



***Sport, the Voluntary Sector, and Canadian Identity: Learning from
the Voluntary Sector Awareness Project***

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A Discussion Paper Prepared for Sport Matters Group
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Executive Summary

Beginning in spring 2005, Sport Matters Group contributed to the Voluntary Sector Awareness Project (VSAP), joining seven other national voluntary organizations at the Partners Table. The VSAP set out to discuss the possibility of a more unified voluntary sector within the sector itself, and then to increase public awareness and influence stakeholders about the value of the voluntary sector to Canadian society. The first step was to organize 75 “Community Conversations” for 1,500 volunteer organization representatives; of these, sport held 11 Conversations for 200 participants.

Sport is the largest part of Canada’s voluntary sector, accounting for 28% of all volunteer positions, and Canada’s voluntary sector is the second-largest in the world. Many sport Conversation participants heard these facts, and others from recent national and international surveys of voluntary and not-for-profit organizations for the first time. As a result, awareness of implications and possibilities could only begin to emerge during the Conversations; the concept of a voluntary sector working together to assert its importance was generally welcome, but participants were less supportive of a large-scale public awareness campaign. A more detailed post-Conversation analysis provided in this paper suggests the importance of sport in Canadian society extends beyond frequently touted health, social and iconic benefits. The VSAP provided an insight into the pivotal nature of the voluntary sector in Canadian life, and highlights an unexplored opportunity for sport to assume a leadership role in the sector and in nation-building.

This discussion paper provides a summary of the VSAP process and Conversation outcomes, gives information on sport in context of the greater Canadian voluntary sector, and provides an analysis of the role and importance of the voluntary sector, including sport, in the Canadian political reality. New arguments for the importance of sport and voluntary organizations as key to government effectiveness, social and economic development, quality of life, and balance of public and private sector agendas are advanced. A conclusion is that the voluntary sector is both defining of the Canadian character and essential to our prosperity, and that sport, working in the context of the collective voluntary sector, has an opportunity to position itself to government, business and the public as an indispensable element of the Canadian quality of life.



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Introduction: An Emerging Sense of Sector

Sport and recreation make up the biggest part of Canada's voluntary sector, and Canada's voluntary sector is the second-largest in the world.¹ In Canada, the number of sport volunteers (2.2 million volunteers in 5.3 million positions) and the number of sport organizations (33,649), is greater than arts and culture, religion, health, education, social service, or any other sub-sector. Taken together, our nation's voluntary sector represents 2 million full-time job equivalents, contributes \$75.9 billion or 8.5% of GDP annually, and much more important, is the heartbeat of our growing, evolving country. The quality of Canadian life depends not on our ability to hew wood and draw water, nor so much on natural resources, multi-national corporations or government institutions, but on our tradition of caring, giving, and forming strong communities. It is a strength that we seem almost embarrassed to talk about.

Typically, reaction to the statistics is one of muted surprise and quiet pride: we are never completely astonished to hear that Canada leads the world in quality of life. In sport, especially, we know how much we rely on volunteers. Yet questions soon form. Why doesn't every Canadian know how large and important our voluntary sector is? Are our volunteers and organizations taken for granted? If we are so important, why the constant struggle to secure resources for our work? Could we do more, working together, to let the country know? This, too, is completely in character: to greet the best of news unblinkingly, to immediately examine the accomplishment suspiciously, to conclude that we are too busy to do more than struggle on stoically, and then to wonder why nobody else is celebrating us - how Canadian! If we wish to be understood we much understand ourselves, and if we wish to be celebrated we must celebrate ourselves.

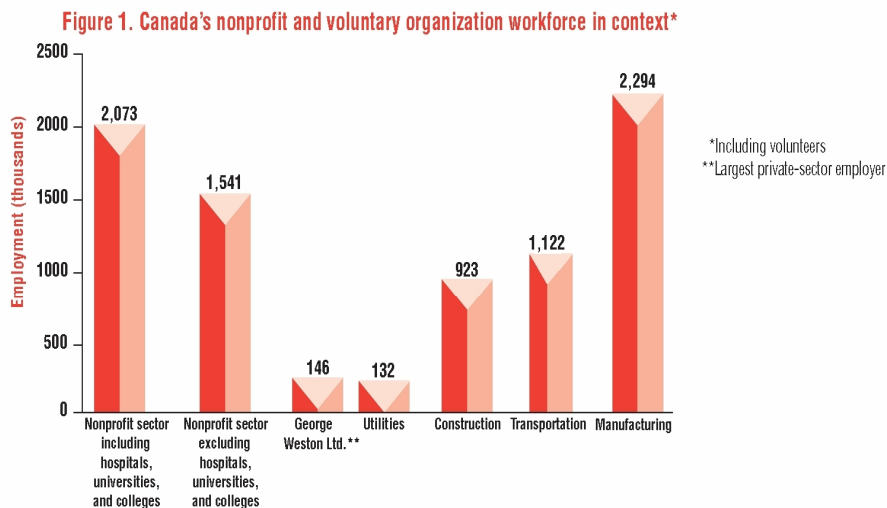
This insight is the basis of the Voluntary Sector Awareness Project, or VSAP. Beginning early in 2005, the Voluntary Sector Awareness Project, funded by Social Development Canada and supported by Imagine Canada, planned the organization of 75 Community Conversations across the country. Through the Conversations, thousands of local and provincial organizations exchanged information and considered the benefits and challenges of creating a "unified voice" for the voluntary sector, the better to understand ourselves and prepare for an intended national campaign to bring attention to both our crucial role and concerns. The Sport Matters Group contributes to the project at the VSAP Partner's Table, and in the fall of 2005 coordinated eleven sport Conversations held from Vancouver to Halifax.

This paper, prepared on behalf of the Sport Matters Group, describes the process and outcomes of the VSAP community Conversations, considers its meaning, and suggests directions for sport in context of the Canadian voluntary sector as a whole. Expanded participation in voluntary sector leadership positions sport in an entirely new way, and may create opportunities we have not imagined. We know our value to the health and pride of our nation, but we are only beginning to grasp our importance to our democracy and our social contract. We may be able to play a larger role than we thought possible in shaping Canada's future. This growing awareness, for sport and the voluntary sector as a whole, invites the emergence of early leaders: where should they lead us?

