

Lessons learned from dancing with the government
How can we be real partners and find a common pace?

Presentation by Jean-Marc Chouinard
Philanthropic Foundations Canada, 2015 Symposium

First, I would like to thank PFC for the invitation and for the opportunity to share some lessons learned and some thoughts of this particular experience. This opportunity is a gift: it gives us a good reason to organize our thoughts around this specific topic.

Just before starting, please understand the following story as a shared responsibility between the government of Quebec and our Foundation. Like the title evokes, it takes two to dance. Also, during the last 15 years, our Foundation went through its own clarification and development process. Therefore, if sometimes my remarks are interpreted as a critique of the way government works, it is not my intention.

That being said, I will, first, give you a bit of context and guidelines to understand the type of partnership we created. After, I will outline the key lessons learned, a few observations and my conclusion.

The Chagnon Foundation was founded in 2000 following the sale of the family telecommunications business, Videotron. The mission of the Foundation is to prevent poverty by contributing to the educational achievement (PPEA) of young people living in Quebec.

André Chagnon, and his late wife, Lucie, understood the importance of public policy to the extent that the vision of our organization was to influence governments to adopt policies, programs and measures that favour prevention of poverty.

This is why, over the past fifteen years, the Foundation has joined forces with the government in setting up three partnerships founded on 5-10 year agreements.

Each of the three agreements was intended to address a specific issue and all three are essentially patterned on the same model. Through these agreements, the Foundation has invested \$360 million and succeeded in mobilizing equivalent resources from its partner ministries.

In addition to the obvious money leverage for both partners, we believed the partnerships would open up opportunities, including:

- Increased capacity for impact (expertise, networks, resources)
- Development of expertise
- Promotion of innovative initiatives
- Establishment, modification or implementation of public policy at all levels (local, regional, provincial)

For the government, the partnerships represented a possibility for:

- Flexibility in implementing complementary actions
- Sharing new practices
- Developing evaluation

In the following brief remarks, I will focus on what our Foundation has learned about the influence of philanthropy on public policy, based on our partnership experience with the Quebec government over the last 15 years.

The first agreement was concluded with the Ministère de la Santé in 2002, and revolved around fostering healthy lifestyles for young people in the perspective of their educational achievement. At that time, the field of public health was starting a shift and looked into new ways to strengthen and increase the resources needed to address major health and social issues. In this climate, the winds were thus favourable for a new type of association.

Strongly encouraged by this first experience, and in an attempt to complement its poverty prevention initiatives with efforts to promote the educational achievement of young students, the Government and the Foundation agreed to sign two subsequent partnerships. The first dealt with early childhood development, and was concluded with the Ministère de la Famille. The second aimed to promote student success by lowering high school dropout rates, and was concluded with the Secrétariat à la jeunesse. The first two partnerships secured the financial portion from the government through a ten year legal agreement.

Only rarely do government commitments stretch over such long periods of time!

Before going any further, please allow me to take a few moments to describe the governance involved in these agreements.

Essentially, our partnership was designed as a collaborative relationship that would entail co-building and co-managing the newly created organization as a result of each agreement.

The partnerships' Board of Directors was symmetrical, with equal seats for each partner as well as seats reserved for representatives of the civil society—and each agreement had a common goal : to have a direct influence on public

policies. Over the years, we forged good ties with our partner, and our association achieved positive results in its targeted areas:

- 150 communities, in all regions of the province of Quebec received and still receive support
- Thousands of partners are involved
- Thousands of strategies and actions are implemented
- Hundreds of thousands of children and families are reached
- Mobilized and shared knowledge and tools for practitioners are developed
- Several public institutions (schools, city and towns, etc.), and also some business communities have adopted priorities, measures, policies favourable to PPEA

The duration of our agreements made it possible to introduce new ways of doing things, thanks to our “teamwork” approach. It also enabled us to document the progression of implemented practices and to share the resulting knowledge. But in spite of the positive results for both partners, over the years, certain points of tensions gradually began to arise in the background.

In 2013, following our own learnings drawn from our internal process of development, and from listening to the needs of our field partners, we undertook negotiations with our partner to explore the possibility of renewing our agreements, given that one of them was set to end soon. Our requirements were:

- A shared vision and a refocus of the partnership around PPEA
- The development of the Partnership in a way that would go further than a simple agreement between two organisations, but one that would involve all stakeholders who shared the same vision (community organizations, operating and funding bodies, government, foundations)
- An agreement driven by a response to the needs of the community partners that asked for an integrated approach

- An agreement driven by efficiency as well, although, not the driving force of the approach
- An integrated governmental leadership

It is through these negotiations with animated discussions on the guiding principles for our actions, and with very concrete examples of their implementation that we realized that there were major differences in culture between our two worlds.

Last February, we made a common decision not to renew the actual model of partnership we had agreed on a few years ago. We will pursue our collaboration with the government (in fact we have several other types of collaborations already) but will work to reinvent how to best conciliate the attributes of philanthropy and public action for social change.

My following comments will touch on issues relating to what could be called the “cultural differences” between philanthropy and government, grouped into five sections: clarity and consistency of purpose, structure, risk tolerance, time horizons and accountability.

1. Clarity and consistency of purpose

When any individual or organization chooses to partner, for whatever purpose, the key to success is a deep understanding of the concepts that will guide the partnership’s actions, and on how each partner defines these concepts.

To presume that your partner shares your vision of the guiding principles for your joint actions is a mistake. In the specific case of our partnership with the Quebec government, irrespective of the ministry involved, we have discovered through our common work that our partner had a different understanding of the four key

guiding principles for our actions: community mobilization, community support (meaning accompaniment), sustainability and evaluation.

