signed with the voluntary sector last December, to enable the sector to contribute to national priorities and represent the views of those too often excluded."

Speech from the Throne, 2002

1.4 Scope and Application of the Code

This Code applies to existing and future policy dialogue between federal government departments and agencies (including their regional organizations) and the voluntary sector organizations that they work with, at both the national and local levels. As a tool to be used by those who are involved in policy, this Code is expected to evolve over time. Moreover, it will be subject to regular review within the context of the Accord, which calls for regular meetings between Ministers and sector representatives to discuss the results that have been achieved.

The focus of this Code is on the relationship between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector, and how the principles of their joint Accord apply to policy dialogue.

That being said, both sectors recognize that their relationship is only one part of the broad public policy process. For its part, the federal government has a responsibility to consider many sources of input when developing policy, including the voluntary sector, other levels of government (provincial, territorial, local), private sector entities and labour unions. For example, the realities of constitutionally-based federal-provincial and territorial relationships are imbedded in many of the Government of Canada's policy initiatives. Furthermore, the Code recognizes the particular role played by the Parliament of Canada in representing the views of Canadians, debating the policy and legislative agenda of the government, and ultimately determining the laws and fiscal parameters that give effect to that agenda.

At the same time, the voluntary sector has a number of ways that it can influence and comment on policy, one of which is through dialogue with the Government of Canada. The voluntary sector contributes to public policy-making in many areas of responsibility, including with governments at all levels and with other sectors of society.

Both the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector are committed to the full application of the Code, over time, to those policy issues on which they choose to work together. Both sectors recognize that there will be variations in the pace and manner in which the Code is applied. Furthermore, both acknowledge that the nature of the issues under consideration will influence the extent of the interaction. They recognize that there are circumstances where the Government of Canada and voluntary sector organizations may advocate different courses of policy action or choose to tackle issues of common interest separately. The Code does not compel them to work together; rather it outlines what will govern the relationship when they choose to work together.

Many departments and agencies and voluntary sector organizations are already using many of the practices outlined in the Code. Others are at different stages. All share a commitment to be guided by these good practices.

2. Principles Underpinning the Code

Building on the Accord, this Code is based on the following shared principles:

The Voluntary Sector's Value

A healthy and active voluntary sector plays an important role in helping the federal government identify issues and achieve its public policy objectives. By its very nature and particularly because of its connection to communities, the voluntary sector brings a special perspective and considerable value to its activities, including those it undertakes with the Government of Canada.

Mutual Respect

Both sectors will listen to and consider the views of all participants and respect their legitimacy and input.

Inclusiveness

Both sectors will involve the broadest possible range of groups or individuals who may be affected by a policy or who can make a meaningful contribution to the debate. Increasingly, policy development must take account of the specific needs, interests and experiences of the diversity of the voluntary sector including, for example, groups representing women, visible minorities, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal people, linguistic minorities, sexual orientation,

remote, rural and northern communities and other hard-to-reach subsectors. Policies must also respect the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, the *Employment Equity Act*, the *Official Languages Act*, the *Multiculturalism Act* and the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, as well as Canada's obligations as a signatory of relevant international treaties and conventions, for example, on the rights of children, women and indigenous peoples. Policies must also respect all amendments, extensions or replacements to these laws and policies.

Accessibility

Both sectors will take the appropriate measures to ensure that all those invited to participate in a dialogue have access to the process. This will take account of factors such as language, region, distance, ethno-culture, religion, socio-economic background, age, knowledge or capabilities.

Clarity

Recognizing that a clear mutual understanding of the objectives, purpose and process of participation and feedback is vital, both sectors will establish the terms of the policy dialogue in advance and communicate them to participants.

3. Context:

The Stages of the Public Policy Process

Dialogue between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector will take place at the various stages of the public policy process (see diagram in Appendix 2). These stages are described briefly below.

Some activities, such as consultation and engagement, cut across the policy development process and can be used in a variety of ways at each stage. Similarly, advocacy can be used at the various stages of the public policy process as a strategy to effect change.

Advocacy is defined as “the act of speaking or of disseminating information intended to influence individual behaviour or opinion, corporate conduct, or public policy and law.”¹

Issue Identification

Voluntary sector organizations can play a particularly valuable role in the identification of emerging policy concerns. The federal government respects the voluntary sector’s advice, which is based on direct experience and relationships and involvement with members of organizations and communities. Because of their grassroots involvement, particularly in service delivery, voluntary sector organizations may become aware of trends or emerging issues before the federal government. Strengthening the sector’s participation in governmental or departmental policy development processes

and mechanisms – such as policy scanning and planning exercises, advisory mechanisms and international delegations – can help in the process of issue identification. Through advocacy initiatives, voluntary sector organizations can also play a key role in drawing public attention to emerging issues.

