

ALBERTA'S CIVIL SOCIETY PRE- AND POST-COVID-19: WHAT'S GOVERNMENT GOT TO DO WITH IT?

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SUMMARY

The pandemic is forcing Canadians to re-examine civil society's place in addressing social problems. The government of Alberta has recently launched a Premier's Charities Council to explore partnering with community groups, giving them improved capabilities to deliver programs and services and reducing bureaucratic clutter. Another aim is to explore leveraging civil society during COVID and recovery. This focus presents a good time to probe where the line between government and civil society ought to be drawn.

There is no single definition of civil society. However, in Canada, it is often entwined with the emergence of voluntary organizations and their gradual consolidation into a "third sector" distinct from the public and private sectors. As such, civil society is understood as the cumulative actions of people, community groups, labour unions, social movements and other groups pursuing a common good outside of the state or market.

The problem for policy makers working on civil society issues is that Alberta does not have a solid definition nor data set to understand what exactly civil society is and how it operates. For instance, there are more than 25,000 charities and non-profits in Alberta, but from a legal perspective, these are completely different types of legal entities according to the Canada Revenue Agency. Drilling into charities only, where we have better data thus visibility, we know that in 2017 Alberta was home to 8,981 such entities whose economic activity amounted to \$35 billion or 11 per cent of total provincial GDP. However, this picture is further complicated by the inclusion of 'public charities' (hospitals, schools, postsecondary institutions) in these figures, which makes up about 80 per cent of the total revenues of charities and are dependent on provincial

funding at 85 per cent of revenues. When we look at non-public charities only, these raise more than 60 per cent of their revenues on their own to complement 40% of revenues from government funding.

This data suggests government and certain components of civil society, namely charities, that are usually considered distinct, are in fact interdependent. Government relies on these organizations to meet community needs and public charities depend on the government for their revenues and enabling policies to support fundraising.

There is potential to consider the public vs. non-public charity approach and the right revenue mix to maximize value and impact for Albertans. There may be room to develop new revenue sources outside of government.

Finding these opportunities requires understanding why public and non-public charities vary so much in their reliance on government revenues; the value of each approach for ensuring community wellbeing; the transparency of non-profit organizations' revenues, expenditures and outcomes; and the potential impact of social enterprises that blur the line between non-profit and for-profit solutions to the common good.

Government needs to provide clear direction to establish how civil society can expand its role in the social safety net, and define standards of service, performance and integration with the public and private sectors to offer Albertans high-quality supports. Tax incentives to encourage fiscal and volunteer contributions to civil society beyond charities will also be essential. To do so, government would need to consider thinking beyond charities and nonprofits however to tap into grassroots efforts and social entrepreneurship models.

As the province comes to grips with COVID-19's impact on its finances, alternative modes of funding and organizing civil society will become necessary to meet growing social needs during a tough road ahead through recovery. The traditional approach of contracting out services won't go away, but government can consider innovative policy options to support Albertans at a time when they need civil society more than ever.

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 provincial budget prioritized civil society as a critical partner to improve Albertans' wellbeing. The newly appointed [Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society](#)¹ was launched "to advise government on how best to assist the efforts of civil society groups in helping to make Alberta a more compassionate society, preventing and reducing increased social problems." But what exactly is civil society and what is its role in the province's future, particularly as we grapple with the COVID-19 crisis and prepare for recovery?

This briefing paper is divided into three main parts. In the first part, we define what civil society is. We will then examine the level of interdependence between civil society organizations and the provincial government. Finally, we reflect on ways to move toward a more independent and self-sustaining civil society in Alberta.

Recognizing the relevant role that civil society plays in the provision of social services in the province, during the 2019 provincial election, the United Conservative Party emphasized the importance of "harnessing the power of civil society." The UCP proposed adopting a number of measures aimed at reducing bureaucratic burdens and strengthening, wherever possible, partnerships between the government and civil society organizations to deliver government programs and services (United Conservatives 2019). This partnership recognizes that for many purposes, community groups are more effective than centralized provision by the government and "are generally more effective in preventing and reducing social problems than a big, bureaucratic state" (United Conservatives 2019). This raises the question, however, regarding the government's purview in the delivery of social services and civil society's role in this. In other words, where do we draw the line between government and civil society, or rather, has it been drawn in the right place? Do we rely too heavily on the government to provide services that civil society might be able to do better? Instead of considering civil society as another sector separate from the state and the market, governments can lift up rather than displace civil society; moreover, government should be an enabler of civil society (Cardus 2018).