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Sport in Context of Canada's Voluntary Sector

Before considering how sport can make common cause with the rest of Canada's voluntary organizations, it would be well to examine how sport fits into the voluntary sector- how it is similar, and how it is different. This is based on data from a series of important surveys which were a foundation for the VSAP: the 2000 *National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, the 2004 *Cornerstones of Community: Highlights of the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations*, and 2004's *Satellite Account of Nonprofit Institutions and Volunteering*, along with the 2005 Imagine Canada- Johns Hopkins *The Canadian Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector in Comparative Perspective*. The following is a snapshot of Canada's voluntary sector and sport's place in it:



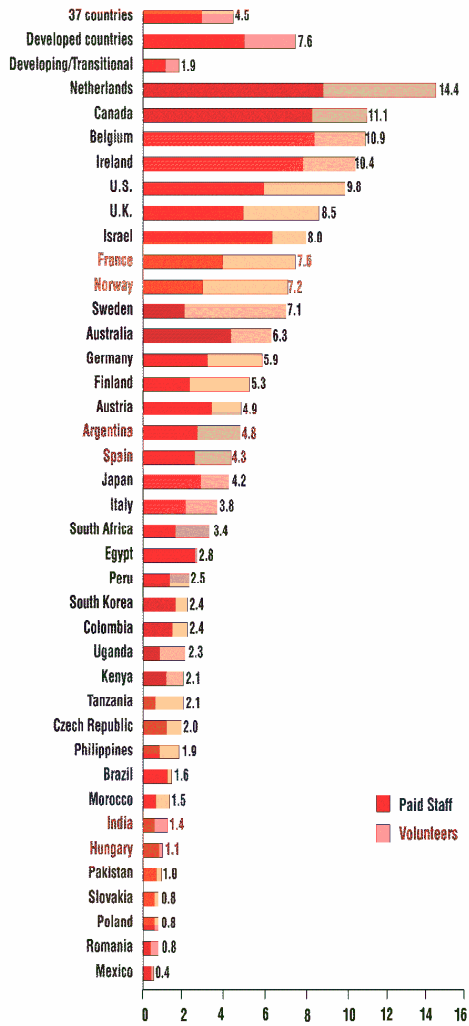
Source: 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating; National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations; International Labour Organization; Report on Business Top 1000, The Globe and Mail

Size and Scope

- Based on size of workforce (number of paid and volunteer employees) Canada has the 2nd largest voluntary sector per capita, behind only the Netherlands and just ahead of Belgium and Ireland (see Figure 2).²

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Figure 2. Nonprofit and voluntary organization workforce as a share of the economically active population, by country



Percentage of economically active population

Source: Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations

- When Canada's hospitals, universities and colleges are included, the sector contributes about \$75.9 billion or 8.5% of GDP to the economy. When they are excluded, the sector still contributes \$34.7 billion or 4% of GDP.³
- The whole sector accounts for 2.07 million full-time equivalent employees (staff and

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volunteers), which is 12.1% of the economically active population. Without hospitals, universities and colleges the sector accounts for 1.54 million FTEs, equal to 9% of the population.⁴

- The sector is as significant an employer as Canada's entire manufacturing sector, and employs one-third more workers than the transportation sector (Figure 1).⁵
- The non-profit and voluntary sector is strongly "bi-polar". Hospitals, universities and colleges are relatively few in number, take a major share of government funding, employ many staff and use few volunteers. The remainder of the sector is the reverse: many organizations with few staff and little government funding.⁶
- Sector-wide, 51% of all non-profit and voluntary organization revenues are from government and 39% are fee-based. By contrast, sport has one of the highest rates of non-government revenue, with 65% as earned revenue from non-governmental sources (ie, fee-based revenue).⁷

Sport in Context

- Sport organizations account for about \$6 billion of the total revenue generated by the voluntary sector.⁸
- Of Canada's 161,000 not-for-profit and voluntary organizations, 33,649 are in sport- 21% of the total.⁹
- Sport makes up 21% of all not-for-profit and voluntary organizations but only 6% of employees.¹⁰
- There are 2.2 million sport volunteers in Canada, fulfilling 5.3 million volunteer positions. This represents 28% of the Canadian total.¹¹
- In sport, 273 million hours were volunteered in 2000, equal to 139,484 full-time jobs and a job "replacement value" of \$3.6 billion.¹²
- 73% of sport organizations have no paid staff, the second-highest percentage among all not-for-profits. Of those sport organizations with staff, 57% had 4 or fewer paid employees.¹³

Trends in Volunteering and Impact on Sport

- Between 1997 and 2000, the overall rate of volunteering in Canada declined from 31% to 27%, and the average hours per volunteer increased from 149 to 162. This means fewer volunteers are working harder; 25% of volunteers responsible for 73% of hours, and a growing number of volunteers preferred to give money than time.¹⁴
- 26% of sport organizations reported a loss of volunteers between 2000 and 2003. This was the highest rate of volunteer loss amongst all not-for-profits.¹⁵



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- 65% of sport organizations report difficulty recruiting the kind of volunteers they need.¹⁶
- 58% say they have trouble retaining volunteers; 58% report difficulty planning for the future.¹⁷

In summary, Canada has an extraordinarily large voluntary sector, but a bi-polar one; on the one side are relatively few hospitals, universities and colleges with the lion's share of government revenues and staff, on the other are a host of small organizations in sport, arts, environment, social service and so on, with many volunteers and few staff. Sport in particular has a large proportion of non-government revenue and a small paid staff base- while this may not be true for national sport organizations it certainly is true at the community level. The rich are getting richer; the larger the organization, the more likely it was to receive increased government funding between 2000 and 2003.¹⁸ Sport, however, consists primarily of a multitude of purely volunteer organizations with no staff, and at the community level, it is under pressure due to minimal government support and declining volunteering rates. Thus for sport, any pride at being the largest group within Canada's voluntary sector must be tempered by concern for the growing challenges faced by our local organizations, some of which may soon find it impossible to carry on. Given the low level of awareness about the importance of volunteers and the voluntary sector among decision-makers, the general public, and even within the voluntary sector itself, a continued decline of volunteering in Canada is a real danger. The impact of a wide-spread loss of community volunteer organizations, the importance of which will be discussed in more detail, would be a tragedy not only for sport but for Canada as a whole.

