



Edmonton Chamber of
Voluntary Organizations

Reimagining Non-Profit Governance through a Social Justice Lens



“

I think that what excites me about this work is there are 600 million different ways an organization could structure their governance if they're given permission.

”

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About this Report

This report responds to the question: **how might we use a social justice lens to reimagine non-profit governance in Alberta?** It includes an overview of trends and historical injustices in non-profit governance and opportunities for transforming inequitable governance approaches. This report serves as both a foundational document for the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (ECVO) in charting a course for supporting Alberta non-profits in reimagining their governance approaches as well as a beginning guide for any non-profits interested in making their internal governance practices more equitable.

This report was generated through a review of academic and grey literature as well as two group conversations with ECVO staff. Themes from the literature review and ECVO conversations, as well as quotes from the conversations, are woven together in the following pages.

How might we use a social justice lens to reimagine non-profit governance in Alberta?

This report was influenced by conversations between three ECVO staff:

- Gemma Dunn, Executive Director
- David Feldman, Director of Learning and Development
- Lisa Tink, Director of Strategy and Innovation

Governance 101

What do we mean when we talk about governance? The literature review and discussions with ECVO staff made apparent that a diversity of understandings proliferate amongst those working in and writing about governance in the non-profit sector. A sample of definitions from the literature captures the different ways people attempt to distill the notion of governance in the non-profit sector, and to invite readers to reflect on what governance means to them and their organizations.

- "...the provision of guidance and direction to a non-profit organization, so that it fulfills its vision and reflects its core values while maintaining accountability and fulfilling its responsibilities to the community, its constituents and the government with which it functions."^{12(p186)}
- "Governance is about who has a voice in making decisions, how decisions are made, and who is ultimately accountable."^{23(p4)}
- "The role of governance in a non-profit organization is to provide stewardship, sensemaking and foresight that advance its purpose."^{30(p2)}
- "...the systems and processes concerned with ensuring the overall direction, control, and accountability of an organization."^{32(p18)}
- "...making collective decisions about important issues, including the purpose of collective action, strategies for achieving purpose, and oversight and accountability mechanisms."^{37(p249)}
- "...the set of conditions that should be fulfilled and practices that should be applied in order to enhance the achievement of a non-profit organization's mission and vision."^{46(p1426)}

Many of these definitions emphasize the role of governance in supporting an organization's purpose, mission, and/or values. This aligns with what several sources cite as the ultimate goal of governance: enabling meaningful community impact.^{12,30} When considering governance through a social justice lens, community impact being at the heart of governance work is critical.

Readers will also note that none of these definitions of governance mention anything about a board of directors. Governance is a set of functions, while a board is a structure.² While the two are often conflated, recent scholarship has focused on conceptualizing governance as a complex system within which a board is just one element. Within this expanded framework a board may indeed be a legal requirement but it is not necessarily the only or most important structure for governance level decision-making.

CONSIDER: How do these definitions reflect your organization's current governance practices and structures? What parts of these definitions don't fit for your organization and why?

CONSIDER: How do your organization's governance processes and practices center and focus on community impact? How could you increase your governance focus on community impact?

Governance is a set of functions while a board of directors is a structure.



“

We've constructed our minds to think that governance is about a board of directors, and we centre everything around this group of individuals being the governors of our organization. But when you think about some of the functions of governance, some of them are highly generative and strategic and some of them are highly administrative or operational or oversight. We don't necessarily think of governance as a complex system that connects organizations to community to clients to members. I'm interested in exploring how we have created a system where governance is about board members and not about governance.

”

ECVO conversations frequently circled back to the need to define governance, particularly what ECVO wants governance to mean for the non-profit sector, including the need to develop a shared language and understanding within ECVO and among the community of what governance is. This is vital work. The Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) describes defining governance as “an important starting place for governance design because it drives choices of structures and processes, as well as speaks to how authority and power are defined.”^{30(p2)} This perspective is reflected in the following questions adapted from ONN for guiding governance design; they demonstrate how an understanding of the purpose of governance forms a foundation for additional design considerations.²⁹

- What is the purpose of governance?
- What are the different components of governance (e.g., structures, processes, practices, culture) and how are they related?
- What is the broader ecosystem influencing governance? (See the later section on the governance ecosystem (p. 11) for a more detailed discussion of key influences shaping governance)
- What functions of governance must be fulfilled? (e.g., strategic planning, advocacy, evaluation, governance design, setting organizational purpose, defining organizational culture, managing resources, engagement)
- What are the roles and responsibilities of the people involved in governance? (i.e., Not all governance functions need to be fulfilled by a board. What should the board’s role be and what should be the role of other structures and people?)
- What kinds of decisions need to be made? Are there legal requirements about who makes them?
- How is decision-making power distributed within the organization?
- What are the actual legal requirements of a board of directors?



A Jumping-Off Point for ECVO

To date the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations' (ECVO's) support for capacity-building around governance in the non-profit sector has focused on two work streams:

1. Reimagining Governance

Supporting organizations in adapting their board practices and decision-making processes by looking beyond traditional board models. This work has focused on supporting smaller organizations, such as community leagues, sports groups, and faith-based organizations.