The leveraging of civil society is embedded into ministerial plans by the newly elected government. In particular, the Ministry of Community and Social Services partners "with civil society organizations to enhance access to and support the delivery of quality programming and services" aimed at addressing domestic and sexual violence, homelessness, post-secondary education and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, and creating more inclusive communities (Alberta Government 2019, 26). In this way, civil society is regarded as an ally and a more effective way "to complement the state sectors and solving social problems" (Government of Canada 2013).

¹

<https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/91c57caa-6878-4a31-9747-4e8f6a82d5aa/resource/659e34a5-b355-49b4-b99e-1e341376d005/download/community-and-social-services-business-plan-2020-23.pdf>

While recognition of the role that civil society plays in the province is appreciated, some representatives of the non-profit sector have raised some concerns with respect to the impact of this approach:

- Will non-profits be invited to engage in meaningful discussions on issues that impact their organizations?
- How do we allocate resources and responsibilities between government and civil society organizations?

Though acknowledging the importance of this process, non-profit sector leaders are concerned that it could be used to “justify further offloading of responsibilities to the nonprofit sector without adequate resources to meet the needs of the community” (Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations 2019, 6).

This tension comes with no surprise in light of the government’s statements on its intention to promote a “civil society in Alberta [that] fosters volunteerism, grows capacity and builds communities that take care of each other” (Alberta Government 2019, 32). While a civil society with stronger voluntarism and self-sustainability is desired, as we will argue, civil society and the provincial government share an interdependent relationship that may prevent organizations from achieving this goal. Historically, this interdependency has translated into highly dependent funding arrangements and service delivery models.

WHAT IS “CIVIL SOCIETY”?

It is important to clarify that there is no consistent definition of the concept of civil society, although overall, there seems to be agreement on several key features. As a concept, civil society generally describes an emerging power, separate from the state. We saw the concept emerge as a check and balance on state power during the second half of the 20th century in response to authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America. The main actors in this scenario were social organizations, community groups, labour unions, informal social movements and even individuals.

In Canada and the United States, the concept of civil society has been used to describe the emergence of voluntary organizations after the world-war era and its consolidation into the so-called third sector (neither government nor private) as key features of democratic society (Chapman 1998, 821-822; Skocpol 2011). In the late 1970s, the Canadian government promoted “an emerging middle way” (Brooks 2001), acknowledging the need to find “mechanisms to encourage the further development of cooperatives and voluntary organizations,” and further explore “the possibility of the private sector providing goods or services that are now provided through government enterprises and programs” (Government of Canada 1976).

During the 1980s, the sector increased in prominence as the state encouraged an “emphasis on the role of individual choice, markets, and non-governmental associations in allocating resources” (Brooks 2001, 168). As Chapman (1998, 821-822) notes, the third sector emerged “in contrast to governments which finance their goods by raising taxes” as a means of “production out of purely voluntary contributions.”

In its purest form, civil society evokes action by individuals, community groups, labour unions, social movements, organizations (registered or unregistered) that, outside of the state or market, pursue a common good. However, as White et al. (1996, 6) pointed out, in reality, the principles of separation, autonomy and voluntary association of the civil society vary as “states may play an important role in shaping civil society as well as vice versa; the two organizational spheres may overlap to varying degrees.”

The ways in which governments and civil society interact with each other depends on context. In some instances, civil society acts as a counter-power to the state, and a good number of individuals, organizations and institutions are dedicated to activities aimed at holding the government accountable and advocating for the respect of human rights. In other scenarios, civil society complements government actions and helps with the provision of programs and services. Civil society can also play an active role in the decision-making process, as the sector is given the opportunity to voice its concerns about a particular issue, and its experiences and inputs are valued and considered during policy design. In this scenario, civil society is not only an extension of the government in the provision and delivery of services, but an effective policy influencer.

