Finding A Nonprofit Policy Voice: The Case Of Settlement Services In Three Canadian Provinces

Shields, John, Ryerson University

This paper examines public policy engagement between nonprofit organizations and mid-level provincial civil service policy officials in three Canadian provinces – Ontario, Saskatchewan and BC. The policy area examined is that of provincially supported immigrant settlement service policy and programing. This is a very important policy area in Canada because of the centrality of immigration to the country and its regions economic and demographic development. Moreover, the Canadian model of settlement service provision to newcomers is one where government provides funding but services are delivered through nonprofit service agencies. Hence, understanding the role which nonprofit bodies, beyond their service delivery role, play in helping to inform policy and programing is important. However, very little is known about policy engagement between nonprofit organizations and public bureaucracies, especially at the provincial level. Based on over 30 in depth interviews with nonprofit actors in the settlement field and mid-level provincial policy officials this study seeks to uncover various dimensions of nonprofit-civil service interactions and perspectives on policy development and external policy engagement. Issues regarding the willingness to use advocacy/voice with government funders, the usefulness of government consultations, strategies used in approaching government, the role of research in making evidence-based cases regarding policy and program change, among other considerations are examined. This paper in particular asks what kind of policy voice does nonprofit settlement service actors have within settlement services at the provincial level; how meaningful is the nature of this engagement; and, how can this voice be amplified? The assessments of key nonprofit actors and non-elected government policy officials are used to bring better understanding of nonprofit organizations’ roles in the daily grounded work of policy interaction which they are engaged.

A nonprofit agency representative expressed the situation of the role of voice in policy as such: “Ultimately as NGO’s, we wear a number of different hats, you know, we are service providers, we provide services to immigrants and refugees, we are social planners, we are advocates, we undertake research, we are involved in local community planning. … All of these different roles and responsibilities that we wear are anchored first and foremost by the delivery of services that we provide to recently arrived immigrants and refugees. And so the policy engagement and policy development work is really key.”

A key finding from this study is that nonprofits in the settlement and integration policy field have a considerably constrained policy voice. This voice has been inhibited because of the limited capacity which most nonprofit organizations can devote to actual research and advocating. The contract funding regime by which settlement agencies receive the bulk of their funding from government further restricts the scope of advocacy and has worked to produce an environment in which advocacy chill is a reality. Moreover, business approaches to governing the relationship between government and nonprofit actors has further limited the nonprofit voice with the state. Moreover, business approaches to governing the relationship between government and nonprofit actors has further limited the nonprofit voice with the state.