

# **The Rural Charitable Sector Research Initiative Phase II**

## **The Capacity Challenges of Nonprofit & Voluntary Organizations in Rural Ontario**

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**Working in Partnership**



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# Executive Summary

Nonprofit and voluntary organizations are an important element of rural communities, often addressing the needs and interests of citizens that the public and private sectors do not. The capacity of these organizations to achieve their missions thus has a direct bearing on the quality of life of rural residents. To improve understanding of the capacity challenges of rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations, the Foundation for Rural Living engaged Imagine Canada to conduct in-depth interviews with fifteen key informants. Ten of the interviewees were leaders of rural nonprofit organizations and five were leaders of key sector organizations in urban centres that serve or work with rural nonprofit organizations. This report presents the results of these interviews, which were conducted between February and April 2005.

The results of the interviews suggest that nonprofit and voluntary organizations in rural Ontario face a variety of challenges as they seek to fulfill their missions and achieve their objectives. Many of these challenges are similar to those faced by urban organizations, for example: organizations are too dependent on short-term project funding, leading to instability and an inability to plan; their funding has not kept pace with inflation or the demand for their services, leading them to cut services and/or spend a great deal of time pursuing alternative sources of funding; they have difficulty accessing corporate funding; grant applications are overly complex and time consuming to complete; they have difficulty recruiting and retaining staff because they are unable to pay competitive salaries; and they have trouble recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Other problems facing rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations are unique. The most significant unique challenges appear to be: a small and shrinking pool of potential board members, staff members, volunteers, and donors due to migration from rural to urban areas; the high cost of serving clients who are spread out over great distances; and lower economies of scale. These challenges mean that rural organizations have both higher operating costs than urban organizations and fewer human and financial resources to draw on.

Rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations may also have more difficulty than urban organizations meeting many of their shared challenges. Interviewees offered several reasons for this, including: rural organizations have less access to certain types of funding (e.g., corporate sponsorships, individual donations); the networks that they can build are smaller and more costly to maintain due to greater distances between organizations; they have less access to technology and other resources; and they can devote fewer dollars to education and training because of the cost of having volunteers and employees travel to and from training locations.

As part of the interview process, interviewees were asked what could be done to build the capacity of rural nonprofit organizations and raise awareness about issues facing rural communities. They had four main recommendations.

1. *Training.* Rural organizations need better access to reasonably priced training and education; ideally, this training should take place in rural communities.
2. *Communication.* Rural organizations need to bring their issues to the attention of the public, the media, corporations, and government.

3. *Technology.* Technology is crucial to rural organizations because it allows them to communicate more easily and cost effectively with their staff, volunteers, and other organizations.
4. *Collaboration.* Rural organizations need to work together to share resources, raise money, develop solutions, promote rural issues, and raise awareness.

This research represents Phase II of the Rural Charitable Sector Research Initiative (RCSRI). Launched in 2003, the RCSRI is a multi-phase project aimed at developing a portrait of the nonprofit and voluntary sector in rural Ontario. Phase I of the RCSRI included an analysis of registered charities and individual giving and volunteering in rural Ontario. The results of Phase I and II combined provide a clear picture of the status of rural Ontario's nonprofit and voluntary sector, its strengths, and its challenges. The next step is to bring representatives of rural organizations together – with each other and with representatives of government and business – so that we can begin to work together towards solutions.

# Introduction

Nonprofit and voluntary organizations in rural Ontario face a number of challenges as they work to fulfill their missions and achieve their objectives. Many of these challenges are similar to those faced by urban organizations, but others are unique. Some of the unique challenges of rural nonprofit organizations include: a small and shrinking pool of potential board members, staff members, volunteers, and donors due to migration from rural to urban areas; the high cost of serving clients who are spread out over great distances; and lower economies of scale.

The findings presented in this report are the result of in-depth interviews with fifteen key informants – ten leaders of rural nonprofit organizations and five leaders of key sector organizations in urban centres that serve or work with rural nonprofit organizations. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights into the capacity challenges of rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations.

In conducting these interviews, we were guided by the conceptual model of organizational capacity presented in *The Capacity to Serve: A Qualitative Study of the Challenges Facing Canada's Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations* (Hall, Andrukow, Barr, Brock, de Wit, Embuldeniya, et al., 2003). This model distinguishes among three types of organizational capacity.

1. *Financial capacity*: the ability to develop and deploy the revenues and assets of the organization;
2. *Human resources capacity*: the ability to deploy paid staff and volunteers within the organization, and the competencies, knowledge, attitudes, motivations, and behaviours of staff and volunteers; and
3. *Structural capacity*: the ability to develop and use relationships and networks with various stakeholders; infrastructure and processes such as equipment, facilities, and management systems; and programs and strategic plans (Hall et al., 2003: 5).

The findings from 15 interviews cannot, of course, be generalized to all nonprofit organizations in rural Ontario. We hope, however, that the information presented in this report will help those with an interest in rural organizations (e.g., board members, staff members, volunteers, donors, foundations, corporations, and governments) to develop a better understanding of the challenges they are facing. This information can be used both to draw attention to the challenges of rural organizations and to develop evidence-based policies to help strengthen them.

This research constitutes Phase II of the Rural Charitable Sector Research Initiative (RCSRI). Launched in 2003, the RCSRI is a multi-phase project aimed at creating a portrait of the nonprofit and voluntary sector in rural Ontario. The first phase of the project included a review of existing literature on the rural nonprofit and voluntary sector; an analysis of individual giving and volunteering in rural Ontario based on the results of the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP); and an analysis of registered charities in rural Ontario based on 1999 Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) data. The results of Phase I were published in *A*

*Portrait of the Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector in Rural Ontario* (Barr, McKeown, Davidman, McIver, & Lasby, 2004).