Regardless of the context, civil society plays an important role in society as a whole: it holds governments accountable, promotes transparency, lobbies for human rights and mobilizes in times of emergency (Jezard 2018). When not overseeing government’s actions, civil society is an important ally of democratic governments: it complements government actions on key aspects such as education, health or social wellbeing, providing essential services to the most key groups, while simultaneously self-funding the delivery of activities. While each individual, organization and institution of a civil society pursues their own specific objectives, when brought together, civil society aims at contributing to the common good: “they provide the glue that holds communities together” (Mitchel 2019).

In the following pages we aim to describe the current state of civil society in Alberta, provide a snapshot of its specific economic and social contribution to the province, and examine the role that civil society currently plays in Alberta.

ALBERTA’S CIVIL SOCIETY AT A GLANCE

How big is civil society and what does it encompass at an operational level? As described above, civil society comprises a number of individuals, organizations, social movements, community groups and labour unions that are part of society and work together for the common good. However, there is no comprehensive data set to tell us the details about all civil society actors, let alone activities, scope of work, revenues and expenditures. We have to make assumptions and piece data together from various sources, which are at times obfuscated by less than ideal information sharing and collection practices.

It is important to clarify that from the Canada Revenue Agency’s (CRA) perspective, a charity and a non-profit organization are not synonymous; in fact, one can only be classified in one category. This definitional distinction is, however, obfuscated in everyday parlance and understanding of civil society where charities and non-profits

are considered to be the same type of organization. They certainly share a focus on advancing the social good and doing this as their primary focus as opposed to profit; however, where the distinction matters (besides taxation policy) is in the data we have on civil society. Because the CRA has different requirements around transparency for charities compared to non-profits, the data available to us are primarily those of charities even though there are as many non-profits in Alberta as there are charities. The Alberta government reports that there are over 25,000 charities and non-profits in the province (Alberta Government 2020) but the data used do not distinguish between non-profits and charities, limiting our capacity to cross-reference this information with the CRA's charity data. Additional clarification and data transparency would be needed to discern this difference further.

Another important note is that charities and non-profits do not make up the entirety of civil society, even though we may at first blush believe this to be the case. Nothing has made this clearer than the voluntarism and business sector mobilization independent of formal non-profit or charity organizations to support the social response to COVID-19. As we write this, there are new help services tagged under COVID on the HelpSeeker.org site that include support being provided by informal civil society groups and private sector actors. To consider civil society as the exclusive domain of charities and non-profits would discount significant energy and contributions from these groups. In fact, in 2013, Albertans contributed a full \$5.5 billion in value as volunteers (Statistics Canada n.d.).

WHAT DATA ON CHARITIES TELL US ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE

While the access to data on civil society as a whole is limited, we do have the benefit of a key component to consider further. In this section, we present analysis on charities in particular.² While this leaves individuals, unregistered organizations and other groups and actors out of the picture, it provides interesting points of reference to inform this discussion.

As non-profits, charities are constituted for the public good and legally forbidden to generate profit. They can be public (created and mainly government-funded) or non-public (created outside the government and usually funded from different sources). As of 2017, Alberta had a total of 8,981 registered charities, and hosted 11 per cent of all charities in Canada: this is the fourth largest concentration of charities in the country after Ontario (36 per cent), Quebec (19 per cent) and British Columbia (14 per cent). Of the total charitable organizations in Alberta, 10 per cent are public charities (universities, colleges and hospitals), while the majority of them (90 per cent) are non-public charities.