2. Governance in Parallel

Exploring how a diversity of decision-making frameworks can exist within the legal framework guiding non-profit boards and governance in Alberta. The 'governance in parallel' language was offered by an Indigenous Elder to describe walking in the same direction but taking a different path. While past work centered on Indigenous decision-making practices, ECVO staff noted that this work might be more appropriately called governance in parallels, in recognition that the multiple cultures represented in Canadian society should be reflected in approaches to non-profit governance. According to census data, Canada is home to over 250 different cultural and ethnic groups,³⁴ a number that balloons as we explore the diversity within groups. Among Indigenous peoples alone there are over 630 distinct First Nation communities, as well as Inuit and Métis peoples, with diverse cultural practices and knowledge systems.³⁵

This existing governance work has largely centered around what one ECVO staff member referred to as "board work". For example, one widely utilized governance training program in Alberta coached groups on the roles and responsibilities of boards. However, an unintended consequence of this work was that "it created a language that people were stuck in" and further entrenched the pervasive idea that board work and governance are synonymous.

ECVO's governance work has increasingly focused on perceived legal barriers faced by non-profit boards to dispel myths that can stifle innovation and experimentation in board practices. An organization's governance structure is indeed constrained by certain laws and regulations, such as those laid out in provincial legislation governing non-profit incorporation.³⁰ In Alberta, most¹ non-profits are incorporated under the Societies Act⁴⁰ which stipulates that organizations must have a board of directors who fulfill certain responsibilities and act in the best interests of the organization (fiduciary duty).¹⁷ However, organizations are generally afforded much more flexibility in their board structure and processes than they commonly believe:

[i] Note that other Acts non-profits may be registered under, such as the Cooperatives Act, Museums Act, or Companies Act, will have different legal requirements.

“A lot of the accepted frameworks of how non-profits and Societies work in Alberta, and a lot of what we [ECVO and other capacity builders] teach, is actually not the legal framework. It’s what we taught ourselves, or something experts chose, or something somebody identified as effective or best practice and others adapted and continued with. When we actually did a deep dive into the Societies Act we realized that really you can do almost anything within the Act. That Act at least cares more about accountability, like who can we blame for a decision or a consequence, but it doesn’t actually care what you’ve decided ... Nonprofit sector employees and volunteers have done more to establish rules and practices by telling others their practices and interpretations than the legislation has.”

For example, many experts recommend a 7-12 person board. But this ‘expert advice’ is often confused with legal imperative despite the fact that, as an ECVO staff member summarized, the Societies Act has “just 3 requirements from a board standpoint: who do we blame from an organizational standpoint (who’s your chair or president), who do we go to for records (who’s your secretary), and who do we go to when it comes to financials (who’s your treasurer).” Further, while the Societies Act requires a minimum of 5 people for incorporation as a Society,⁴⁰ once an organization is incorporated these functions could all legally be performed by a single person.

As another example, most Alberta non-profits are not governed by legislation prohibiting organizations from paying board members for their services. However, notions that board members should be volunteers who do not receive financial compensation have been widely accepted as legal fact. Viewed from a social justice lens, paying some board members, particularly those from groups experiencing marginalization, may be profoundly important for removing barriers to participation and even redistributing wealth in your community.

ECVO staff described the tension between doing the work of today while being open to imagining transformative possibilities for the future:

“I think that’s part of holding the tension of decolonization is we have to have that blue sky hypothetical. Like our sociological imaginations need to be firing if we are going to change anything, recognizing that that change isn’t going to happen tomorrow. But we need to be able to shift between working towards an ideal vision and coming back to what we can do today. I do not think Western thinkers, or those of trained to focus on actions, models, and putting containers around everything, do a good job of that.”

Remember: You also need to follow your bylaws, which likely includes mention of the minimum and maximum number of people on your board as well as the positions on the board and their related responsibilities. You likely will have to change your bylaws to enable rules and possibilities for more equitable governance within your organization.

When we are equipped with knowledge of the minimum legal requirements for their boards, we can imagine greater creative possibilities for governance.

While ECVO’s existing work in non-profit governance has largely been rooted in the concrete realities of today’s organizations, many of whom still understand boards as the sole or primary site of governance, this report represents an invitation to enter into the imaginative work.

Governance in Neoliberal Context

Organizations committed to social justice strive to mitigate structural inequities experienced by marginalized populations.⁴⁷ Yet non-profits have been subject to extensive critique for their widespread failure to live out a commitment to social justice in the ways their organizations are governed. Rather than serving as a rare site of resistance among private and public sectors that in many ways act to deepen inequities, the current “non-profit structure undermines the transformative potential of social justice work.”^{33(p98)} Indeed, the non-profit system in Canada was never built to address systemic issues or disrupt dominant power structures. It was built to lessen and mitigate the negative impacts of social issues among individuals while largely preserving the conditions that gave rise to those issues.²⁰ Today, this legacy is understood through the ideology of neoliberalism, the form of capitalism dominant in Canada since the 1970’s.