Agenda-Setting

Issues come onto the public policy agenda from various sources, including: political platforms, research and analysis, academe, the private sector and voluntary sector organizations. Based on its in-depth knowledge and understanding of emerging and important issues, the voluntary sector can bring key information to the development of public policy priorities. Dialogue between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector during the agenda-setting stage serves to inform the sector of how it can participate most effectively in the public policy process.

Policy Design

The voluntary sector can contribute its ideas, knowledge, expertise and experience to the various steps in public policy design, including research, analysis, drafting and testing models, and developing design options.

¹ *Working Together: A Government of Canada/Voluntary Sector Joint Initiative: Report of the Joint Tables*, Voluntary Sector Task Force, Privy Council Office, Government of Canada, August 1999.

4. Good Practices: The Code in Action

This Code is intended to encourage good practices at the various stages of the public policy process, throughout the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector at both the national and local levels. These good practices are founded on shared principles and are aimed at effecting changes in behaviour that will result in better policy. The following list is not exhaustive nor is it ranked in order of importance. Both sectors will be expected to look for new ways to continuously enrich the dialogue and the Code will evolve to reflect these new good practices.

4.1 Good Practices for Both Sectors

The Government of Canada and the voluntary sector commit to:

- engage in an open, inclusive and ongoing dialogue through the various stages of the public policy process, including issue identification, agenda-setting, policy design, implementation, monitoring and impact assessment;
 - identify and allocate resources and time to policy activities;
 - ensure appropriate and significant representation from across the voluntary sector;
 - develop and strengthen knowledge and policy capacity to promote more effective dialogue during the policy process and deepen understanding of their respective issues and processes;
 - be aware of the policy implications of their experiences and activities, and inform one another of important conclusions; and
- ensure that assessment takes into account the differing regional impacts of policies.

4.2 Good Practices for the Government of Canada

The Government of Canada commits to:

- develop ways (e.g., a voluntary sector lens) to ensure that all departments and agencies recognize and consider the impacts and implications for the voluntary sector and voluntary sector organizations of new or modified legislation, regulations, policies and programs;
- develop ways to engage in regular dialogue to listen to concerns and issues identified by voluntary sector organizations, and to make these methods of dialogue known; more specifically, find mechanisms to encourage dialogue with the voluntary sector in all its diversity, including those at the grassroots level and those representing women, visible minorities, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal people, linguistic minorities, remote, rural and northern communities and other hard-to-reach subsectors;
- draw on the full range of methods to engage in a dialogue with the voluntary sector at the various stages of the public policy process, including methods such as written consultations, opinion surveys, focus groups, user panels, meetings and various Internet-based approaches;
- to the fullest extent possible, make appropriate statistical and analytical information – such

- as survey data, research studies and policy papers – readily available in accessible and useable formats to enhance the voluntary sector’s capacity for analyzing and developing informed policy positions;
- respect and seek out the expertise and input of the voluntary sector and include it in the analysis and design of policy initiatives;
 - make every effort to plan and co-ordinate policy dialogue with the voluntary sector on related topics, avoiding overlapping requests for participation in the same time period;
 - ensure that policy initiatives capture the fullest spectrum of views and give due consideration to all input received, paying particular attention to those likely to be most affected by policy proposals;
 - include opportunities for the voluntary sector to discuss the rationale for and implications of decisions, thereby building understanding and trust; and
 - use appropriate means to ensure that information about the results of dialogue and consultations (e.g., final reports, approved policies) is made available to those engaged in the policy process, so they know how their input was used, including its impact on federal government proposals or decisions.

4.3 Good Practices for the Voluntary Sector

The voluntary sector and its organizations commit to:

- develop and strengthen knowledge and policy capacity in their areas of expertise;

- develop a better understanding of the Government of Canada’s formal and informal policy development process;
- take specific steps to ensure that diverse groups within the sector are given an opportunity to consider issues and provide input;
- represent the views of their constituents and articulate their position clearly on particular issues that they consider important;
- identify whose views are represented when intermediary bodies express opinions on behalf of parts of the sector regarding issues of major importance to its members, supporters and users;
- where appropriate and where possible, build consensus by improving co-ordination within the sector;
- perform an intermediary role on behalf of sector organizations by: using a range of methods to extend the dialogue’s reach; canvassing an organization’s members/users/ volunteers before presenting views on its behalf; and including a summary of the views of the groups consulted and the methods of consultation used;
- identify and maintain contact with policy-makers and actively seek opportunities to share policy ideas with them; and
- pursue opportunities to identify and raise emerging issues to the attention of the Government of Canada, including issues of local concern.