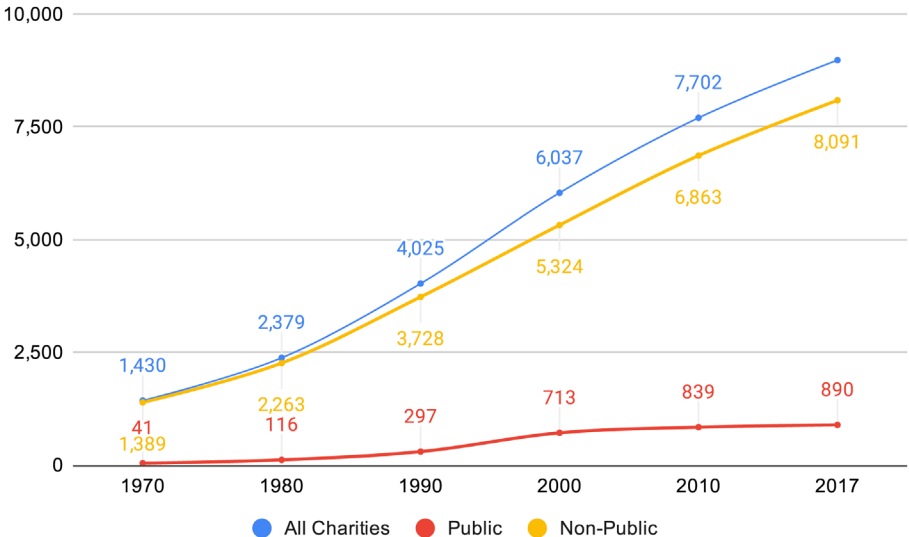
The sector experienced its fastest growth in Alberta between 1970 and 1990, when the total number of charities grew 181 per cent at an average rate of five per cent per year as

²

For this section, we use 2017 data from the CRA, particularly from the registered charity information return corresponding to the form T3010 and corresponding schedules with financial statements of each charity such as assets, revenues, expenditures and compensations along with self-identification, programs and general information.

Figure 4 outlines. Compared to non-public charities, public charities have grown at a much faster pace and have increased their proportion within the sector, accounting for three per cent of the total number of charities in the province in 1970, to 10 per cent in 2017.

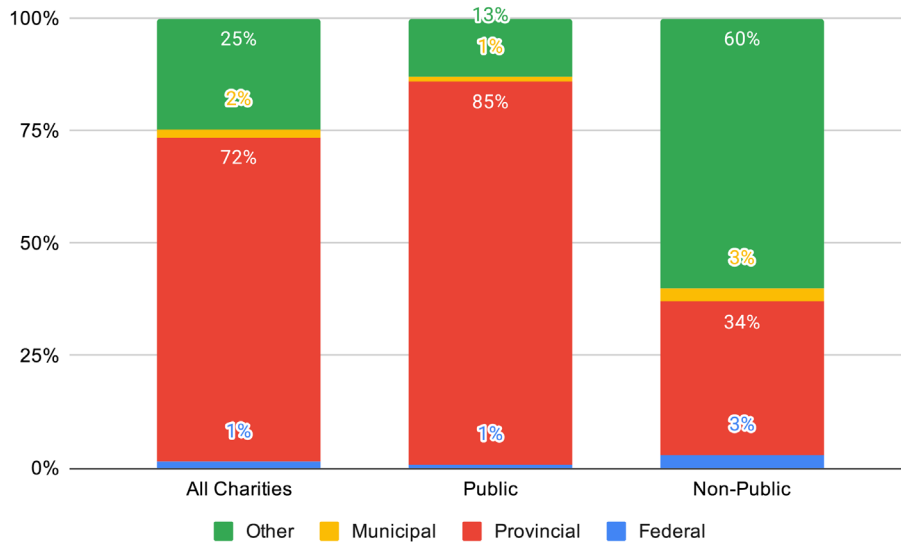
FIGURE 1. CHARITIES' ACCUMULATED GROWTH, ALBERTA, 1970 - 2017



The economic activity of charities in the province totalled \$35 billion, of which \$26 billion (75 per cent) came from revenues going to public charities. This represented 11 per cent of Alberta’s total GDP in 2017.

Most of this funding went to public charities (hospitals, schools, post-secondary institutions). The majority of the revenue going to public charities came from the provincial government (85 per cent or \$22 billion), but interestingly, a significant proportion (13 per cent or \$3.4 billion) came from voluntary contributions such as donations or fee-for-service and fundraising activities. This dependence on government for revenue was less present in the case of non-public charities, which saw 34 per cent, or \$2.9 billion of revenue, from the provincial government, with a higher proportion of income (60 per cent or \$5.2 billion) coming from voluntary contributions (Figure 5).