Neoliberalism emphasizes dismantling of state-provided social welfare programs, increased privatization of services, market deregulation, and the maximization of corporate profits.^{9,20,48} Prevalent business values rooted in neoliberalism, such as professionalization and efficiency, have become pervasive in the non-profit sector along with governance models rooted in neoliberal business approaches.^{9,25} This market-based philosophy has constrained a social justice approach to non-profit governance by inhibiting and even undermining democracy and participation.^{9,27} For example:

- Non-profit organizations guided by market values often focus on being perceived as competitive service providers. As a consequence, individuals’ participation is sought on issues of customer service provision (programs and services), rather than meaningful engagement in governance decision-making (community impact).⁹
- As non-profits structure themselves to resemble businesses and abandon advocacy functions, they are less likely to use innovative governance models that create opportunities for collective participation, and more likely to utilize exclusionary models rooted in business practices.²⁷
- Efforts to foster diversity and inclusion are framed not as matters of justice and equity, which they are, but now co-opted by neoliberal values are perceived as meaningful only insofar as they contribute to corporate outcomes like organizational efficiency.²⁷
- An emphasis on professionalization, such as prioritizing board members with formal education and professional designations (e.g., law, administration), which frequently aligns with class, race, and gender privilege, undermines self-determination by excluding those closest to the issues from decision-making power.^{20,21,27} Spade notes that “racism, educational privilege, and classism within non-profits mirrors colonialism in the way that the direction of the work and decisions about its implementation are made by elites rather than by the people directly affected by the issues at hand”^{33(p98)} Further, filling governance positions with people who benefit from the existing neoliberal structure means the work of non-profits is less likely to challenge the status quo and may actually perpetuate the same inequitable systems that non-profits claim to oppose.

Activists have referred to the relationships under neoliberalism between the government, wealthy elites, and non-profits as the non-profit industrial complex. In this relationship government uses non-profits to surveil, control, and disrupt social justice movements, while perpetuating exploitative and exclusionary practices that uphold inequitable power structures.²⁰ This understanding serves to orient us towards potential areas for action in redesigning non-profit governance.

A History of Governance Approaches

Revisiting the Board

For decades, boards have been seen as the primary (and often only) locus of governance for non-profit organizations. Rooted in neoliberal ideology and modelled after corporate boards, non-profit boards were originally established to promote fiscal accountability.^{12,29} Typical non-profit models entrench divides between community and organizational decision-makers by confining all governance decisions to an exclusive group of board members who typically do not reflect the demographics or lived experiences of the community.¹² Efforts to improve governance have often been focused myopically on board training or recruitment.

Past attempts to reform non-profit governance were rooted in a ‘best practices’ approach aimed at addressing particular problems with the board.^{12,29} For example, the Policy Governance Model (also called the Carver model after its creator Dr. John Carver)⁴ was developed to minimize board involvement in operations.^{3,29} This was an important innovation because many in the non-profit sector felt that operational functions fell outside the real work of governance and that governance should be about providing strategic leadership and ensuring the organization serves its community.²³ The Policy Governance Model continues to be one of the most influential models in the non-profit sector in Canada, even over 30 years after its introduction.²⁹ This may be a consequence of pervasive misconceptions about what is possible within the legal frameworks governing non-profits:

“Most don’t understand that the Carver model is a model. They think that’s the way they have to work. And that’s a problem. They follow a model thinking that’s the way you have to do things, and not thinking that that’s a model. So we’ve gotten stuck in it.”

Chait, Ryan, and Taylor’s 2005 book *Governance as Leadership*⁵ represents another influential contribution to non-profit governance. Also developed to address a pervasive challenge with non-profit boards, namely engaging board members effectively, the authors lay out three modes of governance:

1. The fiduciary mode, concerned with stewardship of tangible assets;
2. The strategic mode, concerned with developing organizational strategy; and
3. The generative mode, focused around serving as a source of leadership for the organization.

These board-focused governance approaches contain echoes of ideas that become crystallized in more contemporary thought. For example, in the

CONSIDER: What model(s) does your organization base its governance processes and systems on?

CONSIDER: What problems or concerns was your organization trying to address with the board processes and systems it implemented? What assumptions about governance underlie your organization’s processes and systems?

Policy Governance Model, Carver describes governances as a system, proposes a set of principles to guide governance, and asserts that board structure should be determined by board composition, history, and unique contextual factors.^{4,12} Both Carver and Chait et al. also advocate the importance of accountability to the communities that non-profits serve.^{4,5} The primary distinction between these earlier approaches and more recent thought on non-profit governance is that older models do not question whether the board should be accepted as the de facto site of governance. Working within the traditional corporate board model, these thinkers were concerned with resolving symptoms of board structure rather than reimagining the entire system of governance itself to address the root causes of the governance challenges facing non-profits.^{12,22}

Beyond the Board

Dissatisfied with the shortcomings of board-based governance models, newer approaches to non-profit governance imagine governance as a complex system of people, structures, and processes.^{22,29} Erin Kang, Project Lead for the Reimagining Governance initiative with The Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), describes this shift in non-profit governance as moving from questions of “how can we fix the board?” to “what is the most effective way for us to fulfill our governance?”^{22(para11)} Reframing governance in this way liberates organizations from trying to reconcile social justice values with an incompatible board structure that in many cases impedes participation and democracy.¹²

...in this new generation of governance, which has been most actively evolving in those segments of the non-profit sector where agencies strive to address these complex challenges, non-profit organization boards are merely one element and no longer the primary “home” of the governance processes by which we address many of our most critical community issues.