The VSAP: Background

As national survey data was collected and analyzed over the years 2000-2005, a new picture of Canadian charitable and not-for-profit organizations and their importance emerged. However, the surveys are only one part of a series of initiatives in the voluntary sector spanning the last decade, each of which has contributed to a growing sense of sector. The VSAP is the latest step in that evolving process.

In the mid-1990's, under threat from government funding cuts and charges of mismanagement by Canadian charities, several of Canada's national voluntary organizations came together to create the Voluntary Sector Roundtable (VSR). A primary goal of the VSR was to open a dialogue with government on several key issues: the nature of the sector-government relationship, the growing demands for "accountability", and the restrictive regulatory framework within which voluntary and charitable organizations existed. An outcome was "Building on Strength", the 1998 Broadbent report on governance and accountability in Canada's voluntary sector. The report brought the significance of the sector home to the federal government in a compelling way, and suggested some actions to clean up abuses and strengthen the sector-government relationship.¹⁹ By 2000, this heightened awareness led to the \$94 million Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) which, among other things, triggered a restructuring of national leadership (the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy and the Coalition of National Voluntary



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Organizations merged to form Imagine Canada, and its role and that of Volunteer Canada were better defined), and also led to a decision to increase the awareness of Canadians about the sector via a new Voluntary Sector Awareness Project, announced late in 2004.

The objectives of the VSAP are straightforward: to discuss the possibility of a more unified voluntary sector within the sector itself, and then to increase public awareness and influence stakeholders about the value of the voluntary sector to Canadian society. The VSAP Partners Table brought together sport (Sport Matters Group), arts and culture (Canadian Conference of the Arts), environment (Canadian Environmental Network), social and international development (Canadian Council on Social Development, Canadian Council for International Cooperation), and health (Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association) with Volunteer Canada, Imagine Canada and Social Development Canada. As an initial task, the partners divided up the planned Conversations, with sport working with provincial sport and recreation federations to host eleven sessions in Vancouver and Kamloops BC, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Huntsville ON, Quebec, Montreal, Moncton and Halifax. These Conversations were designed to bring together representatives of community, provincial, and national sport, recreation and active living organizations, both volunteer and staff, to discuss the concept of sectorhood and the opportunities and challenges of working together within the broader voluntary sector to create a public awareness campaign. The process of planning and coordinating the Conversations began in March 2005 with the majority completed in November 2005; in all, 75 Conversations for 1,500 participants were held, and a further 150 on-line surveys were contributed.²⁰

What We Heard

The results of the Conversations, both in sport and sector-wide, are interesting as a snapshot of an emerging sector with limited but growing awareness of its challenges and possibilities. The Conversation process was tightly prescribed, following a template that required facilitators to look first at challenges and opportunities (Which barriers most keeps us from working together- competitiveness, impact of threat, cultural differences or distraction? What is the most important reason for proceeding with the project- the moral imperative, the power of many, the opportunity to take leadership or the potential to increase our influence?), then at how participants could best contribute to strengthening the concept of a unified voluntary sector, and finally at suggestions for a planned public awareness campaign.

The 11 sport Conversations accounted for approximately 200 of the 1,500 national participants. The majority of sport's participants were employees of provincial sport or recreation associations, although in smaller communities (Kamloops, Huntsville) a majority were volunteers. This may account for stronger themes of decentralization and need for community-specific initiatives heard in these Conversations.

Unsurprisingly, in both sport Conversations and the national Conversations as a whole, opinions were very diverse. Notwithstanding, some themes and agreement emerged in the sport Conversations²¹, notably:



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- The viewpoints of participants tended to represent the practical realities and necessities of their own organizations first and foremost. For example, in the “Threats and Opportunities” opening to the sessions, inter-organization competitiveness and distraction (ie excessive busy-ness) were consistently named as the top two threats to intra-sector cooperation, while “moral imperative” (ie “it’s the right thing to do”) ranked at bottom as a reason or opportunity to proceed. Similarly, much of the discussion tended toward whether the VSAP would be a benefit to the individual organizations in the room, as opposed to the voluntary sector as a whole.
- As noted above, themes of “by ourselves, for ourselves” tended to be more prominent in rural or smaller urban/provincial centers. There was a mistrust of national initiatives led from Ottawa.
- Much of the discussion in the “How could your organization contribute?” section centered on a need and desire for more dialogue between organizations, and more education—especially awareness of statistics on the size and scope of sport within the voluntary sector. It was often suggested that increased awareness would be a by-product of increased local-level dialogue.
- Opinion was very mixed on the advisability of a national voluntary awareness “campaign”. There was much dissent, with feeling running high that a multi-million dollar television campaign, which was often thought to be the only worthwhile kind, would be a waste of money better spent on the voluntary activities themselves. Many participants stated that a grassroots campaign would resonate better in their areas. At the same time, there was widespread acknowledgement that local organizations would probably not have the resources or time to be effective leading a campaign in their communities.
- There was a distaste for jargon, particularly the phrase “voluntary sector” itself. People tended to feel an affinity for the known and close-to-hand.
- It was frequently stated that providing direct recognition to individual volunteers was more important than promoting the voluntary sector as an entity.
- The idea that we should be more aware of and make better use of existing resources was prominent. Better networking and more dialogue were seen as a way to share existing resources more effectively.
- A host of highly practical suggestions for better local/regional volunteer recruitment and retention, need to advocate to reduce specific legislative barriers, etc were made in virtually all of the sport Conversations, even though this was not the intended focus.
- Most of all, there was a consistent theme of pride and passion about the work that we collectively do, awareness that the work of other (non-sport) voluntary organizations was just as vital as our own, and a lamentation that volunteers are badly under-valued and their contributions little-appreciated.