This report begins with a brief profile of rural Ontario and its nonprofit and voluntary sector and a summary of the capacity challenges faced by nonprofit and voluntary organizations across Canada. This information is intended to provide readers with a context for understanding the results of the interviews. In the following section, we explain the details of the research process. Finally, we report on what we learned about the capacity challenges of rural nonprofit organizations and how organizations are meeting, or could try to meet, these challenges.

## **Rural Ontario and its nonprofit and voluntary sector**

Barr et al. (2004) report that, according to census data, 1.48 million people lived in rural and small-town Ontario in 2001. This represents a decline of almost 7% from 1991. National data indicate that rural communities have a slightly higher proportion of people over the age of 65 and under the age of 15 than urban communities. Canadians living in rural areas tend to have lower incomes, higher rates of unemployment, lower levels of education, and lower life expectancy than those living in urban centres. There is some evidence that the gap between urban and rural areas may be smaller in Ontario than in other regions of the country, but complete data are not available.

The results of the 2000 NSGVP show that rural Ontarians are more likely to donate to nonprofit and voluntary organizations (85% donated) than urban Ontarians (76% donated). Rural residents, however, donate less on average (\$280 per year, compared to \$322 per year for urban residents). Rural donors are more likely than urban donors to give in response to a door-to-door solicitation and in memoriam. This behaviour suggests that rural donors are less strategic in their giving, but it also suggests that rural nonprofit organizations benefit from the fact that people living in rural areas are more likely to know and trust one another.

Rural Ontarians are more likely to volunteer for nonprofit and voluntary organizations than are urban Ontarians (31% of rural residents volunteered, compared to 24% of urban residents). Rural volunteers, however, contribute fewer hours on average (157 per year, compared to 168 for urban volunteers). Volunteer hours are more evenly distributed among volunteers in rural areas than in urban areas, which suggests that rural nonprofit organizations are *not* any more reliant on a small core of volunteers. Compared to urban Ontarians, rural Ontarians are more likely to say that health problems prevent them from volunteering more.

An analysis of 1999 CRA data reveals that charities in rural areas account for approximately 20% of all charities in Ontario, but only 4% of all charity revenue. Charities in rural areas are also smaller, on average, than urban charities. Almost all rural charities (97%) reported revenues under \$1 million in 1999, compared to just 24% of urban charities. Not surprisingly, rural charities also report fewer paid staff than urban charities (22 vs. 44, on average). Compared to charities in urban centres, charities in rural areas receive proportionately more revenue from received gifts and less from government sources.

Both the smaller size of rural charities and their lower level of government funding are at least partially explained by differences in program emphasis. Approximately 60% of charities in rural areas are classified as “religious” by the CRA compared to just 40% of charities in urban centres. In comparison, only 22% of charities in rural areas are classified as “health, education, and social services,” compared to 39% of urban charities. Religious organizations tend to be smaller than health, education, and social services organizations, in terms of both revenues and paid staff (Hall et al., 2004). If religious charities are excluded from the analysis, rural charities receive proportionately *more* revenue from governments than urban charities.

## **Capacity challenges of nonprofit and voluntary organizations**

The results of the qualitative phase of the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations (NSNVO) indicate that these organizations face significant challenges that affect their ability to fulfill their missions (see Hall et al., 2003). Financial issues appear to pose the greatest challenge. Government cutbacks and downloading have had a major impact on many organizations, as has tendency for funders to support short-term projects rather than long-term activities and core costs. Other financial problems include increasing competition among organizations for diminished funding, onerous financial accountability requirements, and difficulty obtaining corporate support. Many organizations also find themselves tailoring their programs to meet the requirements of funders, which puts them at risk of “mission drift.”

Although most nonprofit and voluntary organizations identify human capital as their greatest strength, they also face significant human resources challenges. In recent years, there has been a decline in the number of volunteers. Many organizations are finding it particularly difficult to recruit and retain volunteers who are willing to make a long-term commitment and taken on leadership or administrative roles. The biggest problems with regard to paid staff are that the funding environment makes it difficult for organizations to hire enough staff, to hire staff with skills they need, and to pay staff well enough that they stay with the organization for more than a year or two.

Nonprofit and voluntary organizations face a variety of structural capacity issues. Engaging in strategic planning and development is difficult for many organizations because of the uncertainty of their funding, frequent changes in funding priorities, and constraints on the use of funds. Participating in policy development is also a challenge because of a lack of time and other resources. Many organizations regard policy development as a luxury that they cannot afford. Most structural capacity issues are ultimately related to dependence on short-term project funding that does not support organizational infrastructure. This lack of support can also affect the ability of organizations to collaborate and access technology.

The quantitative phase of the NSNVO provides additional evidence regarding the capacity challenges of Canada’s nonprofit and voluntary organizations (see Hall et al., 2004). Conducted in 2003, this national survey of 13,000 charities and incorporated nonprofit organizations found that the majority of organizations (56% to 58%) report difficulties recruiting the types of volunteers they need, obtaining board members, and planning for the future. Close to half (48% to 49%) report difficulties retaining volunteers; obtaining funding from other organizations such as government, foundations, or corporations; and obtaining funding from individual donors.

Approximately 40% of survey respondents also report the following problems: competition with other organizations for funding (43%), increasing demands for services or products (43%), difficulty earning revenues (42%), difficulty adapting to change (41%), lack of internal capacity (e.g., administrative systems and technology, 39%), difficulty participating in development of public policy (39%), and difficulty providing training for volunteers (38%). In comparison, less than 30% of organizations report difficulties retaining paid staff, obtaining the type of paid staff they need, providing staff training and development, and collaborating with other organizations.