31(para1)

Governance approaches aligned with this new orientation tend to shirk the prescriptive language of the past and describe themselves as ‘approaches’ or ‘frameworks’ that must be tailored to each organization and its unique context.¹² Non-profits should be wary not to replicate the pitfalls of the past and assume that any one of these newer approaches is appropriate for all organizations.

“I’m a strong believer that there’s no such thing as one right model. Instead, it’s about finding frameworks and pathways to create an approach that works for you and it’s about creating opportunities to move forward. What I really don’t want to see is us suggesting a new model of governance because I think we’re just going to recreate the same problem we have now. Instead we need to understand different ways to govern and show that it’s about finding the right approach for your organization at the time.”

Two governance approaches that can serve as complementary frameworks for reimagining governance beyond the board are Community-Engagement Governance and ONN’s Reimagining Governance initiative.

Community-Engagement Governance

Community-Engagement Governance is a framework rooted in participatory principles where governance is distributed among all key participants in an organization's network.¹² Seven key principles form the foundation of this approach:

1. Community impact is at the heart of governance;
2. Governance is a function, not a structure;
3. Key stakeholders share power, governance decision-making, and leadership;
4. Non-profits should foster democracy and self-determination within their governance models, not just advocate for these values outside their organizations;
5. There is no one right model for governance – within or across organizations;
6. Governance functions should be distributed creatively among participants; and
7. Openness and transparency among participants is essential to shared governance.

Each organization must determine the governance structures and processes that will guide their work by:

- Understanding actual legal requirements;
- Defining their community and impact;
- Identifying community stakeholders;
- Deciding which stakeholders (e.g., community, staff, board, volunteers, funders, network partners) should be involved as mutual participants in which types of governance decisions; and
- Deciding how decisions will be made.

Several organizations have experimented with Community-Engagement Governance over the past decades, resulting in unique governance configurations.¹² Commonly utilized governance structures beyond the board include:

- Large-group decision-making structures such as community forums, town halls, and member assemblies. Some organizations hold these large assemblies one or two times a year to focus on strategic direction or advocacy planning.
- Decision-making teams such as task forces or working groups focused on specific governance functions, such as direction setting, planning, advocacy, or fiduciary care.

These structures are often comprised of many different stakeholder groups, such as community members, community leaders, the board, organizational staff, representatives from partner organizations, and funders.

ONN Reimagining Governance

Both Community-Engagement Governance and ONN's Reimagining Governance initiative intentionally withhold any guidance about what an organization's governance structures and processes should look like. But while Community-Engagement Governance elaborates a vitally needed participatory approach to non-profit governance, its creators

CONSIDER: Discuss these questions with your staff, volunteers, board, members, and clients. See what themes emerge and what they may suggest for new governance processes and systems for your organization.

dedicate little time to outlining what factors should influence the design of an organization's governance structures and processes.

ONN recently took up this task with its Reimagining Governance initiative, developing several resources and tools to help Canadian non-profits (re)conceptualize their governance systems from the ground up. Available resources represent the initial development of what ONN calls the "Transformative Design Process" – an open-ended process of developing innovative approaches to governance in the non-profit sector.²⁴ As work on this initiative continues, more information on the Transformative Design Process is expected.

ONN's approach to governance is rooted in understanding governance as part of a complex system of dynamic and interconnected components. This 'governance ecosystem' includes internal and external factors as well as organizational and system-level influences. The following summary, adapted from ONN,^{29(p11)} provides a high-level overview of these factors and influences for organizations to consider when designing their governance approaches:

External Factors

- **Capacity builders:** Capacity-building organizations like ECVO can support organizations in determining and shaping governance approaches.
- **Collaborative partners:** Creating collaborative governance structures introduces additional complexity and accountabilities.
- **Funders:** Grant and contract requirements influence fiduciary responsibilities and who should be involved in those decisions.

Internal Factors

- **Management team & board members:** The competencies, experiences, and diversity of people involved in the organization shape governance.
- **Beneficiaries:** The role community members could or should play in decision-making should influence your governance approach.

Organizational Influences

- **Culture:** The values, biases, and worldviews that shape an organization's understanding of who should have a voice in decision-making.
- **Organization's circumstances:** Factors such as the organization's resource capacity, stage of development, adaptability, and openness to innovation.

Shaping all of these factors are system-level influences including economics, demographics, politics, legal and regulatory requirements organizations must follow, and social norms and values.

Drawing on elements of the governance ecosystem, ONN also outlines four interconnected enabling factors for good governance:³⁰

1. Governance culture
2. Structures
3. People
4. Policies and processes

While ONN has developed several useful frameworks to guide organizations in reimagining their governance approaches beyond the board, this work has so far not had an explicit social justice orientation. The Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations' (ECVO's) unfolding exploration of non-profit governance through a social justice lens thus has a complementary role to play in building up the evolving Canadian capacity-building ecosystem.