FIGURE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF REVENUE CHARITIES, ALBERTA, 2017



Public and non-public charities saw similar expenditure patterns; on average, 57 per cent of all charity expenses were allocated to the staff compensation of 465,339 employees, 56 per cent of whom had part-time positions in the sector. Public and non-public charities follow this provincial trend, with 60 per cent and 50 per cent of expenditures used to pay for the salaries of 253,408 and 211,931 employees respectively. Non-public charities reported a higher proportion of part-time employees compared to public counterparts (51 per cent vs. 62 per cent) (Figures 6 and 7).

FIGURE 3. COMPENSATION TO EMPLOYEES AS A SHARE OF TOTAL CHARITIES' EXPENDITURES, ALBERTA, 2017

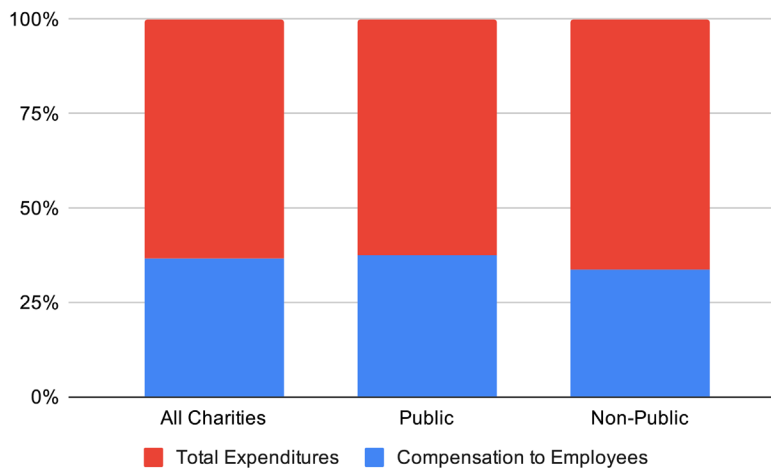
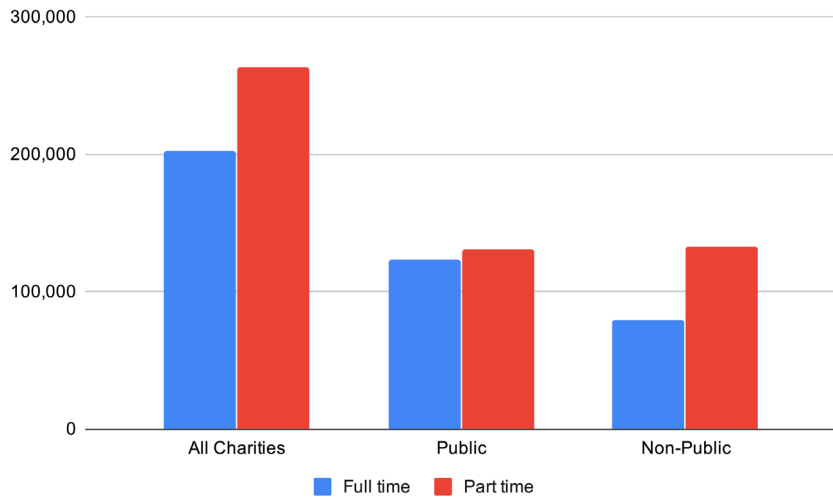