Organizations that received external funding (from governments, foundations, corporations) and had been active for at least three years (48% of the sample) were asked about this type of funding. Between 61% and 65% of these organizations report that reductions in government funding, the unwillingness of funders to fund core operations, and an over-reliance on project funding are problems for them. Forty-seven percent report that the need to modify programs to receive funding creates problems, and 43% report problems with the reporting requirements of funders.

# The Research Strategy

To improve understanding of the capacity challenges of nonprofit and voluntary organizations in rural Ontario, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with ten leaders (e.g., executive directors, senior volunteers) of rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations and five leaders of key sector organizations (e.g., United Way, Community Foundations of Canada) in urban centres that serve or work with rural nonprofit organizations. Interviewees represented a variety of organizations including volunteer centres, foundations, social services providers, and agricultural societies.

The interviewees were selected randomly from a list of 36 people provided by the Foundation for Rural Living.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted between February 1, 2005 and April 16, 2005; each lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondents and transcribed for analysis. Interviewees were assured that published quotations would not be linked to them or their organization.

The interview questions were informed by the results of the first phase of the Rural Charitable Sector Research Initiative and by the conceptual model developed by Hall et al. (2003). Two sets of questions were used. The questions for the leaders of nonprofit and voluntary organizations (see Appendix A) focused on their organization's capacity challenges. The questions for the leaders of key sector organizations (see Appendix B) focused on issues facing rural nonprofit organizations in general.

Both sets of questions were divided into four groups: the first group of questions focused on the challenges of rural communities and the effects that these challenges have on nonprofit and voluntary organizations; the second group delved into the financial capacities and challenges of rural organizations; the third focused on human resources issues; and the last focused on structural capacities such as relationships and networks, strategic planning, use of technology, and influence on government policy.

Throughout this report we use the term “nonprofit and voluntary organizations” to describe the organizations on which we are focusing. Nonprofit and voluntary organizations undertake activities in a wide variety of areas, including health, social services, arts and culture, sports and recreation, education and research, environment, and housing. Organizations are considered to be part of the nonprofit and voluntary sector if they have a degree of institutional structure; are institutionally separate from government; do not distribute profits to owners, directors, or shareholders; are self-governing; and benefit to some degree from voluntary contributions of time or money (Salamon and Anheier, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> The list of nonprofit organization leaders was compiled from a variety of databases to provide good representation of different types of organizations and all regions of the province. Key sector leaders were selected based on their perceived understanding of rural organizations and issues.

# Findings

The results of our interviews indicate that rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations face several unique challenges, including:

1. a small and shrinking pool of potential board members, staff members, volunteers, and donors due to migration from rural to urban areas;
2. the high cost of serving clients who are spread out over great distances; and
3. lower economies of scale.

These challenges mean that rural organizations have both higher operating costs than urban organizations, and fewer human and financial resources to draw on. Interviewees recognized that urban and rural organizations face many of the same challenges. Their perception, however, is that rural organizations have a harder time overcoming these challenges because:

1. they have less access to certain types of funding (e.g., corporate sponsorships, individual donations);
2. the networks that they can build are smaller and more costly to maintain due to greater distances between organizations;
3. they have less access to technology and other resources; and
4. they can devote fewer dollars to education and training because of the cost of having volunteers and employees travel to and from training locations.

In this section, we summarize the key findings from the interviews relating to financial capacity, human resources capacity, and structural capacity. Given the qualitative nature of this research, we have chosen not to indicate the precise number of interviewees who expressed certain opinions. Where possible, however, we have tried to indicate in a general way the extent and magnitude of certain problems and whether they vary by organization size, focus, location, etc.

## Financial capacity

The organizations that participated in this research receive revenue from various sources, including government, corporate and individual donations, and membership or association fees. Most organizations are funded through more than one method.

The largest source of revenue for many rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations is government. Government revenue can come in the form of payments to organizations to deliver services or grants to undertake specific projects. All levels of government provide funding to nonprofit and voluntary organizations, although the results of the NSNVO indicate that, in the sector as a whole, provincial governments are by far the largest funder.

*We're funded primarily by provincial ministries. Our largest funder is the Ministry of Community and Social Services. The second largest is the Ministry of Housing. We also have a small amount of money from the Ministry of Health, and*

*then because of budget shortfalls, we are compelled to fundraise in excess of \$100,000 in a rural community.*

Many interviewees told us that their biggest financial challenge is a lack of stable funding for core operations. Most of their funding is for specific programs, with very little available to cover the day-to-day expenses that any organization encounters (e.g., rent, utilities, communications, accounting, technology, travel).

*[Our biggest challenge is that] we don't have core funding. I think there is a real place for Volunteer Centres to have a model that's like in Quebec, where they have core funding for their Volunteer Centres. We don't have a source of income that we can count on annually. It is the constant battle to stay in existence.*

Although many interviewees told us that they preferred government funding over other sources because it was comparatively stable, they still expressed concern about the work needed to have government contracts renewed each year. They also reported that government funding had not kept pace with either inflation or the demand for services. According to the people we spoke to, both costs and the number of people seeking services have increased. The payments they receive from government, however, have remained essentially the same. This situation has forced many rural organizations to seek other sources of funding or cut services. Some organizations have had to do both.

*Our dependence on government funding has eroded our capacity because government funding has eroded in absolute amounts in some programs and in relative amounts against inflation. Because basically, once you get a grant, you have program. And say that it hypothetically receives \$100,000; the amount never increases. If government wants to give you additional money, it's for new programs so that they can get political recognition. Escalating costs – for salary, health costs, rent – are causing the layoff of staff and decline of services.*

These problems are not necessarily unique to rural organizations. However, rural organizations may have more difficulty coping with them because they have fewer alternative sources of funding, higher costs, fewer employees, and a smaller population base to draw on for assistance. Corporate funding, for example, is perceived to be less available to rural organizations than it is to urban organizations. And many rural organizations lack both the money and personnel to search for suitable grants, approach foundations, or engage in additional fundraising. The root of at least some of these problems is migration out of rural areas, which has left many rural organizations with a smaller population base to draw on for all types of assistance (e.g., board members, volunteers, staff, donations).