Democratizing Non-Profit Governance

Board Diversity

Non-profit governance in Canada has a well-recognized diversity problem, and new data allows us to put numbers to what those in the sector have long understood.¹³ In 2020, Ryerson University's Diversity Institute published the findings of a study reviewing the representation of women and racialized people in board positions in eight Canadian cities.⁸ Across all eight cities, women comprised 43.1% of board positions in the voluntary sector and racialized people 11.6%. However, Alberta's voluntary sector lagged behind the national picture. The representation of women and racialized people on boards in Calgary (the only Alberta city investigated) was lower than the average across the other seven cities. Women make up about half the population of Calgary but held only 33.3% of board positions in the voluntary sector. Racialized people, who comprise about 33.7% of Calgary's population, held just 9.1% of voluntary sector board positions in the city.

Statistics Canada data released in 2021 provides an even broader picture of the diversity of individuals involved in non-profit governance by exploring other facets of identity.³⁶ While this data was collected through crowdsourcing (as opposed to probability-based sampling) and thus must be used carefully if making inferences about the overall makeup of non-profit boards, it does potentially point to some problematic trends. Although at least half of participants reported that their organizations served Indigenous people, LGBTQ2S+ individuals, newcomers, and/or racialized people, only 3% of survey participants identified as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit; 8% as LGBTQ2S+; 14% as immigrants to Canada; and 11% as a visible minority. Clearly, Canadian non-profit boards are largely comprised of people who do not reflect the communities they are intended to serve.

Existing research on diversity in non-profit governance focuses on the board as the site of governance. It would therefore be illuminating to explore diversity in organizations employing different governance structures and mechanisms, such as citizen councils, advisory committees, or community planning sessions.²³ If these different governance structures signal a commitment to addressing issues of diversity and representation, one would expect greater levels of diversity than seen on typical boards. This would shed further light on diversity in the voluntary sector and, along with serious considerations of the complexity of identity,¹⁴⁴ help inform design of new governance approaches.

[i] Note: intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is a framework to understand how people's identities combine to create different forms of discrimination and privilege. It is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. For a brief overview of intersectionality: [youtube.com/watch?v=O1islM0ytKE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1islM0ytKE)

Re-Centering Communities: Towards Inclusion, Equity, and Justice

Viewed through a social justice lens, diversity and inclusion in non-profit governance are about recognizing that the people an organization serves are most knowledgeable about the issues affecting them and should play a meaningful role in governance decision-making.¹¹ Yet “because most boards—the one mechanism that is intended to provide community accountability—are largely made up of members of the professional class, they tend to support a paternalistic decision-making process that enables community outsiders to make decisions on behalf of the communities they intend to serve.”^{41(p17)} Non-profits often run into several interrelated problems when trying to diversify their governance approaches, particularly that:

1. Traditional board-based governance does not provide the infrastructure for meaningful inclusion and community accountability; and
2. Non-profits attempt to diversify their governance structures without addressing underlying organizational culture, values, processes, etc. that hinder meaningful inclusion.

Non-profits should certainly work to diversify their boards by creating opportunities for participation for people from excluded groups. However, they must also recognize this is not enough if the goal is representativeness, or ensuring that governance participants represent the people a non-profit serves.⁴⁴ Non-profits that try to populate their limited number of board positions with the diversity of experiences needed to meaningfully represent their communities – because they have no other structures for engaging those community members – can veer into tokenism.^{14,24} Rather than trying to diversify the board as the sole area of governance, non-profits aiming to ensure their governance represents the diversity of their communities should consider how they can transform their organizational decision-making to build a broader system of governance.²⁴ Non-profits should explore how they can “create positive (as opposed to coercive) power structures that empower the broadest range of people to work powerfully on what matters to them.”^{42(para1)}

CONSIDER: What spoken or unspoken values, work processes, or expectations undermine meaningful inclusion in your organization? (e.g., are long hours encouraged or rewarded? Is one style of communication or interaction encouraged or rewarded over others? etc.)

“If we want to truly have stronger organizations and a stronger vision for the future and stronger strategic planning and insight...we need more frames of reference, we need more worldviews to actually create a closer representation of reality...if we want stronger organizations they need to have richer pictures of reality to be able to work forward, and that’s really the role of good governance.”

Non-profits must also contend with the neoliberal ideology in which they operate if they truly want to uphold inclusion, equity, and justice. The corporatization of non-profits has led to many organizations adopting diversity as a means of improving organizational effectiveness or enhancing legitimacy to their communities or funders.¹⁰ When diversity is not underpinned by a deep commitment to equity and justice, and a corresponding willingness to challenge the neoliberal ideologies^{25(p61)} driving non-profits’ work, increasing diversity within existing structures and processes will not contribute to meaningful change.¹³

“If we want boards to be diverse, it’s not just about recruiting diverse board members. If anything, that’s the last step. It’s about how we create environments on boards that are welcoming and actually inclusive themselves.”