5. *Moving the Code Forward*

The Government of Canada and the voluntary sector are committed to broad outreach and communication of the Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue. The Code is intended to help representatives of both sectors improve their approach to dialogue at the various stages of the public policy process. The policies and practices in this Code are designed to help strengthen the policy dialogue between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector.

To achieve these results, both the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector must commit to using the Code on an ongoing basis. As the guidelines established in the Code are incorporated into daily and weekly practice, voluntary sector and federal government representatives will, over time:

- discuss the Code and learn from one another;
- work to adapt their policy practices and approaches; and
- propose reforms to make the Code more effective.

This Code describes an environment characterized by continuous learning and improvement in which both sectors work together to enhance their relationship with respect to policy dialogue.

Results will flow from the increased use of the array of good practices already in place, including those proposed in this Code, as well as from those that will evolve with time and experience. Understanding in both the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector of their mutual commitment to achieve progress together is key.

In *An Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector*, both sectors agreed on the need to report to Canadians on the status of their relationship and the results that have been achieved under the Accord. Assessing the Code's use and effectiveness as a tool in meeting the Accord's goals will require periodic review, discussion, analysis, evaluation and reporting. This may result in modifications to the Code and the establishment of new priorities.

Appendix 1

Description of the Voluntary Sector, Values, Principles and Commitments to Action

The Voluntary Sector

The *Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector* describes the voluntary sector as follows:

This sector consists of organizations that exist to serve a public benefit, are self-governing, do not distribute any profits to members, and depend to a meaningful degree on volunteers. Membership or involvement in these organizations is not compulsory, and they are independent of, and institutionally distinct from the formal structures of government and the private sector. Although many voluntary sector organizations rely on paid staff to carry out their work, all depend on volunteers, at least on their boards of directors.

The voluntary sector is large, consisting of an estimated 180,000 non-profit organizations (of which 80,000 are registered as charities) and hundreds of thousands more volunteer groups that are not incorporated. In 2000, 6.5 million people volunteered their time to a voluntary sector organization and the sector employed a further 1.3 million people. This diverse multitude of organizations ranges from small community-based groups to large, national umbrella organizations and includes such organizations as neighbourhood associations, service clubs, advocacy coalitions, food banks, shelters, transition houses, symphonies and local sports clubs.

The Accord contains a number of references relating to policy dialogue during the various stages of the public policy process:

Values

The Accord identifies six values that are most relevant to the relationship between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector:

Democracy – upholding the right to associate freely, to express views freely and to engage in advocacy.

Active Citizenship – welcoming the active involvement or engagement of individuals and communities in shaping society whether through political or voluntary activity or both.

Equality – respecting the rights of Canadians under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Human Rights Act, and the rights of individuals worldwide as defined by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Diversity – respecting the rich variety of cultures, languages, identities, interests, views, abilities, and communities in Canada.

Inclusion – welcoming the expression and representation of diversity and upholding the right of each to speak and be heard.

Social Justice – ensuring the full participation in the social, economic and political life of communities.

Principles

The Accord highlights the principles of independence, interdependence and dialogue, which are relevant to this Code:

Independence:

- *The Government of Canada is accountable to all Canadians for its actions and has a responsibility to identify issues of national concern and mobilize resources to address them, establish policies and make decisions in the best interest of all Canadians;*
- *Voluntary sector organizations are accountable to their supporters and to those they serve in providing services, organizing activities and giving collective voice at the local, national and international level;*
- *The independence of voluntary sector organizations includes their right within the law to challenge public policies, programs and legislation and to advocate for change; and*
- *Advocacy is inherent to debate and change in a democratic society and, subject to the above principles, it should not affect any funding relationship that might exist.*

Interdependence:

The voluntary sector and the Government of Canada recognize that:

- *The actions of one can directly or indirectly affect the other, since both often share the same objective of common good, operate in the same areas of Canadian life, and serve the same clients; and*
- *Each has complex and important relationships with others (business, labour, provincial, territorial and local governments, etc.) and the Accord is not meant to affect these other relationships.*

Dialogue:

The voluntary sector and the Government of Canada, recognizing that sharing of ideas, perspectives, and experiences contributes to better understanding, improved identification of priorities, and sound public policy, agree that dialogue should be open, respectful, informed, sustained, and welcome a range of viewpoints.

