Social Planning: Mobilizing Local Civil Society

by Susan McGrath, PhD

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXAMINATION of the concept and contemporary practice of social planning in Canada, a term that is rarely seen today in the literature or in government documents. Social planning was part of the post-war attempt to establish social order in the wake of an economic depression and a long war. It was meant to use rational processes to resolve what were perceived as social problems, and was located at two main sites.

One was the federal government, where it took the form of social policy planning that resulted in the development of a modest welfare state consistent with the prevailing liberal ideology. The other field of activity was the third sector, often referred to as the voluntary sector or, more recently, as "civil society."

Voluntary social planning organizations (SPOs) were formed at national and provincial levels, but most of them appeared locally, in urban centres. Their primary mandate was to solve local social problems through efficient social service planning and coordination. In what was believed to be an era of unending economic growth fueled by the dramatic expansion of technology, both fields of practice were anchored in the waters of economic efficiency, scientific rationality and professional expertise. This rational, comprehensive model of planning dominated the field in the '50s and '60s. But government has consistently placed economic development ahead of social development. Leonard Marsh's war-time proposals for social reconstruction were never fully implemented, and what was established is now being dismantled by neo-liberals. By the 1990s, modest and often inadequate social welfare programs were being cut and devalued as the federal government tried to shed its responsibility for social well-being. It is in this context that local SPOs have been renewing their practices, often in ways that provide insights into the state of Canadian civil society.

Local voluntary practices of social planning

Social planning agencies began to appear in most major Canadian cities during the '50s, '70s and '80s. A 1993 survey identified 113 SPOs, with a minimum of one located in each province and territory. The majority (51) were in Ontario, which also has a province-wide SPO, the Ontario Social Development Council. Many of these were strictly voluntary associations, and some of them may no longer exist. The survey also identified seventeen regional health and social service agencies in Quebec, all of which are part of an extensive system of community-based service organizations. With their legislated mandate and local administration, these agencies bridge the government/third-sector divide, and thus are not included in this examination. The Quebec organization that does fall within the third sector is the Conseil québécois de développement social, which was formed in 1994 when the Canadian Council on Social Development, a national social planning agency that advised the federal government, closed its Montreal office as part of its own rationalization process.

SPOs usually rely on a mix of funding from local United Ways, municipal governments and membership fees. Specific, time-limited research and planning projects may also be funded by various levels of government. SPOs have always been vulnerable to cuts whenever they advocate social policy positions that are not supported by their funders. The cutbacks in the social welfare system in the '90s have also taken their toll. The Canadian Council on Social Development, for example, no longer receives sustaining government funding and now relies wholly on research grants. Most local SPOs have experienced significant cuts in government and/or United Way support, causing many of them to close their doors. Others have undergone major restructuring, as was the case in Toronto in 1998, when the former Metro-wide council was amalgamated with five local municipal SPOs to create the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto. Faced with their own financial insecurity, growing social and economic inequality, and increasing racial and ethnic diversity (particularly in large urban centres), SPOs are renewing their practice to focus on the mobilization of their own communities.

A value-based practice

The traditional community social planning model, based on rational service planning and social scientific research, is no longer adequate. While most SPOs still have ties to the human service system, their commitment to improving the well-being of the members of their communities is defined more broadly and achieved through a wide range of activities. SPOs see themselves as sites for the creation of values and norms in their communities.1 The Social Planning Network of Ontario, for example, identifies four core values that support the practice of its members: community, voluntarism, diversity, and social justice.

SPOs view local, diverse communities as their primary constituencies. Volunteers from the community guide the agenda, which is intended to ensure equitable treatment and fair access to resources for everyone in the community. Such themes appear in the mission statements of SPOs across the country, sometimes articulated as commitments to social development and social change.

The range of activities carried out by social planning organizations is extensive, and can be organized into three categories: community organizing, knowledge construction, and communicative action.

Community organizing

Organizing a community to identify and respond to local concerns has been a long-standing activity of social planning organizations. The Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador, for instance, offers a varied list of local services it has helped to organize, including a Boys and Girls Club, the Personal Credit Counselling Service, Community Housing and Support Services, and an Independent Living Resource Centre. SPOs are no longer limited to social service planning and coordination. They see themselves as meeting places that provide opportunities for people in their communities to debate and address social issues. They are focal points for community mobilization. Low-income families, seniors, and ethno-specific communities are among the groups seeking access to the resources of local councils. Thus, the Toronto Social Planning Council views the advancement of local democracy as a major goal.