These ideas align with calls for “a politics of re-centering rather than inclusion”^{20(p154)} in the non-profit sector. Inclusion often means adding diverse representation to governance structures built for white, middle-class people. Re-centering means shifting from asking ‘how can we include our communities in governance?’, to ‘what would our governance system look like if our communities were at its center?’²⁰

In a recent article, Liben Gebremikael, Executive Director of TAIBU Community Health Centre in Toronto, advises that decolonization should be the foundational work for any organization looking to broaden the diversity of their governance decision-making.¹³ Decolonization, “a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power,” involves “dismantling structures that perpetuate Eurocentric ways of being, doing and knowing.”^{13(para10)} In the words of an ECVO staff member, “there’s no such thing as a dysfunctional system, the question is who is the system functional for?”

Rather than aiming to give marginalized groups equitable opportunities within a system that actively contributes to their exclusion, decolonization is about challenging and dismantling damaging Eurocentric ideologies and institutions (e.g., white supremacy, patriarchy) that perpetuate forms of exclusion such as racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, and classism.^{18,33}

By valuing and integrating other norms, principles, processes, and ways of knowing, non-profits can imagine transformative possibilities for their organizations and communities.^{13,28}

Shifting Power in Decision-Making

Governance structures and processes emphasizing decentralized power, shared decision-making, and nonhierarchical leadership hold promise for promoting community self-determination, equity, and justice in non-profit governance.^{12,17} However, research as part of ONN’s Reimagining Governance initiative indicates that, in practice, efforts to engage a wider range of participants in governance decision-making remain largely limited to eliciting input on specific decisions (for example, strategic planning), rather than authentic power sharing and active decision-making with community members.¹⁷ This is not particularly surprising, given that many non-profits try to shift their decision-making processes without doing the deeper work of changing organizational culture and values.¹⁷ Non-profits may need to look to grassroots social justice movements for authentic examples of community-driven governance.¹¹

An important caveat when envisioning what decentralized or non-hierarchical governance might look like is that it is not structureless and it requires intentional design and consideration of accountability.¹⁷ Waretini cautions that “in the absence of formal hierarchies, informal and often invisible ones spring up in their place. Hierarchies of status, influence, and information that are incredibly difficult to challenge because they’re implicit.”^{42(para3)} The following framework, adapted from a report developed for ONN’s Reimagining Governance initiative,¹⁷ provides a starting point for organizations interested in designing systems for shared decision-making:

- What governance decisions must be made?
- Are there themes in these decisions?
- What parameters must be considered when making decisions? For example: decisions must be informed by stakeholders who will be most affected by them, decisions must align with organizational values, etc.
- Who is best suited to make which decisions?
- Who has the appropriate experiences?
- Who has the necessary competencies?
- How can decision-making power be shared authentically?
- How will decision-makers be held accountable for outcomes? For example, giving decision-making groups (such as a working group or task force formed to develop a strategic plan) real decision-making power and ensuring boundaries and expectations are clearly defined (this reinforces the need for clear 'parameters' for guiding decision-making). Decision-makers should feel ownership and authority for the decisions they make and have the understanding to assess what good decision-making looks like in the context of their organization.

While governance in Western history has typically been associated with rigid, top-down hierarchies centered on maintaining individual power, Indigenous traditions have tended to emphasize more flexible and adaptable leadership systems diffused throughout the community and rooted in the community's changing needs.⁴³ In this way, the growing attention to non-hierarchical governance approaches and shared decision-making is not something 'new', but should recognize and be strengthened by the development of these ideas in traditional Indigenous governance approaches.

For example, consensus decision-making has been commonly practiced by Indigenous communities as a collaborative process for making whole group decisions.¹⁹ Top-down decision-making structures where leaders make decisions without the full and meaningful participation of those affected, often result in decisions that do not reflect or address the realities and priorities of those the decision is intended for. Consensus decision-making aims to acknowledge all voices and provide those impacted by decisions with opportunities to participate in voicing and finding creative solutions to problems – solutions that people are committed to carrying out because they helped shaped them. In a consensus process all people may not completely agree with every decision, but all must give their consent to move forward (as opposed to a majority rule approach). Minority viewpoints, rather than being silenced, are crucial for exploring the nuances of an issue and refining a decision until the group can consent to it. For many Indigenous communities, consensus decision-making is grounded in the Seven Generations Principle: the understanding that an individual is responsible for and accountable to oneself and seven future generations. Community members thus approach decision-making not solely from their own self-interest but from the best interests of the entire community.

The principle of Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk in Mi'kmaw) describes the practice of “learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, learning to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.”^{26(para3)} Two-Eyed Seeing acknowledges the distinct and whole nature of both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, but encourages a “weaving back and forth’ between knowledges”^{26(para22)} and an openness to exploring other perspectives and ways of doing. As with the notion of governance in parallel(s) described earlier, the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing need not be limited to a mere ‘two eyes’:

...Mi'kmaw First Nations' understandings are but one view in a multitude of Aboriginal and Indigenous views...and similarly so are the various disciplines in the Western sciences. All of the world's cultures (which we take to include Western science) have understandings to contribute in addressing the local to global challenges faced in efforts to promote healthy communities. One might wish to talk about Four-Eyed Seeing, or Ten-Eyed Seeing, etc., as four perspectives or ten perspectives are brought into the collaboration.^{26(para19)}

While calls for the inclusion of governance practices from different ethnocultural perspectives have gained prominence in recent years, much less has been written about what this might look like in practice.