*We do not have the potential to tap corporate sponsors that those in urban centres would have, which is another problem that's particularly related to rural.*

*We don't have the human resources to go after funds. I think it's appropriate that we do it, but we don't have that infrastructure. Citizens and local elected officials – like the municipal or county elected officials – don't understand health. They*

*understand roads, sewers, farms, all kinds of stuff like that, but not health very well. They're going to have to in the future and support it.*

## **Grants**

Grants present specific challenges to rural nonprofit organizations. One of the greatest challenges relating to grants is the lack of resources available in small communities to help organizations prepare strong grant applications. Funders and others often provide training or workshops to assist grant applicants, but the training location is usually in an urban area and many rural organizations cannot afford to send a staff member or volunteer to attend these sessions.

*I don't think that there's the same amount of accessibility in [rural areas]. We have an HRDC office here, but if you drive an hour and a half into some of the other areas where nonprofits are operating I don't think that they will have the same capacity, because they don't build the contacts, they don't have the same accessibility to the knowledge, they don't have the same accessibility to the mentorship that these grantors can give you.*

The people we spoke to believe that the accessibility of grants varies greatly depending on the community in which an organization is located. Often, nonprofit organizations in small and/or remote rural communities must compete for the same grants as organizations in large urban centres, which they find quite challenging.

*Sometimes it's hard to convince people to take us as seriously. I think there's a little bit of a perception that rural means lack of expertise, lack of modern thinking. I know even when we're dealing with people from Belleville or Kingston sometimes there is a bit of an attitude of condescension there that maybe rural organizations aren't as up to date. In some cases, as much as I hate to say it, in some of the smaller areas it might be true. We've even dealt with that. But, at the same time, we need to have the same access. We need to be taken seriously.*

Another challenge mentioned by several organization representatives is the amount of time it takes to prepare a grant application. Each funder expects their grant application to be presented in a different way. The lack of consistency in the criteria or the preparation of grant applications means that organizations need to invest a lot of resources into preparing applications rather than providing services. Although this problem is not unique to rural organizations, it may be a greater challenge for these organizations because they tend to have fewer staff.

## **Fundraising**

Most rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations rely on fundraising to some degree. Smaller organizations and those in smaller communities tend to focus on events such as bingos, lotteries, cookbook and bake sales, auctions, festivals, theatre productions, walks, and golf tournaments. Larger organizations and those in larger communities are more likely to approach corporations. For many organizations, fundraising is an annual event. For others, it occurs on an *ad hoc* basis.

*What we have done in the past is hold a community charity walk. Another thing that we do is we run a summer youth theatre program every year and the sale of the tickets for the production is another fundraising venture that we do, where we actually hold a show at our local community theatre. We've held a couple of other similar things like a fundraising auction, where we've gotten contributions from our local businesses and held an auction with them.*

*The bingos are regular, so they happen all the time. With the other events, it's just depending on our deficit and what we need to have covered and what programs we have funded, depending on what the services we're offering.*

According to our interviewees, it is difficult to raise funds in rural areas because many people living in these communities are poor or will only give to causes that affect their own families (e.g., sports and recreation). Organizations that provide social services such as women's shelters, youth help lines, or drug abuse rehabilitation find it especially difficult to raise funds in rural areas.

*We are a small community and a tapped-out community. People don't want to be part of an ongoing base-funding structure, which they end up having to do. Also, some people don't support women's shelters. They just think it's not as worthwhile as a little kids' hockey team, and so they're not as apt to give.*

Smaller organizations in rural areas also find it difficult to compete with local hospitals and larger, better-known organizations, such as the United Way, which are able to carry out more sophisticated and larger-scale fundraising campaigns. There is also a perception that many of the funds that are collected from rural communities during large fundraising campaigns are not distributed to the communities from which the money is collected.

### **Funders' understanding of rural nonprofit organizations**

Most of the interviewees thought that funders – e.g., governments, foundations, corporations, individual donors – do not understand the needs of rural nonprofit organizations unless the person in charge of distributing the funds is from a rural area. In some cases, funders do not recognize the ability and professionalism of rural nonprofit organizations. In other cases, the person setting up the criteria for the funding is in an urban area where the increased costs faced by rural nonprofit organizations are not recognized or understood.

*What we do costs more, just because of the rural and remote nature, the infrastructure. To travel to and from where services are delivered – all those kinds of things – I don't think they appreciate that at all because they always talk about "equity funding." But if you do it by population, you're cooked, because you have fewer people, but your service delivery costs are much higher.*

### **Strategies for dealing with financial challenges**

The nonprofit leaders we spoke to told us that their organizations use various strategies to overcome the financial challenges they face. The strategies vary according to the type of

organization and the sources of funding it receives. The following appear to be the main strategies used by rural organizations to cope with their financial challenges.

1. *Evaluation.* Evaluation processes are used to examine the resources needed to obtain each type of funding. This allows organizations to determine which source is the least costly and which is likely to yield the highest return on investment. Organizations also use the review process to determine whether programs that are already funded suit their mission.
2. *Strategic grant applications.* Organizations that apply for grants try to ensure that proposed projects are similar in nature to the projects or programs that they already provide. This strategy is beneficial because it ensures that the organization does not have to spend scarce resources starting up completely new projects.
3. *Partnerships.* Rural nonprofit organizations in larger communities often create partnerships with other organizations in an attempt to reduce costs or deliver more services for the same cost. This appeared to be easier for organizations situated in less remote communities. For organizations in remote communities, building relationships is more costly and difficult due to geographical distances among organizations and communities.
4. *Technology.* Video conferencing, high speed Internet, and other information and communications technologies help rural organizations cope with large geographical areas in a cost effective way. Organizations that could afford these technologies reported using them to communicate with other organizations for the purposes of building partnerships, engaging in joint fundraising efforts, etc. Start up and maintenance costs are often quite high, however, so not all organizations are in a position to take advantage of technology.