The turnout for Conversations in all sub-sectors was less than hoped. This was not completely



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surprising for sport, which is a late-comer to the national voluntary tables and lacks the central national structure of some other groups. Perhaps for this reason sport was largely represented at Conversations by professional staff, even though in general sport has fewer staff than other sub-sectors. Even less surprisingly, the viewpoints of local Conversation participants were different than those of representatives at the VSAP Partners Table, who are more used to thinking in terms of nation-wide campaigns and movements. In many ways, then, the outcomes of the Conversations served as a reality check for the national voluntary organizations at the VSAP Partner's Table, reminding them that Canada's 161,000 voluntary organizations are as perennial as the grass- and just varied in form and expression.

Analysis: Toward A New Understanding of Sport and the Voluntary Sector

A review of statistics and Conversation outcomes takes us only so far. Numbers, particularly economic impacts, remind us of arguments that sport has long ago taken to heart and memorized: that a tax dollar invested in sport means lower health care costs, lower social service costs, and increased revenues from event hosting, making us a superior investment for government and a superior instrument for achieving economic growth. We have made other arguments about the importance of what we do, particularly the iconic value of our champions and Olympians in building national pride and acting as role models for our youth, but these are more difficult to quantify and we ourselves sometimes dismiss them as "soft". While entirely valid, these arguments for sport have become stale; at least, they appear to have taken us as far as they can. Statistics may appeal to many minds, but they touch few hearts. Our participation in the VSAP informs a new perspective- scratching the surface of the national volunteer statistics suggests an entirely different way to position sport, and the voluntary sector as a whole, in a way that transcends mere economics. Understanding the role of Canada's nonprofit and voluntary sector gives a unique insight into what it means to be Canadian.

It is almost impossible for a Canadian to conceive of life without our nonprofits and voluntary organizations. Imagine, for example, the privatization of every hospital and university, and the disappearance of nearly all sport and social clubs, non-government social and community services, charitable and advocacy organizations. No more Meals on Wheels, shelters or other services assisting the elderly, physically- and mentally-challenged and other vulnerable groups. No more arts councils and opera companies. Not only the services on which Canadians depend, but the network of interpersonal relations which is a foundation of an open democratic society, would disappear. This network creates so-called "social capital", or "the bonds of trust and reciprocity that seem to be crucial for a democracy and market economy to function effectively", to quote the Imagine Canada report.²² Without nonprofits and volunteers, the Canadian way of life as we know it would end.

How has Canada become the beneficiary of this vast, indispensable, yet often overlooked, social machinery? Why does our nonprofit and voluntary sector reflect a uniquely Canadian identity? The authors of the Imagine Canada study offer some important clues. The study is part of a much larger Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, which has allowed the authors to gather extensive information on the workings of the nonprofit sector in nations



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around the world. The leaders of the Johns Hopkins Project have grouped the nonprofit sectors of these nations according to their characteristics, and Canada's comes out as a hybrid. In many ways, our sector resembles the "welfare partnership model" similar to that found in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany and Ireland, characterized by a large nonprofit workforce with a high ratio of employees to volunteers, a focus on social welfare services such as health and education, and extensive government support. On the other hand, Canada has a higher proportion of volunteer activity and private philanthropic support, making us similar to nations such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.²³ This should not be surprising to a student of our history; Canada has always walked a tightrope between European and American influences. From the paternal role of the Roman Catholic church in New France, to our nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ties to the "motherland" of Great Britain, to experiments with European-style welfare-statism in the 1970's, Canada has always looked to strong central institutions for "peace, order and good government" while, at the same time, being powerfully drawn to the small-government "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" model of our neighbours to the south. Our nonprofit and voluntary sector falls neatly between the two- it is a made in Canada solution.

By our character, by our tradition and history, we have chosen a middle way that has served us well as a nation. In walking the middle path, we have been conditioned to see ourselves navigating between warring private and public sectors: higher-taxes-for-more-social-programs vs lower-taxes-and-more-business-growth. We overlook the crucial role of a third sector, our sector, in keeping public and private interests in healthy balance. Civic engagement, or "social capital", is a hallmark of that balance- an index of our collective desire to maintain a quality of life which we see as uniquely ours, and to make a meaningful contribution to our country. The Canadian balance is more than a philosophical notion or a fuzzy group hug. On the fiscal side, several thinkers have demonstrated how civic engagement, driven by a strong voluntary sector, has a clear relationship with economic well-being; how the two in fact create a self-reinforcing "virtuous circle" that drives a prosperous nation. We are inclined to think of the voluntary sector as a counter-balance to private-sector influence, but analysis suggests that the voluntary sector and sport within it is also a cornerstone of Canada's business prosperity.

Prosperity and Interdependence

Thomas Homer-Dixon's book, The Ingenuity Gap, is a good starting point.²⁴ Homer-Dixon, a professor at University of Toronto, argues that ingenious ideas- that is, ideas that help us meet specific needs or solve specific problems- must keep up with the increasing complexity and pace of our world, or we will "crash". This relates to the economic debate about whether, and how, we can overcome the mounting pressures of overpopulation, pollution, resource depletion, and so on. Economists know that we are dodging a Malthusian bullet by increasing output to keep pace with exponential growth, and have concluded that this must be due to technological advances overcoming what were thought to be fixed limits to our ability to feed and take care of the world population. The New Growth school of economics says that ideas, which are the basis of technological growth, are a means of economic production and must be accounted for in economic theory, since as Homer-Dixon paraphrases, "...in a given economy,



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the flow of ideas leading to useful technologies is a direct result of investment in human capital (in education and research and development, for example).²⁵ If the voluntary sector can be more clearly shown to be an economic generator (of ideas as well as GDP) or as a foundation of the economy (through social capital-building) we can make a much stronger argument for the sector as an indispensable partner of the private and public sectors. Homer-Dixon frames this well when he writes,