SPOs bring their expertise in organizing human service agencies to the formation of networks and partnerships that bridge service sectors. They form problem-solving partnerships around specific issues such as lack of affordable housing, child poverty and access to services. For this reason, many SPOs are part of Campaign 2000, a national coalition of organizations dedicated to eliminating child poverty in Canada.
The focus of this activity is what SPOs describe as "social learning," or what a recent study of SPOs describes as "social witnessing." This practice is aimed at increasing the understanding of Canadians with respect to issues of public concern. Social witnessing focuses attention on social issues that society often chooses to ignore. SPOs create and disseminate knowledge that tracks major social trends in order to encourage engaged and enlightened participation. Thus, part of the mandate of the Social Planning Network of Ontario is to promote awareness of our responsibilities as citizens of the global community. Social learning or witnessing is intended to increase social power.

The areas of research are broad. At a recent conference of members of the Social Planning Network of Ontario, the range of issues included homelessness, housing, poverty, settlement, youth shelter, hunger/food security, underemployment, and the mapping of social indicators. Several agencies have been collaborating with the Ontario Social Development Council on a project that involves the monitoring of specific social and economic indicators in order to evaluate and compare the quality of life in local communities over time. Likewise, the Edmonton Social Planning Council recently worked with Edmonton's Food Bank on a report called "Often Hungry Sometimes Homeless," which examines the increased reliance of Edmonton families on food banks and emergency shelters.

SPOs have a long history of policy analysis and advocacy regarding local, provincial and federal issues, particularly those related to income security. Briefs criticizing existing or proposed policies have been presented to municipal councils, standing and ad hoc committees of provincial and federal legislatures and the public. The Toronto Social Planning Council has been particularly active in advocating social assistance reform at the provincial level and a stronger social safety net supported by the federal government. As the impact of Canada's deteriorating social welfare system is felt more and more acutely in the streets of its cities, SPOs have been focusing their efforts on local issues.

Communicative action

A transformational approach to planning requires not just the creation of knowledge but action. "Communicative action," a theory developed by the philosopher Jurgen Habermas and applied to planning by John Forester, characterizes planning as an interactive, communicative activity using qualitative, interpretive forms of knowledge creation.

SPOs have to get their message out there. Public education takes place in a variety of forms and forums. Most SPOs have pamphlets, booklets and reports that are distributed to members, the media, and local agencies and libraries, often by means of Web pages. Public forums with guest speakers, as well as presentations to local schools and agencies, are part of their attempt to reach people in a more interactive manner. The quantity and quality of the coverage varies with the amount of competition for the public agenda on a given day.

The Internet is becoming an effective tool for communicating with constituencies locally and around the world. For example, the Edmonton Social Planning Council is using the Internet to receive direct input from its community. By visiting the Council's Web site, concerned citizens can participate in discussion groups on various issues. Thus, the site is part of the organization's effort to encourage real dialogue. Unlike the print media, which is owned by profit-making corporations who usually support the market values of the dominant economic system for addressing social needs, the Internet offers access to information that is more democratic and participatory, at least for those with access to computers.

Enabling civil society

There has been renewed interest in "civil society," which is to be distinguished from the other two "spheres" of society, the state and the economy. It is a term that is now heard frequently in the public sphere, if only the approaches to it vary depending on whether the individual or the "individual in association" is regarded as the central component. SPOs assume a collective approach that locates civil society not only in the private or intimate sphere of relationships (e.g., the family) but in public, associative, and collective spheres within voluntary associations and social movements.

The significance of civil society is best expressed by political theorist Axel Honneth, who sees it as a "domain in which individual and collective actors contest competing interpretations of their collective needs and normative orientations as well as the distribution of scarce social resources." Through political influence and public education organizations such as the Fraser Institute, the C.D. Howe Institute and the Business Council on National Issues, the corporate sector has had a strong presence in Canadian civil society, particularly in regard to social welfare issues.

It is therefore essential that citizens have the opportunity to participate more frequently and effectively than their occasional self-definition as the "base of society." Civil society offers a forum for discussing and deciding in an open and democratic manner.

Summary

This paper explores the contemporary practice of social planning in Canada. In the context of a diminishing social welfare state, the momentum for planning around social issues is generated by local voluntary associations. The evolution of the practices of social planning organizations is traced from their rational roots to the participatory, interpretative and critical approaches of today. These practices are organized under three functions: community organizing, knowledge creation, and communicative action. Such local capacities are identified as crucial to the practice of citizenship in a democratic civil society.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Ken Muller and Peter Ockler for feedback on an earlier version of this article, and to Brian Lynch for his skillful editing.

Endnotes


4 ibid, p.176

5 Muller et al., 1999, p. 109.


References

Dr. Susan McGrath is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at York University. Her doctoral thesis was a case study of the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto. She has worked extensively with social planning organizations in the Toronto area and is currently working on a project with the Social Planning Network of Ontario. Her email address is smcgrath@yorku.ca.