## **Human resources capacity**

### **Paid staff**

The main challenges that rural nonprofit organizations face with regard to paid staff are the inability to pay competitive salaries and the lack of secure funding to hire full-time, permanent employees. Many organizations experience high employee turnover because once employees gain experience and skills they leave the organization for more secure, higher paying positions elsewhere. This challenge is not unique to rural nonprofit organizations, but it may be a greater challenge for them because of the smaller population base they have to draw on.

*[Our biggest problem is] the competition to both hire and retain, because our salaries are lower. Most nonprofits have lower salaries than the private sector. We had a 3% increase this year – the first time in 10 years. So the competition for*

*retaining staff as well as attracting them in the first place is difficult. We do a lot of training of people, and then they are hired away.*

Recruiting and retaining professional staff and staff with specialized skills can be particularly difficult for rural organizations. Such individuals are often looking not just for full-time, permanent positions with good salaries but also for training and networking opportunities. The Internet is a useful tool in these circumstances, but distance does make it difficult for employees such as nurses and social workers to attend association meetings and interact with other professionals.

*The struggle is to generate the funds you need to attract and compete for the best and brightest, and also to be able to give them the professional training and the stimulation they require is a struggle.*

Staff burnout is a problem for some rural organizations. Social services organizations such as women's shelters, kids help lines, and emergency crisis centres appear to be particularly vulnerable to this problem.

*My staff are highly dedicated and committed. They see extremely vulnerable people. They see outrageous injustice and they want to change it and they want to stop it, so it's very easy to become caught up in crisis and caught up in the tremendous need to change things. So your focus becomes very, very intense. I spend a lot of time trying to get them to relax and take time off, and don't build up their overtime.*

## **Volunteers**

The majority of the people we interviewed told us that their organizations rely on volunteers for a large number of tasks, from helping with fundraising events, to office work, to working crisis help lines. Most of them said that, without volunteers, their organizations would not exist.

*Without volunteers, we would not have a program. If we didn't have volunteers, the program wouldn't exist, because they are the ones that are there on the ground delivering the project to the members.*

Recruiting and retaining volunteers is an issue for many rural nonprofit organizations. Many volunteers are looking for short-term assignments, which means that organizations spend a lot of resources on recruitment and training. Another challenge reported is the high costs of police checks required for some types of volunteer activities such as helping with crisis lines and working with children. Although urban organizations also have these problems, rural organizations have a smaller population base to draw on so likely feel the problem more acutely.

*I think the biggest challenge now is to retain volunteers. Increasingly, people are looking for very short-term volunteer opportunities, with a definite beginning and end. That becomes tough because then you're talking more recruitment, more training, more orientation, and that's a bit of a challenge. But that's the nature of what's happening all over the place.*

*The volunteer base is smaller and the skills level is more limited, and there isn't as broad a base of the population that you can count on. Sometimes two or three highly skilled and very active people do everything. That's often how it works in small rural communities. But that means that, even if those people are highly skilled and very experienced, you still have a smaller base to move forward with.*

Many rural nonprofit organizations report particular problems recruiting and retaining fundraising volunteers. People who live in rural areas and who are willing to volunteer are often already active in several organizations and do not have the time or energy to devote to yearly fundraising campaigns. Moreover, organizations report that they train volunteers to participate in an annual fundraising campaign, and then the next year they are too busy to participate. As a result, organizations are constantly training new volunteers, which is both expensive and time-consuming.

## **Structural capacity**

### **Relationships and networks**

Rural organizations build relationships by inviting people from the community to take part in activities through newsletters, the media, face-to-face meetings, joining committees, etc. and by approaching organizations and linking them together with other organizations.

*One way I describe our organization is kind of like a spider web, and we're somewhere on that spider web, and if you can picture every point in between is another organization. Our board of directors liaises with corporate partners, we liaise with community members, we liaise with students, seniors, labour groups, municipal leaders, politicians, etc.*

Interviewees told us that it is beneficial to be in a small community when it comes to building relationships. Volunteers can see the impact of their services on the community, funders can see how the money is being used, and nonprofit organizations from different sub-sectors (e.g., social services, sports and recreation, arts and culture) are more likely to work together.

*Our big thing is transparency. People like to see that their dollars are being well spent. Because there are so many individuals in this community with a vested interest in our organization, we invite them to come in and participate in different committees. We invite them to come and do our reviews and see where the money is going, to sit as a volunteer during our campaign fundraising, to help with a special project that we're doing. And so we've opened up our doors to try and build those relationships, and in doing so we've brought some individuals in that otherwise may not have felt comfortable, or may not have thought that we wanted them here, and that's really built relationships.*

Another benefit is that people in rural communities tend to know each other. When the director of an organization is grocery shopping, he or she may run into a funder, or someone who works

for organization that they have partnered with. This allows for more casual communication, which facilitates relationship building.

### **Relationships with other organizations**

Relationships with other organizations are the norm for rural nonprofit organizations. Sometimes these relationships are formal partnerships; these are usually formed when two or more organizations work together on a project. Other relationships are more informal, with organizations sharing information, recommending each other's services, etc.

*We have about 80 partnerships that we've built up over the last four or five years. When I first came about five years ago, it was pretty small. There was a negative impression of the centre as it existed in the previous few years, so we really strategically built on those relationships – that we were all in it together, and we try to work together and coordinate our services and structures in our planning. We're involved with an amazing infrastructure through education, healthcare, social services, the Chamber of Commerce, seniors' groups. It's a large list, but it's very active.*

Competition, particularly in terms of territory, can be a problem. The effects of competition are that organizations are unwilling to work together and will not offer services in regions where there might be overlap with services offered by other organizations.