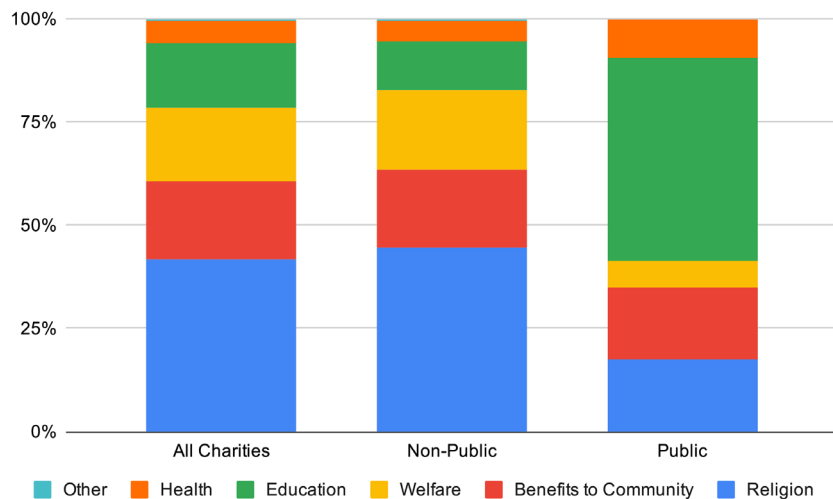
FIGURE 4. CHARITIES' FULL-TIME POSITIONS AND PART-TIME POSITIONS, ALBERTA, 2017



There is a significant difference in the average salary of employees in the charitable sector. While the average annual salary per job in all charities was \$42,000, the average salary in public charities was close to \$61,700, compared to a whopping low of \$19,400 in the non-public charitable sector. This low average salary shows the combined impact of the prevalence of part-time work and relatively low wages in the sector.

When the data on the types of activities reported are examined further, we see considerable variance between public and non-public charities. The latter were more likely to focus on religion and less on education, while public charities still reported religious focus as shown in Figure 8.

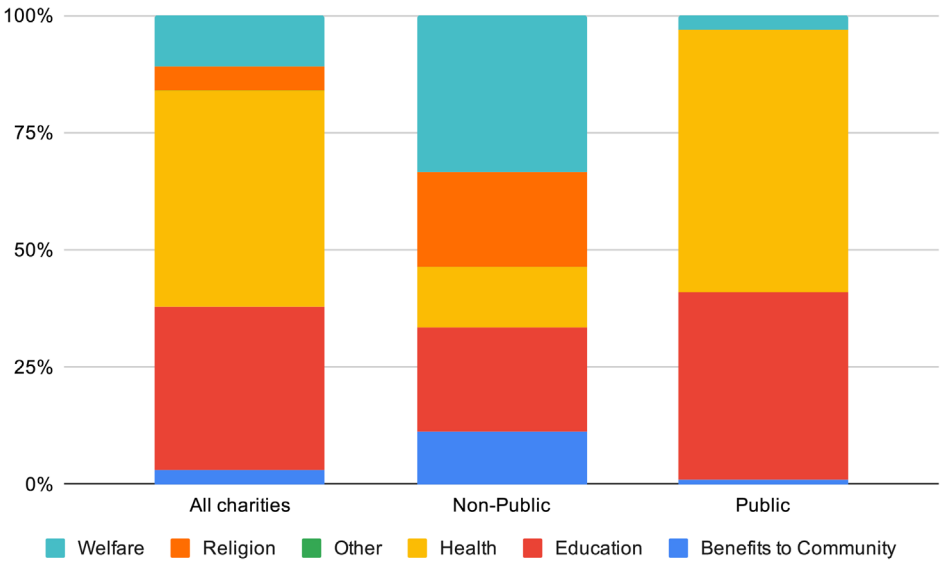
FIGURE 5. DISTRIBUTION OF CHARITIES BY MAIN ACTIVITY, ALBERTA, 2017



As expected, the majority of the public charities (58 per cent) are dedicated to the delivery of health (nine per cent) and educational (49 per cent) services. In contrast, following the national trend, an important majority (45 per cent) of non-public charities in Alberta are dedicated to the provision of religious activities, followed by charities delivering services for the benefit of the community (19 per cent).

Despite the small number of health and education charities within the non-public and public charities count, these charities gather 81 per cent of total charities' revenue in Alberta, most of which comes from the government. The distribution of revenue by activity among the public charities was mostly invested in health and education, as expected.

FIGURE 6. DISTRIBUTION OF CHARITIES' REVENUE BY MAIN ACTIVITY, ALBERTA, 2017



CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE

Can civil society be part of the answer to Alberta's deficit challenges when it comes to unmet social, health and other wellbeing needs? What will COVID-19 mean for this discussion?

First, we need to consider the relationship between civil society and government. As mentioned, while in theory civil society as a concept refers to the action of individuals, community groups, labour unions, social movements and organizations (registered or unregistered) that, outside of the state or market, pursue a common good, in practice the separation line is blurred. Instead, there is an interdependent relationship between government and civil society. Government relies on civil society actors, such as charities and non-profits, to address population needs within the provincial government's purview.

