



# Non-profits must develop new techniques for survival

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 17, 2011

Society is beset by some "wicked problems," and no one agency -not government, nor business nor the voluntary sector -can deal with them on their own, says Judith Maxwell, president of Canadian Policy Research Networks.

"But if you pool resources and skills and capacity across sectors, or across a community, you have more hope of making a dent in these deeply rooted, complex issues like the causes of poverty, the impacts of inequality or climate change," she told me during a chat last week.

The trouble is, she says, that just when the new ideas, energy and expertise of community organizations are needed most, their capacity to contribute is being eroded.

"We've had decades of underinvestment in non-profit organizations. We've been constantly asked to do more with less. Stable mechanisms like core funding [from government] have withered away.

"So they're struggling. They don't necessarily go bankrupt, but they quietly disappear. Or they become less and less able to fulfil their missions ..

"If you put those two things together -the wicked problems and the weakened sector -it's not looking sustainable."

Turf wars -"fighting for their little empires rather than fighting for solutions" -are making intractable problems worse, she said.

But collaborative approaches are starting to take hold.

"You don't have to merge or have a takeover," she said. "It's not like capitalism where you're constantly consolidating and firms disappear. But people have to agree on what they want to achieve together and move in that direction."

I hope she's right, but it seems to me that this process is, at best, a two-steps-forward, onestep-back kind of dance. I'm not encouraged by examples like Ottawa's crusade to close the Insite safe injection site despite widespread community support. Or the costly Prosperity Mine debacle -17 years to get a Yes from the province and a No from the feds. Or CIDA's hacking of core funding to longtime and highly successful partners. These don't sound collaborative to me.

Maxwell agrees. But she still sees progress, particularly between the voluntary and business sectors. "There has been a softening of attitudes on both sides," she said.

"There are business leaders now who are interested in social citizenship and who behave very differently from the traditional tycoon you see in the movies. Vancity is in the forefront, but there are also other companies like, to name just a couple, Canadian Tire and Bell, on whose board I used to sit

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