### **Relationships with funders**

Many rural organizations prepare grant proposals or approach organizations or foundations for funding, but few appear to think of these activities in terms of relationship building. One organization spoke of building a relationship with the Ontario Trillium Foundation and two other funders. These relationships were the result of working together on a project that involved delivering workshops across the country. This partnership has been very beneficial to each of the organizations, especially from a learning perspective.

### **Relationships with the media**

The nonprofit leaders we spoke to told us that it is really important for rural organizations to have good relationships with members of the local media because they rely on them to cover local events. Poor rapport with the media can seriously damage the reputation of a rural nonprofit organization. The consequences of this are particularly grave in small rural communities.

Although most rural organizations appear to have positive relationships with the media, some interviewees expressed concern that this is changing. Many community newspapers have been taken over by large chains, with the result that there is more coverage of national and international events and less coverage of community events.

*We've got fairly strong [relations with local media]. About 70% of the media here are community members, so they sit on a lot of the boards themselves and they tend to have a soft spot in their hearts. One thing that I'm finding, though, is that the big conglomerates are gobbling up local media and we're starting to lose that personal touch. One local daily is a prime example. They're really getting away*

*from the local stories, local coverage, and they're printing information that's coming from outside of the community. It's really starting to hurt us, financially and public relations-wise.*

### **Relationships with corporations**

In some rural communities, there are few corporations, perhaps only the local bank or a chain grocery store. Moreover, many interviewees told us that when they approach these businesses for funding they are told that decisions about such matters are made at head office, which is usually located in an urban area.

*There are no large corporations to build relationships with. There's the bank, but they're not interested in local groups, and they tell you that. We have five bank branches here, but you go in there and every bank manager will say it's a corporate decision. Wal-Mart will say it's a corporate decision. That's what you get all the time. We don't have an industrial base here at all anymore.*

This experience is not universal, however. Nonprofit organizations in some rural communities have been able to build very positive, beneficial relationships with corporations.

*We had the bank sponsor a breakfast speaker series last year. They paid for speakers to give presentations on any number of aspects of corporate management, which is relevant for both the nonprofit sector and the for-profit sector. They paid for the breakfast, they paid for the speakers, they did quite well by us, I would say. We have other organizations looking to implement some type of corporate-wide volunteering, so they look to us for leadership and guidance on how to get their employees more involved in the community. They're looking to improve their civic presence. I would suggest it's mainly political, but that's beside the point. Sometimes the end does justify the means.*

### **Barriers to relationship building**

The main barrier that rural nonprofit organizations face with regard to building relationships is the amount of time and money it takes to maintain long-distance relationships. This is, not surprisingly, an especially big problem for small organizations and those located in remote areas.

Some interviewees also told us that lack of cooperation among organizations can be a problem. This is particularly likely among organizations that provide similar services in adjacent locations. These organizations can be reluctant to build relationships in case they “lose a piece of their pie.”

### **Strategic planning**

Some rural nonprofit organizations engage in formal strategic planning processes; others do not. Many organizations that engage in strategic planning have just recently started to do so. In general, it appears that larger organizations are the most likely to develop formal plans. Smaller organizations may have a plan that was created to obtain funding, but the plan is not regularly reviewed or updated.

In most organizations, strategic plans are developed by staff and presented to the board of directors for review and approval. Most organizations plan for only one year at a time. They have difficulty planning for more than one year because of the duration of their funding contracts. Larger organizations are the most likely to have a one-year, three-year, and five-year plan.

*We mostly have one-year plans, because funders tend to change things quite often and without notice. So it doesn't make a lot of sense to create a five-year plan. What I try really, really hard to do is to be aware of the political climate, because that's what the reality is. You have to know which way is the wind blowing. For instance, when the Harris government was first elected, we knew that the funding cuts were coming. So, at that time, we underwent a really large consultation – with the community, with board members, and with clients – and we looked at the priorities of the organization. So when the funding cuts came, we said, “We've done the consultation. We can say in good conscience that, although we believe these are valuable services, these are the things that have to go.”*

## **Use of technology**

Most of the rural nonprofit organizations that participated in this research use technology for general administrative purposes. Many use technology for word processing, spreadsheets, and presentations. All of the organizations use the Internet and email.

Only a few organizations, however, use databases. Those that do use them mostly to store information about their clients and volunteers; a few use them to keep track of funders. The extent to which databases are used depends on the size of the organization and how the organization is funded. Organizations that get most of their revenues from fundraising or membership/association fees are more likely to use a database system than are organizations that are funded mostly through government contracts or grants.

The Internet and teleconferencing services are very important for organizations that work in partnership with other organizations. Larger organizations depend on technology such as video conferencing and telecommunications when their partnerships involve organizations in regions other than their own. The cost-saving benefits of using technology include lower travel expenses and a more efficient use of staff time. There are limits, however, to how much organizations can rely on technology. For some activities, face-to-face meeting are still preferable.

*We're probably one of the most advanced organizations in the province technologically. We have every office hooked up to video and everything. The advantages are efficiency in terms of time and cost, and for people just to feel connected at that level. But it's not the panacea. You still need the live connections. I drive about 40,000 kilometers a year just for work. Even with the technology, I can't decrease it that much. Live presence is important. If it's a functional meeting, technology is fine, but it doesn't develop relationships.*

The main technology challenge in rural Ontario is the lack of high-speed connections for Internet and email. Many rural organizations, particularly in Northern Ontario, are restricted to using dialup connections. This poses problems for organizations because using such slow speeds to

communicate with other organizations and funders is very time consuming for employees. Moreover, many of the documents that need to be exchanged are much too large to be downloaded through dialup systems.