The challenge of the government's current approach is that despite a certain level of revenue diversification, any reduction of provincial investments in key areas of the social safety net such as education, the justice system and child care (CBC News 2019), has an impact on the operational capacity of many civil society organizations that rely primarily on state sources of funds. While prioritizing investments is key to mitigating other prominent demands of services (particularly in mental health and addictions), the interdependent nature of this relationship should be carefully considered using evidence to assess capacity, needs, gaps and opportunities to maximize impact. Paradoxically, in periods of economic downturns civil society sees an increasing demand for services, but this is also when funding tends to shrink from government or donor sources.

This goes much further than the organizations of the health and education sectors, given the diversity of agencies working on poverty, disabilities, addictions, homelessness and social inclusion that are still predominantly funded by the government for the provision of such services. While the public charitable sector receives 85 per cent of its revenues from government sources, for the non-public charities public funding is considerably lower at 34 per cent, prompting alternative sources to complement revenue needs. Non-public charities self-fund over 60 per cent of the revenues needed to deliver religious activities, benefits to the community, welfare and other activities. This suggests that non-public charities are essential and complement government investment to support Albertan's wellbeing; they might also suggest a future model to stack public charities with non-governmental sources of funding to further the impact.

There is a need to consider the public vs. non-public charity approach the government has established and probe what the right revenue mix is to maximize impact and value for Albertans. There is a clear dependence on government funding for public charities, though not exclusively. Are there opportunities to enhance revenue sources outside of the province to create a revenue mix more akin to what we see in non-public charities? This should be further explored. Before we can truly make a dent in this critical question, we need to probe:

- The reasons for and impacts of provincial variance in state reliance on public and non-public charities;
- The value-add of a public vs. non-public charity model when it comes to population and individual wellbeing outcomes;
- The transparency of non-profit organizations' revenues, expenditures and outcomes to assess their role in the safety net;
- The potential roles of B-Corps and social enterprises who blur the lines between for-profit and non-profit approaches to the common good.

As Alberta discerns the true impacts of COVID-19 on society and provincial finances, the considerable reliance of charities on government will be challenged – making alternative modes increasingly attractive if not necessary in a time when social needs are rising. A broader, more creative approach to leveraging and mobilizing civil society will be even more important.

MOVING FORWARD

As described in this paper, the line drawn between aspects of civil society and government is wide and fuzzy, particularly when it comes to charities. While the current discourse on the role of civil society in Alberta hinges on its separation and independence from government, in practice government and civil society depend on each other's efforts to improve the wellbeing of Albertans particularly during periods of economic and social stress.

As Premier Jason Kenney notes, “government per se doesn't have all of the answers” to social challenges, and “many of the best and most creative answers to social problems [...] lie within civil society.” On the service delivery end, clear policy direction is needed on the role civil society plays to Alberta's social safety net. This should clearly articulate levels and standards of service, performance measures and integration with public and private sectors to ensure a consistent value to Albertans and quality of support across different parts of the province. With funding streams strained due to the COVID-19 impacts, transparency and value-for-dollar will become critical pressures for the government while finding innovative solutions to keep up with social needs resulting from the pandemic's economic and health fallout. Charity reliance on donations will be strained further as incomes decrease and unemployment grows. Yet, a silver lining persists and has already manifested itself: neighbours connecting, volunteers delivering meals, restaurants donating food or offering it at lower costs, faith groups offering shelter, etc. Examples of civil society at its best demonstrate a significant opportunity to strengthen our social safety net from the bottom up.

Government can and should consider enhancing the tax measures to support and incentivize financial and voluntary contributions to civil society beyond charities. Government can also support Alberta's social enterprise sector that toggles traditional non-profit models and the private sector approaches. While the traditional model of contracting services will likely continue, the state has an opportunity to consider investment in the social enterprise ecosystem that supports diversification and agile development of this emerging model to achieve common good objectives. Last, enhanced capacity building and incubation support for informal civil society activities outside of registered organizations should be considered that do not hinge on administratively burdensome contracts to support Albertans' community engagement and social innovation.

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