“...books and articles published by many other economic commentators in the late 1990s, seem to be guided by the overriding conviction that the production of wealth in a modern economy is largely a matter of getting government out of the way. But the reality is not so simple. The relationship between government and the market is decidedly symbiotic: government creates the intricate conditions for thriving markets, while markets create the wealth that (when taxed) strengthens government. Today’s most sophisticated and vigorous markets don’t operate in zones that government has completely evacuated, or where its intervention is minimal. Even in the most laissez-faire capitalist economies, markets float on a sea of complex institutions, regulations and government interventions.”²⁶

The statement seems obvious to a Canadian: government is important. Yet it raises a key question for us: in the yin and yang of governments and markets, where does the voluntary sector fit? We know that state control (think communist and state-socialist regimes) has proven to be cumbersome and progress-deadening. As Homer-Dixon points out, societies must devise ingenious responses and make intelligent decisions as we face increasingly complex, fast-moving problems- the opposite of central control by the state. What are needed are “self-organizing” and “complex-adaptive” systems.²⁷ To demystify the jargon, this simply amounts to responsive action by many diverse, decentralized, empowered, autonomous agents, which rather than being rigid and bureaucratic, “maintain themselves on the cusp between order and chaos”. For example, think of community sport organizations, which are so numerous that many municipalities have no good idea of how many their boundaries contain- yet without any centralized control, government funding, or even formalized support structures, community sport carries on.

Considering the “extraordinary success of Western societies in recent history” Homer-Dixon states:

“The secret to their success has been a self-reinforcing combination of institutions and culture that has maintained Western societies on the fecund boundary between order and chaos. Western economic institutions hinge on markets, which are decentralized networks that give corporations and people the information and things people need to work on their problems in parallel. Western culture and political institutions also encourage the development of a vigorous civil society- a dense web of non-state associations, including religious groups, unions, community-service organizations, sports clubs and the like. These groups’ activities help build the trust and norms of reciprocity that ... are the key to solving collective action problems, and that other scholars say are vital to sustained economic growth.”²⁸

The voluntary sector is key to the present and future success of our society, as a social-capital builder that creates the foundations for economic growth, as a source of ingenuity which in the



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New Growth model has inherent economic value, and as part of the diverse web of “complex-adaptive” organizations which can act faster than centralized government to respond to the challenges we face. The resilience of a market-based economy is its multiple, redundant systems; if one business fails, competitors take over. In the same way, by having multiple non-profit partners to choose from, government can put policy into practice in a quicker, more responsive way. Government in Canada does not control the voluntary sector, yet voluntary sector agencies are prime delivery agencies for government policy, to the extent that without the voluntary sector, government can scarcely act in key areas of health, education, and social development.

In 2000, the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project produced a paper entitled *Social Origins of Civil Society: An Overview*, which, based on their survey of the nonprofit sectors in 22 countries (the project has since grown to 36 countries, including Canada) discards the idea that the private, government and nonprofit sectors are competitive with each other, and instead supports the idea that sectors are *interdependent*:

“Under certain circumstances, therefore, close cooperative relationships can be forged between the nonprofit sector and the state in addressing public problems. This can occur where, for ideological and other reasons, resistance to direct state action is strong yet demands arise for protections from particular social or economic ills; or where support from those associated with the nonprofit sector becomes crucial to enhance the role and power of the state. Under either circumstance, we would expect a positive relationship between government spending and the scope of the nonprofit sector. What is more, since government is most likely to turn to the nonprofit sector in fields where it is already engaged, we would expect this relationship to hold most strongly in the fields of health and social services. Furthermore, because government is viewed under this theory as a potential source of financial, and not just political, support for the nonprofit sector, it follows that the government share of nonprofit income should be higher also where the overall government spending is greater.”²⁹

This statement tallies well with Canadian experience and the data from the NSNVO and other Canadian sources. Canada exists in a social middle-ground between Western Europe and the United States; as in the US, pressure from the private sector to keep government social spending down is strong, yet the appetite of Canadians for universal social programs is high. In our environment, the nonprofit voluntary sector is indispensable for government; we allow government to meet social demand at arms’ length without incurring the wrath of the private sector. We are a relief valve for both sides of the government-or-free market debate; we allow government to deliver big social programs in a business-friendly “small government” environment, and we maintain the social stability and quality of life necessary for economic expansion without placing a high tax burden on business. We quietly maintain the Canadian social balance.

Policies and Practices: The Voluntary Sector Bridges the Gap

Why else is the non-profit voluntary sector indispensable to the Canadian polity? Because we are the buffer and translator between government policy and community practice, the key



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enabler of government action. In a 2003 presentation titled “Can Society Invest in Social Capital?” Michael Woolcock of the World Bank points out that despite “social capital (being) linked to virtually everything governments do” it can be challenging for government to invest in social capital-building. One reason is the distinction between policies, programs and practices: where *policies* and *programs* are largely in the hands of governments and major institutions, *practices*, which are in the realm of local volunteer organizations, determine how things are done in the real world. Policies and programs are technocratic and bureaucratic; practices are idiosyncratic, differing in every context, time and place. “Social capital largely inheres in practices”, Woolcock says, since while policy is faceless, practices demand face-to-face interactions that build trust, norms of behaviour, and so on. According to Woolcock, “failure in (government) service delivery is largely a failure to recognize the power, pervasiveness, and potential of practices”.³⁰

Policy and programs, the only levers government and large institutions have to use, are unwieldy and difficult to adapt to local conditions, and government is too far removed from community to see how small-scale, difficult-to-measure, idiosyncratic, volunteer-led practices actually work. Likewise, to local voluntary organizations, flavour-of-the-month government policies and programs seem baffling, if not idiotic. In sport and recreation terms, accountability frameworks and policy papers, not to mention funding cycles that stop at election time and restart six months later in different form, are incomprehensible to community volunteers, while government departments despair of being able to deliver programs through the sport hierarchy from the top down. Somehow the gap between provincial/territorial-level organizations and community club delivery cannot be bridged. This gap is often conceived as a lack of organizational capacity when in reality it may simply be the result of government speaking a fundamentally different language from community groups, one the “policy language” and the other the “practice language”. A go-between, a translator of policy into practice, a facilitator to turn policy into action, is needed. That role falls to the national and provincial organizations of the voluntary sector.