Commitments to Action

The Accord includes the following commitments:

Government of Canada Commitments:

- *Recognize and consider the implications of its legislation, regulations, policies and programs on voluntary sector organizations including the importance of funding policies and practices for the further development of the relationship and the strengthening of the voluntary sector's capacity; and*
- *Recognize its need to engage the voluntary sector in open, informed and sustained dialogue in order that the sector may contribute its experience, expertise, knowledge, and ideas in developing better public policies and in the design and delivery of programs.*

Voluntary Sector Commitments:

- *Continue to identify important or emerging issues and trends in communities, and act on them or bring them to the attention of the Government of Canada; and*
- *Serve as a means for the voices and views of all parts of the voluntary sector to be represented to and heard by the Government of Canada, ensuring that the full depth and diversity of the sector is reached and engaged.*

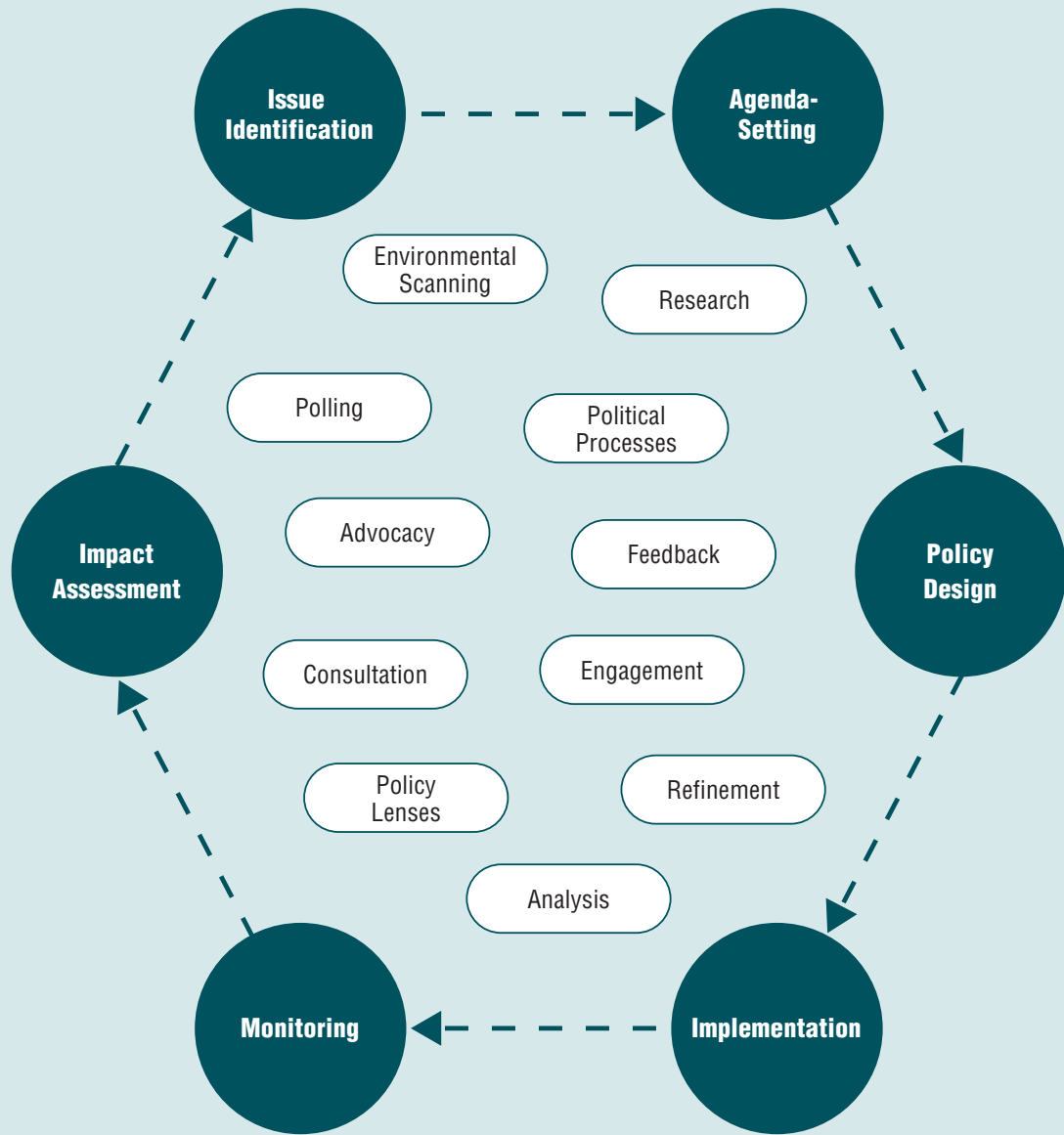
Commitments by Both Sectors:

The voluntary sector and the Government of Canada agree to develop in a timely fashion:

- *Codes or standards of good practice to help guide interactions between government departments and voluntary sector organizations on aspects of the relationship such as policy dialogue, funding, and other issues as identified.*

Appendix 2

Diagram of the Public Policy Process



Elements in the public policy process



Methods of involvement in the process (Note: While all methods of involvement may happen at any element in the public policy process, some methods are more prominent than others during certain elements in the process.)