Another major problem is the cost of obtaining and maintaining hardware and software. Technology is constantly evolving, which means that computers need to be replaced regularly, software programs need to be upgraded to the latest versions, and adequate support is required to ensure that systems function smoothly. All of these costs can outweigh the benefits and savings that can be had by using technology.

*[Our major challenge is having] the money to keep it up to date. We have an amazing digital video camera, but yet we can't afford the \$1,000 per computer to get Norton Anti-virus because funders won't consider that part of it. It's like, "We'll give you the basics of what you need to do the projects that we're funding." But they consider anti-virus protection to be part of the overall organization expense.*

## **Policy development**

It is difficult with a small sample to know the extent to which rural organizations in Ontario attempt to influence government policy. Those that are associated with larger national organizations are likely to let the national organization deal with policy. Smaller organizations tend to lack the resources necessary to engage in policy development. Many organizations attempt to engage with government to better their situation without participating in policy development.

Among those organizations that do attempt to influence policy, some work in conjunction with other organizations and some work directly with government. Many work only with provincial and federal governments because they believe that their local governments have little money or influence.

*I'd say at the municipal level it's just polite. They have no money. It wouldn't even be worth approaching them for any. But we try to involve them. For example, we get the mayor to plant the trees and things. It's mostly cooperation and awareness-raising. Provincially, we try to maintain good relations because they're our core funders. Obviously we're going to try to be nice.*

## **Suggestions for building capacity and raising awareness**

As part of the interview process, we asked interviewees what could be done to build the capacity of rural nonprofit organizations and raise awareness about issues facing rural communities. They had four main recommendations.

1. *Training.* Training and education were repeatedly mentioned as key to building the capacity of rural nonprofit organizations. According to the people we interviewed, rural organizations need training in a variety of areas, including: how

to fundraise, how to prepare grant applications, and how to build networks. To be useful, however, the training needs to be both cheap and accessible.

2. *Communication.* A number of interviewees suggested that rural organizations should talk more about the issues facing them and their communities. Organizations need to bring their issues to the attention of the public, the media, corporations, and government. Interviewees felt that too many rural nonprofit organizations stay silent because they are worried about losing their funding.
3. *Technology.* Another frequent suggestion was that funders should provide more support for technology. Technology allows rural organizations to communicate more easily and cost effectively with their staff, volunteers, and other organizations. It also reduces their isolation because, with the proper technology, even organizations at opposite ends of the province can share resources, discuss issues, and develop solutions.
4. *Collaboration.* Interviewees felt that rural organizations, even more than urban organizations, need to work together to share resources, raise money, develop solutions, promote rural issues, and raise awareness. Collaborations could be based on geography, with organizations in a given area banding together, or on activities, with similar types of organizations (e.g., social services organizations) working in concert.

## Conclusions

This study reveals that nonprofit and voluntary organizations in rural Ontario face a number of significant challenges. While many of these challenges are similar to those faced by urban organizations, others are unique. Migration out of rural areas, for example, has left rural organizations with smaller populations from which to draw their boards, staff, volunteers, and donors. At the same time, they face the high cost of serving clients over great distances and must deal with lower economies of scale. Moreover, the evidence suggests that rural organizations are likely to have a harder time than urban organizations overcoming shared problems because they have less access to funding, resources, training, and networking opportunities.

Nonprofit and voluntary organizations are an important element of Canadian society, often addressing the needs and interests of citizens that the public and private sectors do not. They improve the quality of our lives by providing us with opportunities to participate in sports, recreation, and the arts, and by addressing social and environmental issues. They also provide many of the services on which Canadians have come to depend: healthcare, childcare, eldercare, food banks, clothing closets, credit counselling, services for youth, disaster and emergency services, just to name a few. Thus, the problems faced by rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations are not abstract or unimportant. They have real consequences for real people: fewer health and social services; longer wait-times for services; fewer recreational opportunities, arts and culture options, and opportunities for citizen engagement.

A recent study conducted by Imagine Canada and the Johns Hopkins University indicates that Canada's has one of the largest and most vibrant nonprofit and voluntary sectors in the world (Hall, Barr, Easwaramoorthy, Sokolowski, & Salamon, 2005). It would appear, however, that not all Canadians have an equal opportunity to participate in or benefit from this vibrancy. This report includes some suggestions for building the capacity of rural organizations and raising awareness of rural issues. The next step is to bring representatives of rural organizations together – with each other and with representatives of government and business – so that we can begin to work together towards solutions. With that in mind, we will give the last word to one of our interviewees:

*It's not all about money and it's not all about people living in urban centres giving us more money. I think there are some tremendous skills in rural areas and we just need to try to enhance them a bit. Rural people can accomplish enormous things against huge odds.*

# Appendix A – Questions for Organization Leaders

## General questions

1. In your view, what are the most pressing issues facing rural communities today?
2. What do you think are the biggest challenges that rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations face?
3. In your opinion are rural nonprofit organizations able to address these challenges?  
Probes: Why  
Why not?
4. Do you think the challenges you mentioned differ from those of urban organizations?  
Probes: Why  
Why not?

## Financial capacity questions

### Financial challenges

1. How is your organization funded?
2. Of the sources of funding mentioned, which are the most important sources to your organization?  
Probe: If government funding, specify which level of government.
3. What would you say are the most pressing financial challenges faced by your organization?
4. What are some of the strategies that your organization uses to overcome these challenges?

### Grants (only organizations that are funding by grants)

The following section refers to grants that are defined as monies received in support of the charity or one of its programs from various governments. This does not include payments under contracts or purchase of service agreements for goods or services the charity provided.

1. How do you obtain information about grants that are available for your organization?
2. Are there specific criteria that your organization follows in selecting a grant to apply for?
3. Is there anyone specifically designated to apply for grants? Who is this person and what is their position?
4. What are some of the problems that your organization has faced with regard to grants?