Building a Nation, One Community at a Time

The voluntary sector, of course, does more than simply provide a smorgasbord of delivery options for government and a balance between public-sector and private-sector interests, and it is more than the myriad of organizations which support self-expression and civic engagement. It is also an attractor of like-minded people, a billboard which proclaims “build community here!” This idea about the attractive value of our sector and the economic consequences of that attraction is drawn from Richard Florida, author of The Rise of the Creative Class.³¹ The creative class, which Florida says make up about 30% of the US workforce, are idea-originators and trend-setters, engines of the new economy and those most likely to narrow the “ingenuity gap” as Homer-Dixon would put it. In short, they are in demand, or ought to be, and the question for a city or a nation is how to attract or retain them. Florida has done extensive research to support his thesis that this class migrates to communities which meet their needs for quality of life. Cities which have a high proportion of creative class



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residents are affluent and growing, while cities with a low proportion are languishing.

According to Florida's research, the creative class is attracted by "...interesting music venues, neighborhood art galleries, performance spaces, and theaters... a vibrant, varied nightlife... active, participatory recreation opportunities, indigenous street-level culture---a teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between performers and spectators. They crave stimulation, not escape. They want to pack their time full of dense, high-quality, multidimensional experiences." In particular, parks, open spaces, recreation paths and participatory sport and recreation opportunities rate high as creative-class attractors. City planners ignore this at their peril; as former Winnipeg Mayor Glen Murray has said: "What kills a city are people who want only low taxes, only want a good deal and only want cities to be about . . . pipes, pavement and policing."³²

The idea that a diverse culture is a driver of creativity is not new, of course. As John Stuart Mill wrote, "It is hardly possible to overrate the value... of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar... Such communication has always been, and is particularly in the present age one of the primary sources of progress."³³ In this context, diversity becomes an economic factor which the business sector ignores at its peril. Canada's cultural mosaic becomes more than a reason to consider ourselves good global citizens and role models, it becomes a foundation for economic prosperity.

Florida's findings are of obvious interest to urban planners, economic development officers and business recruiters, but perhaps the connection to the voluntary sector is less obvious. The link, of course, is social capital, created by the web of organizations and volunteers who help give a community or nation its vitality. A comparison of the UN's 2002 Human Development Index (HDI) and the Johns Hopkins rankings of countries by size of voluntary sector shows that 9 of the top 10 voluntary sector nations are in the top 20 for HDI.³⁴ Likewise, 9 of the top 10 voluntary sector nations are in the top 20 among major nations for per capita GDP, and 7 are in the top 20 in the world for GDP growth between 1998 and 2002. A large, well-organized voluntary sector correlates highly with quality of life, economic output and economic growth. More than this, by providing opportunities for citizens to participate in communities, a large voluntary sector is inherently welcoming: it creates "plug-and-play communities where anyone can fit in quickly", as Florida says.³⁵ We may despair at the apparent fragmentation of our sector but it is the ability of any citizen to not only join a voluntary organization, but to start one, without asking leave from the authorities, navigating a maze of bureaucracy, or fearing retribution, which makes our communities so diverse, vital and robust. A Canadian takes this completely for granted- an Iraqi would not.

Canadian-ness, Defined

It was the purpose of the VSAP to build awareness of the value of the Canadian voluntary sector, and new awareness triggers new associations and ideas. As Paddy Bowen wrote in *Greater Than The Sum Of Our Parts*, the discussion paper prepared for the VSAP, "There may well be a time in the future when the sector (or parts of it) will want to explore leveraging the

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greater sense of cohesion that this project may accrue, and find more times and places when shared advocacy could be possible.”³⁶ Given that the VSAP Conversations suggest that the participants have no great sense of sector-hood and a reticence to launch a massive public information blitz, even were resources in place to make this possible, it may seem premature to “explore leveraging the greater sense of cohesion”. Yet while the 1500 voluntary sector leaders who took part in the Conversations may have had some doubts about their capacity for social marketing, they were unquestionably passionate about the value of what they do. When more than one in four Canadians give their time and nearly 8 in 10 give their money to maintain the quality of life in our communities and create the second-largest voluntary sector in the world, we can confidently say that something very important is happening, something which defines us as a nation.

Volunteering is an iconic Canadian virtue. We add *values*, not simply value, to Canadian life. The fact that Canadians are prepared to not just tolerate, but actually roll up our sleeves and pitch in to support such diverse activities as we find in our voluntary sector- organizations for all faiths, races, sexual orientations, and interests- is a distinctive feature of Canadian-ness, and one which deserves to be more celebrated than Mounties and maple syrup. We must overcome a pervasive tendency to justify our value simply in economic terms- on the basis of GDP, for example, or health care savings, or youth kept out of jail or off drugs. Our new message to Canadians must go beyond a narrow appeal to health cost-savings.

Understanding the way volunteering and community-building is plugged into the Canadian soul allows us to make more powerful arguments. Drawing together the theories and findings of some leading thinkers in the field helps up position the voluntary and not-for-profit sector as a true third sector, one which both balances and underpins government and business. While our strongest argument will always be the social good our organizations generate, we can now forcefully say to government:

1. *Government and the voluntary sector are interdependent.* Although government support accounts for 49% of our revenues, we are the arms and legs of government social policy and programs. Without our organizations, government would have to be a direct provider of services at a much higher economic and political cost.
2. *The Canadian voluntary sector is a reflection of our sense of national identity and national purpose.* We have the second largest voluntary sector in the world. This simple fact embodies so much about the Canadian character- our independence, our social conscience, our desire to maintain a position between the socially progressive nations of Western Europe and economic powerhouse of the United States. Canadian choose governments that are socially progressive and economically conservative; we have built a voluntary sector to serve that same mentality.
3. *The voluntary sector maintains the Canadian social balance.* We allow government to maintain the social programs Canadians demand while satisfying business demands for “small government”. We are the relief valve in the government-private sector debate.