We learned that it is not in the naming of the concepts that lies the discrepancy but rather in the concrete understanding of the implementation of these concepts. This became clear when we had to decide which specific strategy or action to support financially!

2. Structure (or silos)

As mentioned in the beginning, we have set up three different structures that we call “Funds,” each with its own orientations in line with a specific issue.

Given that we created three partnerships each with its’ own mandate and given that working in silos tends to be a hallmark of governmental culture, it is only natural that this organizational logic extended to our agreements.

These organizational characteristics significantly shaped our actions, among other things in terms of ties with the involved communities, which are weakened under such a fragmented and service driven approach.

Unlike philanthropic initiatives, which can diverge from the beaten path to support innovative ideas, the Funds’ operation as small public agencies precluded any departure from the mainstream.

At the end of the day, what has been the impact of this threefold action on a complex set of poverty prevention and educational achievement issues?

The fact is that looking at each issue through a different lens makes it difficult, or even impossible, to take effective action, answer adequately the needs of families and community organizations and to have a cross-sectional view of these problems.

3. Risk tolerance

The Foundations that set their sights and take action with a longer timeframe, think of their resources as both “patient and risk capital.” At their Board, members say, “If we don’t invest in this, who will?” conveying a sense of long-term commitment to taking a chance, learning from failure, and adapting accordingly. And the resulting timeline not only allows for, but encourages this continuous learning and progress towards a noble goal.

We at the Foundation—like others wishing to “change the world” for the better one small or medium step at a time—wish to learn from our successes and embrace the learning that comes from a more deep understanding on how and why something isn’t working as expected. The reason might be a poorly constructed grant or the failure to provide proper support in order to build leadership capacity for a project. And governments’ short-term view is driven by a deep sense of intolerance to risk. This difference in risk tolerance suggests that a full partnership with government for a society-changing initiative can be difficult.

Especially when it comes to supporting innovation... If the outcome of a project includes something like “creativity,” it is possible to succumb to the notion that this is a nice word but too risky to support. New approaches are, by nature, approaches with uncertain outcomes, and they should not be supported based on outcome objectives. Philanthropy can, for example, put time and energy into figuring out exactly how to research, operationalize, and measure “creativity” or innovation. There is so much to learn from these initiatives. But it is not easy for government to justify investing in a project that risks doing things wrong or even right, but with insufficient data in terms of accountability.

4. Time horizons

Time is key. Governments of all political stripes suffer from short-termism — the pressure to make it seem like difficult and apparently intractable goals, such as reducing or eliminating poverty, have made great strides several months before the next election.

In contrast, philanthropy takes the long view that its resources amount to “patient capital.” An example of this can be seen in social changes, which are by very definition long-term processes in which the forces of a multitude of actors intertwine in a complex dance.

What is the timeline for a project such as this? However long it takes. The conflict between serving the “wants” of an impatient electorate eager to see results for their tax dollars, and responding with a longer-term commitment to answer the “needs,” can greatly complicate relationships when Foundations seek to partner with those who toil in short-term cultures.

5. Accountability

The laws and programs developed by government are subject to a democratic adoption process that gives them a form of consensus in the public sphere. Socio-political studies have demonstrated that the population of Quebec felt deprived of this democratic process of public funds management when we announced our partnership with the government.

It is important to know that in Quebec, our Foundation’s establishment and our close ties to government have destabilized communities on two fronts. First, Quebec society, and particularly its Francophone population, is relatively unfamiliar with philanthropy, and relies on the state for the redistribution of wealth. The legitimacy of a private organization with considerable capital such as

ours has been challenged since our organization's inception. And second, the government's openness to working closely with private resources to address complex social issues such as combatting poverty has been openly condemned... especially when some of those groups are expecting money from the government.

This raises an important question: How can philanthropy gain the social acceptability that will allow it to become an actor capable of influencing public policy? Although this is a question that we continue to ponder, the lessons learned from our past experiences have confirmed to us that, in Quebec, social acceptability is hard to establish if our ties with the government are in the form of a joint venture, as in our past initiatives.

As the title of my speech indicates, the philanthropy-government partnership gives rise to a dance whose variable pace is sometimes more favourable to one partner in comparison to the other. Looking back at the cultural differences documented by our experience over the past 15 years, I ask myself: Is it possible to find the perfect pace for both partners?

For even if the pace is intended to be even, the forces of each partner are not. By way of natural attraction, the aim of that type of partnership is inevitably swayed in the direction of governmental structures. How, then, is it possible to bring the partner out of its set patterns and to show it other ways of seeing and doing things?

Even if our relationship over the past years has opened up a breach in traditional approaches, our experience has shown that it is difficult to bring about change and working in tight proximity does not necessarily guarantee this change.

Do these observations spell the end of our intentions to work with the government? Most certainly not!

However, our future collaborations will have different bases, and will involve other state institutions and other organizations, as opposed to agreements solely with the government.

To conclude,

The essence of philanthropic action is still rather unclear for many state officials and bureaucrats. Many different opinions and judgements exist and more important they still do not appreciate the scope and flexibility we have for innovation (time, risk and testing possibilities).

Most important, strategic philanthropy, informed by a risk-taking culture that wants to advance innovative ideas about a better society, is more critical than ever.

It is with stronger partnerships with diverse communities, private and public leaders, that we can forge pathways to this safer, healthier and more just and prosperous future for the many, not just the few.

In the final analysis, we continue to believe that the best ideas need to be turned into sustainable public policies. The quest for understanding how best to work with governments will be key. The learning in this regard, must continue.

Thank you for your attention.