Governance in Practice: Case Studies in Participatory Governance

The previous sections outlined governance challenges and potential approaches for reimagining governance through a social justice lens. Putting these together, this section highlights how two innovative organizations, Creating the Future and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, have designed their governance approaches to uphold community participation and democracy. While using different governance structures and practices, both organizations are committed to engaging the communities affected by their work in governance decision-making. These examples are meant as illustrative case studies for inspiring conversations about what governance through a social justice lens might look like in practice. As mentioned earlier in this report, there is no ‘best’ approach for structuring governance, but a myriad of possibilities.

Creating the Future

Creating the Future is a global collective focused on enabling systems change.^{6,7} Over the past decade the group has been engaged in reimagining its governance structure and the role of its board. They landed on a purpose for their board that diverges dramatically from that of the traditional non-profit board.

The central feature of Creating the Future’s governance approach is that the “board doesn’t have to worry about representing the community, because our community members represent themselves.”^{14(para14)} Decisions are made by the people affected by those decisions, not by the board. Based on an interconnected ecosystem approach, nodes of people connected to various issues work on targeted projects and programs.⁷ All major discussions and decisions, including board meetings, are public and open to anyone affected by or interested in the issues at hand (with exceptions for situations where there are legal requirements for privacy or when public conversations would undermine organizational values). As a global organization, all meetings are streamed live online where people around the world can watch and participate, and Creating the Future uses social media to share context and agendas prior to meetings and to engage participants throughout.⁴⁵

The board (a legal requirement) is called an “Integrity Board” and responsible for ensuring that the organization’s actions and decisions align with its values.⁶ Subverting the traditional notion of the board in supporting the organization, the board’s role is to support the people doing the work.

The “board doesn’t have to worry about representing the community, because our community members represent themselves.”

This responds to the critique that board members are generally ill-equipped to make decisions about an organization's work because they are so far removed from the realities of the work and the lived experiences of those affected by it. The Integrity Board is Creating the Future's response to the following question:

Given that the board is a group of people who are not directly involved with the day-to-day of the operations and therefore without great understanding of the details nor the context of that operation, what mission support is actually needed that the board is in the best position to accomplish?^{6(para17)}

Rather than addressing the symptoms of poor governance design through common strategies such as board training, the Integrity Board intentionally addresses the root issue of a lack of alignment between governance purpose and process.²⁹

Sylvia Rivera Law Project

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) is a trans liberation organization based in New York City whose governance system draws on collective governance and antiracist approaches.²⁵ The organization's governance structure is outlined in detail in its Collective Member Handbook,³⁹ serving as a valuable resource for organizations interested in exploring how a social justice approach might inform governance in practice.

The SRLP's governance model is centered on the 'collective', a structure comprised of 6 consistent 'teams' and periodic ad-hoc 'committees.'] 'Teams' are centered around particular governance functions (e.g., advocating for policy reform) and populated by a minimum of 3 members. 'Committees' are created and dissolved flexibly to accomplish specific, time-limited goals.³⁹ In this model, the board is just one of six sites of governance (teams) among which governance functions and decision-making are distributed. Called the board team and comprised of up to 10 members, the board takes on the legal responsibilities of the organization and manages its financial resources. All collective members can attend board meetings, except in special circumstances where privacy is required.

Most day-to-day decisions are made by one or another of the teams and SRLP clearly outlines who is responsible for which decisions in a decision-making chart.³⁹ Participants meet at least once a month with their teams, as well as monthly as the entire collective, to coordinate work across the organization and communicate major decisions made by each team. Annual work plans provide an overarching framework for guiding decision-making and ensuring accountability to the organization's broader goals and mission, but teams have authority and power to do the work and make decisions within this framework. Decisions are made using a consensus process.²⁵

The SRLP is committed to an intersectional approach in ensuring its collective is “diverse in terms of age, race, economic status, class, ability, size, education, citizenship, national origin, ancestry, sexuality, employment status, religion, and gender.”^{39(p3)} Further, the collective aims to reflect the communities SRLP serves, and accordingly includes a majority of people of color; people of trans, intersex and gender non-conforming experience; and low-income people. SRLP is also guided by anti-oppressive beliefs and practices such as working to support low-income individuals and people with disabilities in leadership and decision-making roles.