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4. *A diverse, decentralized voluntary sector provides policy options for government.* The tremendous breadth and depth of the Canadian voluntary sector means government never needs to look far for a partner in addressing emerging issues. Providing funding to such a large group of seemingly fragmented organizations is a social insurance policy; a diverse voluntary sector provides a diverse and effective means of meeting social needs, and government can target its support within the sector as needed.
5. *A diverse, decentralized voluntary sector responds to social needs faster.* Our organizations are the front lines in communities across Canada and around the world. Given the resources, we can identify and respond to need far more quickly than government can. Given the opportunity, we can fill the “ingenuity gap” better than large, centralized institutions.
6. *A diverse, decentralized voluntary sector is both symbolic of, and essential to, our national diversity- and democracy.* The ability of all Canadians to create and belong to voluntary organizations demonstrates the tolerance of our society and makes Canada a more welcoming place for all people. New Canadians are able to participate in Canadian life more easily and fully, and thus to contribute to building social capital in our communities. Such openness is an attractor to creative people from around the world who wish to build a life in Canada.

And, we can say to business:

1. *The Canadian voluntary sector is a driver of the economy.* The 161,000 organizations of the sector contributes \$112 billion to the economy annually, represents the equivalent of 2 million full-time jobs, and is larger in GDP terms than the Canadian retail, mining/oil/gas, or agriculture industries.
2. *The voluntary sector builds the social foundation for economic growth and competitiveness.* Canadians volunteering their time to improve their communities build social capital- the bonds of communication, trust and partnership that are the basis for democratic society. Social capital is as important as economic capital to create a stable environment for business, to attract investment capital and to develop a highly productive labour force so business can grow.
3. *There is a clear relationship between having a strong voluntary sector and high quality of life, economic growth and prosperity.* The world’s leading nations in these indices all have strong nonprofit sectors; Canada, number two in the size of its voluntary sector, is top-five in indices of Human Development Index, GDP per capita and GDP growth.
4. *The voluntary sector helps position Canada as an attractor for international talent.* Creative individuals are the engine of competitive businesses, and research shows that young, creative people are drawn to diverse, active, open communities. The presence of a diverse voluntary sector improves quality of life and helps make communities welcoming and attractive to newcomers.

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5. *A robust voluntary sector means smaller government.* Canadians are socially progressive; they demand a wide range of health, education and other social programs and services. Since the voluntary sector on average generates 51% of its own revenues, a tax dollar spent on the voluntary sector levers a matching dollar and results in an equivalent savings compared with having the government deliver the services. In other words, the government pays for social services with fifty-cent dollars. The result is strong social structures and reduced load on individual and corporate taxpayers.
6. *Partnership with the voluntary sector is an opportunity for growth.* Canada's voluntary sector is huge, and for business represents a largely untapped source of networks, ideas, and connections to community. This represents not only access to a market or an opportunity to demonstrate good corporate citizenship, but an important way to build closer relationships with employees. Programs which support and tap into the volunteer work employees are already doing can help them transfer valuable skills between the community and the workplace.

In short, we cannot simply define the work of the Canadian voluntary sector, or sport, in economic, social or even political terms. Our economy, our government, indeed the Canada we know, cannot exist without us. Our nation is reflected in our voluntary sector. A weakening of the spirit of volunteerism is a direct threat to who we are; a weakening of the voluntary sector is a threat to what we can be as a nation. It is incumbent on us to help Canada understand and nurture this spirit, and to use it as the foundation for our future prosperity.

Next Steps for Sport: New Awareness, New Ideas, New Initiatives

The central ideas presented here- that Canada's voluntary sector allows for a fundamental social balance between the state and the private sector enabling lower-cost provision of vital social services, that the voluntary sector enables government to translate policy to practice and results at the community level, and that the voluntary sector provides a richness of social capital, diversity, and opportunity for citizen engagement which is both an economic driver in itself and key attractor of skilled, creative workers- puts our voluntary sector in a new light. We are more than "good" and far more than "discretionary". We are in fact indispensable to Canada's current success and her future. Collectively, we are Canada's soul.

Such a grand statement must be presented with a caveat. *Collectively* we are Canada's soul, but as the title of the VSAP discussion paper put it, we are also Greater Than the Sum of Our Parts. Each sub-sector (sport, arts, education, social service) is vital, yet a balance must exist among us- at any given moment, some rise, others fall. A level down, as individual sport organizations, we are part of the larger set of redundant, overlapping "complex-adaptive systems" that give government such a wide range of possibilities in implementing policy. To use an analogy, a field of wheat can feed a village, but whether an individual wheat-stalk grows tall, short, or dies, matters very little. Our power lies in our collective impact, but our history as 161,000 unique organizations is that we have demonstrated relatively little ability to



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collectivize. This was a key lesson of the VSAP: awareness of a collective voluntary sector is only beginning to emerge, and most Conversations tended to gravitate to individual and community-level interests despite the pulling and prodding of the facilitators toward big-picture issues.

So what can sport do with self-awareness? How do we generate collective impact when our very strength lies in our diversity and the ability of citizens to create new voluntary organizations in an uncontrolled way? It may be unrealistic to expect every Canadian sport organization, particularly the vast majority of community sport clubs, to participate in the growth of a new national movement. Indeed, it may be unrealistic to expect that of our national organizations. The campaign which emerges from the VSAP is still being conceptualized and will likely be low-key: a message, a slogan, artwork delivered to voluntary organizations for their discretionary use. The greater impact will come from our own emerging self-image, our ability to say to government, “you can’t do this effectively without us” and to business, “your success depends on us”. Self-confidence and authentic participation as equals may take a long time to be fully realized, but it will come, little by little. There will be those in sport, as elsewhere in the voluntary sector, who will be ready to enlarge upon the powerful themes into which the VSAP has allowed a glimpse.