5. Do you feel that rural nonprofit organizations have equal access to grants as urban nonprofit organizations?

### **Fundraising (only organizations that fundraise)**

The following section refers to fundraising revenues that are defined as revenues received from fundraising organizations, such as the United Way or Federal Health, or from private, family or community foundations.

1. How does your organization fundraise?  
Probes: Do you develop a fundraising plan?  
Does your board help you with fundraising?
2. What are the challenges that your organizations face with regard to fundraising?
3. Do you feel that rural nonprofit organizations have equal access to donations from fundraising as urban nonprofit organizations?

### **Perceptions of challenges for rural nonprofits**

1. What do you think can be done to improve the ability of rural nonprofits to fundraise?
2. Do you think that funders understand the needs of rural nonprofit organizations?  
Probes: Government?  
Funding organizations / foundations?  
Public at large?

### **Human resources capacity**

1. Tell me about your paid employees. For example, how many do you have, are they full-time, part-time, on contract, and what are they responsible for?
2. What would you say are your biggest challenges your organization faces with regard to your paid employees?  
Probes: Recruitment  
Training  
Retention  
Burnout
3. Now, tell me about your volunteers. What do they do, how many do you have, to what extent do you rely on them?
4. What would you say are your biggest challenges with regard to your volunteers?

### **Structural capacity**

1. Does your organization engage in planning?  
Probes: Is your plan documented?

2. Could you describe the type of planning you do.  
Probes: timelines – 1 year, 2 years, 5 years
3. Who is involved in the planning process? And what does each person do?  
Probe: What role does each person play?
4. What role does your board of directors play in your organization?  
Probe: Amount of involvement in everyday activities
5. Review of budget and plans?
6. Could you tell me about some of the relationships that your organization has built with other organizations or people outside of your own organization and the nature of these relationships?  
Probes: Clients  
Members  
Funders  
Partners  
Government (probe for level of government and department)  
The media  
Corporations  
Other nonprofit organizations  
The general public
7. How do you or members of your organization build these relationships?
8. Overall, what would you say are the greatest challenges facing organizations in rural areas with regard to relationship building?
9. What do you think can be done to help organizations in rural Canada develop their networking capacity?
10. To what extent does your organization use technology?  
Probe: Do you maintain databases for clients, funders, donors, etc?
11. What challenges does your organization face with regard to using technology?
12. Does your organization attempt to influence government policy? If so, how?

### **Closing questions**

1. In your opinion, is there anything that rural organizations can or should do to raise awareness of issues facing their communities?
2. Do you have any other comments or issues that you would like to bring to our attention that we have not discussed?

# Appendix B – Questions for Key Sector Leaders

## General questions

1. In your view, what are the most pressing issues facing rural communities today?
2. What do you think are the biggest challenges that rural nonprofit and voluntary organizations face?
3. In your opinion are rural nonprofit organizations able to address these challenges?  
Probes: Why  
Why not?
4. Do you think the challenges you mentioned differ from those of urban organizations?  
Probes: Why  
Why not?

## Financial capacity questions

### General

1. In your opinion, what would you say are the most pressing financial challenges faced by rural nonprofit organizations?
2. Do you feel that the challenges that you mentioned are the same as challenges faced by urban nonprofit organizations?
3. Do you know of strategies that are used by rural nonprofit organizations to overcome these challenges?

### Grants

The following section refers to grants that are defined as monies received in support of the charity or one of its programs from various governments. This does not include payments under contracts or purchase of service agreements for goods or services the charity provided.

1. Do you feel that rural nonprofit organizations have equal access to grants as urban nonprofit organizations?

### Fundraising

The following section refers to fundraising revenues that are defined as revenues received from fundraising organizations, such as the United Way or Federal Health, or from private, family or community foundations.

1. What would you say are some of the challenges that nonprofit rural organizations face with regards to fundraising?

2. Do you feel that rural nonprofit organizations have equal access to donations from fundraising as urban nonprofit organizations?
3. What do you think can be done to improve the ability of rural nonprofits to fundraise?

### **Funds**

1. Do you think that funders understand the needs of rural nonprofit organizations?  
Probes: Government  
Funding organizations foundations?  
Public at large

### **Improving capacity**

1. What can rural nonprofit organizations do to make themselves more competitive as they apply for grants and other sources of funds?

### **Human resources capacity**

1. What would you say are the biggest challenges rural nonprofit organizations face with regard to paid employees?  
Probes: Recruitment  
Training  
Retention  
Burnout
2. What would you say are the biggest challenges with regards to volunteers?  
Probes: Recruitment  
Training  
Retention  
Burnout

### **Structural capacity**

1. Do you think that rural nonprofit organizations have the same opportunities as urban nonprofit organizations to network with other nonprofit organizations?  
Probe: Why do you say that?
2. Do these networking challenges differ from those faced by urban nonprofit organizations?
3. Could you tell me about the importance for rural nonprofit organizations to develop relationships with various levels of government?  
Probe: Does it differ from urban organizations?  
Which level of government would you say is most important?
4. Tell me about the role that media plays for rural nonprofit organizations.

5. Do you think that rural nonprofit organizations have access to corporations?
6. What are some of the challenges faced by rural nonprofit organizations when developing relationships with other nonprofit organizations?
7. What do you think can be done to help organizations in rural Canada develop their networking capacity?
8. Do you feel that rural nonprofit organizations have any influence government policy?  
Probe: If so, how?  
If not, why not?
9. In your opinion are rural nonprofit organizations effective with their strategic planning?

### **Closing questions**

1. In your opinion, is there anything that rural organizations can or should do to raise awareness of issues facing their communities?
2. Do you have any other comments or issues that you would like to bring to our attention that we have not discussed?

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