Founders often end up possessing a great deal of power in an organization because of their history and role and relationships with funders, and their continued presence can often restrict the leadership of others. [SRLP’s founder] recognized that most poverty-law organizations he knew of had white male founders who retained power, prevented meaningful community governance, slowed progress of antiracist organizational development, and contributed to the cult of personality dynamic in social justice arenas in which individuals, rather than groups, are credited with the work of community organizations.^{25(p6)}

The organization’s founder, a white trans lawyer, began planning for his transition out of formal leadership and into an unpaid support role within the organization from the beginning.²⁵ This was an intentional effort to build the leadership of people of color within the organization:

Over 2 years, the organization worked towards this transition by supporting staff capacity-building and transferring leadership responsibilities to others. This is an example of how organizations can ‘live their values’ by modelling their own practices after the “transformative change that an organization imagines for the world,”^{33(p109)} understanding social justice as a process rather than a product.³⁹ All organizations striving to reimagine governance through a social justice lens should consider how they can “create structures that model [their] vision of a more just society.”^{39(p1)}

CONSIDER: What is your organization’s vision of a more just society? What would you like to see? (e.g., more equitable access to services, different distribution of financial and other resources, increased value and respect show for vulnerable people, etc.)

How could you role model this vision for social justice within your organization’s governance structures and processes?

A Systems Perspective

Hildy Gottlieb, co-founder of Creating the Future, asks us to consider what might be possible if socially minded non-profits modelled themselves more like movements than organizations.¹⁵ Whereas organizational governance is premised on regulatory compliance, oversight, and risk management, governance in movements, she argues, is about values and making decisions in alignment with those values. This re-framing speaks to an idea that arose during the conversations among ECVO staff: how can Alberta's non-profit sector come together to articulate shared values for governance in the sector? And when inspired by the concept of movement-building, how can non-profits move beyond an insular organizational focus to a holistic understanding of the sector as an interconnected system driven by shared values?

Tools such as the Four Pillars of Social Justice Infrastructure, developed by the Miami Workers Centre, can help inform these conversations by providing a framework for envisioning how multiple organizations fit together to build towards social justice movements.³³ Structured around the pillars of policy, consciousness, service, and power, the model “is aimed at helping social justice movements understand how these very different kinds of work—which often are located in disparate organizations that do not collaborate extensively and that define themselves as single strategy—are in fact intertwined, complementary, and essential.”^{25(p61)} The Four Pillars can help organizations understand their roles in and contributions to the overarching work of the non-profit sector, as well as identify opportunities for inter-organizational collaboration..

The Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (ECVO) is already engaged in conversations around shared values for the non-profit sector at multiple tables, and they articulated a vision for greater collaboration and systems-thinking in the sector in a recent report centered on transformation in Edmonton's non-profit community.⁴¹ Looking to the future, greater collaboration between organizations will introduce new complexities and challenges for non-profit governance, but also presents an opportunity to explore how shared values can spur social transformation. Approaches for inter-organizational partnership such as Collective Impact and the Constellation model³⁸ may serve as useful guides for experimentation with inter-organizational governance.

Whereas organizational governance is premised on regulatory compliance, oversight, and risk management, governance in movements is about values and making decisions in alignment with those values.

CONSIDER: What other organizations have a similar or complementary vision for justice as your organization? How could you work together more (or differently) to support and role model your vision for justice?

Conclusion

Non-profit governance discussions have undergone a transformation over the past decade, shifting from a focus on boards to a focus on governance as a complex system of people, structures, and processes embedded in a particular organizational culture and broader social ecosystem. Similarly, discussions about equity, inclusion, and social justice have transformed. These discussions have shifted from a focus on diversity to a focus on equity and inclusion at systemic and institutional levels considering historical systems and contexts including colonialism and capitalism.

Everyone in the non-profit sector is tired. Being on the front-line supporting communities and citizens through COVID-19, adjusting programs and services to constantly changing public health restrictions, all while dealing as individuals with living in a pandemic as everyone has had to do, over the past 20+ months has been exhausting. That exhaustion, stress, and uncertainty should further encourage and motivate us to prioritize the work transforming non-profit governance with a social justice lens. Because that transformation is critical to enhancing non-profit organizations, improving outcomes for communities, and ensuring everyone equitably recovers from this pandemic.

As the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (ECVO) explores its role in supporting non-profits across Alberta in building their capacity for governance through a social justice lens, next steps for ECVO may include:

- Defining what governance is to create a common language and understanding for the sector.
- Piloting innovative governance case studies with organizations ready and willing to experiment with new ways of practicing governance (identifying ‘champions’ for this work). Then documenting and sharing those stories – both the successes and inevitable challenges – as a way to create pathways from research through to action.
 - » The Ontario Nonprofit Network is engaged in similar work, collaborating with organizations to explore a “Transformative Design Process” for developing governance approaches.²⁴ ECVOs’ focus on social justice, however, is a unique contribution to the Canadian non-profit capacity-building landscape.
- Working with ECVO board, staff, members, and clients to determine how ECVO can adjust its governance processes and systems using a social justice lens. Partnering with different ethnocultural communities to explore possibilities for governance practices (e.g., decision- making approaches) beyond the Eurocentric approaches dominant in the sector.
- Engaging in sector-wide conversations about the values that should underpin non-profit governance to encourage a shift from internal, organizational thinking to a sense of collective movement-building.
- Working with the Government of Alberta to identify the systemic racism inherent in provincial non-profit legislation and how to rewrite the legislation to be more equitable and just.

ECVO is looking forward to undertaking this individual, organizational, and sector-level work with the rest of the sector and collectively creating a more just province for everyone who lives here.

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