Sport has an opportunity and an obligation to become more prominent at national, provincial and community round tables of leaders. This too will come with self-awareness: as we understand our collective importance we will have more to contribute. Here the “early leader model” which is the basic principle of the Sport Matters Group will serve us well. We have many individuals across sport, recreation and active living well placed to see the bigger picture: how accepting new Canadians, providing better access to sport for minority groups, and engaging youth are the building-blocks for sport, and national, excellence. People who understand how sport builds community and how community builds sport are natural leaders and spokespersons for a more self-aware, self-confident sport system. Using the Sport Matters model, we need to identify them, support them, and maintain dialogue with them.

Canadian sport can use its self-awareness to portray ourselves more effectively to others. Each nation’s sport system reflects its own character: some are an instrument of nationalism, some the hobby of an elite class. Canada has built both a voluntary sector and sport system to reflect its own identity, and Canadians expect sport to serve the greater good. We are proud of excellence in the Olympic realm, but traditionally just as supportive of sport as a means to health, youth development, and cohesive communities. A nation that uses its voluntary sector to keep government small yet still provide outstanding quality of life is expressing values both caring and conservative, in a non-political use of the word. Sport’s greatest appeal is likely to be to those same values. We may do best by positioning ourselves as custodians of our uniquely Canadian way of life: community-based, compassionate, inclusive, building social capital. These themes resonate with politicians and voters at all levels of government and may be the best way to explain our true importance. Certainly they resonate more than sterile statistics about health care savings.

There are examples of sport’s potential to tap into this aspect of the Canadian character. In 2005, True Sport released *Reasons to Believe*,³⁷ its second national survey of Canadian



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attitudes to community sport. Nearly three-quarters of Canadians (72%) believe sport makes a significant contribution to the quality of life in their community, and an overwhelming 90% say that community-based sport reinforces broader societal values and those key values promoted by the True Sport movement, such as honesty, respect, fairness, inclusion, excellence and fun- but a smaller number believe that Olympic or professional sport build these same values. Similarly, 63% of Canadians said fun is most important in sport but only 27% said commitment to excellence, and only 21% said competition, are the values which are very important for sport to reflect. These findings are consistent with a Canadian self-image of community and character-builders that take pride in civic engagement and social capital-building as much as in excellence; it is the self-image of a confident people who refuse to be measured by medals won, but instead by the strength of the communities which produce our champions. These beliefs, and the hunger for stronger bonds of community, are evident in community leadership across the country. In my own community of Markham, Ontario, Mayor Don Cousens has authored a book called “Building Character- A Community’s Success Story” and led a Character Community initiative for the town and region. Needless to say, sport initiatives which emphasize character-building alongside competition are likely to receive more support in Markham- and such is likely to be the case Canada-wide.

We face great challenges in sport. Facilities are over-booked or deteriorating, access to sport and recreation is far from universal, and youth trends are toward inactivity and obesity. Volunteerism seems to be eroding, and sport depends more heavily than most groups on volunteers. Working with partners in the voluntary sector to create support for broad-based volunteer-building initiatives is vital for all of us. The arguments advanced in this paper, which may seem abstruse to many sport people, are in fact critical if we are to convince representatives of the public and private sectors of the crucial role of volunteering in Canadian life- and Canada’s future. It is time to look beyond the technical aspects of sport organization, time to do more than recite statistics about health-care savings. Ultimately, our growth and survival as individual organizations, as Canadian sport, and as the Canadian nation depends on our taking an assertive role in a broader dialogue with and about the voluntary sector. Sitting at volunteer round tables may seem peripheral to sport-building, but nothing could be more important. Understanding the true contribution we make to society may at last enable us to throw off the supplicant mentality that has divided us, both within sport and the entire voluntary sector. Stepping outside our silo allows others to appreciate us and allows us to see ourselves in new ways. Diversity of ideas and contacts nurtures our own creative class; the fourth pillar of the Canadian Sport Policy, interaction, is not simply about a need for government departments to talk together about funding for sport, but about our interaction with each other and with organizations like ours, to learn, to uncover new opportunities, and to build new networks.

Social capital is the ultimate renewable energy resource, the answer to Homer-Dixon’s Ingenuity Gap. We would do well to remember that our challenges, no matter how daunting, can only be overcome by new ideas. Self-awareness may be the first gift from our participation in the Voluntary Sector Awareness Project- but it is only the first. Understanding who we are gives us the strength to become what we can be.



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Notes

1. Data drawn from *Cornerstones of Community* and Hall.
2. Hall, p. 9
3. Hall, p. 8
4. Hall, p. 8
5. Hall, p. 8
6. Hall, p. 13 and *Cornerstones* p. 21
7. *Cornerstones*, p. 26
8. *Cornerstones*, p. 22
9. *Cornerstones*, p. 13
10. *Cornerstones*, p. 37
11. *Cornerstones*
12. *Satellite Account*
13. *Cornerstones* p. 36
14. *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians*
15. *Cornerstones*, p. 34
16. *Cornerstones*, p. 46
17. *Cornerstones*, p. 46
18. *Cornerstones*, p. 28
19. Broadbent
20. *Community Conversations Summary Report*
21. Personal summary of sport Conversation reports
22. Hall, p. 12
23. Salamon
24. Homer-Dixon, T. *The Ingenuity Gap*.
25. Homer-Dixon, p. 228



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26. Homer-Dixon, p. 244
27. Homer-Dixon, p. 304
28. Homer-Dixon, p. 306
29. Salamon, p. 12
30. Woolcock, *Can Society Invest?*
31. Florida, *Rise of the Creative Class*
32. Quoted in Florida
33. Quoted in Woolcock, *The Place of Social Capital*
34. UNDP *Human Development Reports*
35. Florida
36. Bowen, p. 8
37. True Sport, *Reasons to Believe*



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