



# Rebuilding Cohesion and Trust: Why Government Needs Civil Society

**Executive Summary**

**September 2019**



**Institute on  
Governance**

LEADING EXPERTISE

**Institut sur  
la gouvernance**

EXPERTISE DE POINTE



## Rebuilding Cohesion and Trust: Why Government Needs Civil Society

In democracies like Canada's, civil society and governments have a long history of constructive engagement. The relationship has evolved over time, often in response to changes in the social and political environment. Today, huge new trends – including the emergence of social media, the rise of populism, the disruption of mainstream media, the ongoing digital revolution, and accelerating globalization – are transforming our society.

Changes on this scale are usually disruptive, and these are no exception. Sharp declines in both social cohesion and trust in public institutions are deeply worrying consequences. These two factors are vital to a healthy democracy, and the pressure on governments to respond is growing.

Social cohesion arises from shared goals and values. It can be rebuilt by rallying Canadians around solutions to the emerging issues of our day. Solution-focused *leadership* will also rebuild trust. Though the task is clear, the political challenge is formidable: *Can leaders unite Canadians around a set of solutions?* This kind of leadership gets harder as the issues get more complex and social cohesion and trust decline.

IOG launched this project in early 2019 to address two different but related sets of issues – first, to explore ways to strengthen the relationship between governments and civil society, and, second, to address concerns over the loss of social cohesion and over falling levels of public trust in public institutions, especially government. These issues were explored through a two-pronged approach:

- A series of four half-day dialogues was held between March and June 2019. Each dialogue attracted 30 to 40 representatives from the two sectors (i.e., government and civil society); they met, listened to experts speak on different aspects of the relationship, and discussed what they had heard without pressure to arrive at a decision or consensus.

The first dialogue session focused on social cohesion, public trust, and the state of public discourse between civil society and government. The second and third dialogues examined two principal means by which civil society and government interact – advocacy and service delivery, respectively – and discussed how these relationships have evolved in recent decades. The fourth dialogue focused on diversity, empathy, and ways to rebuild social cohesion and public trust.

- A small working group of nine people from government and civil society attended the dialogues; they met a week after each dialogue to discuss ideas that arose from or were related to the topics explored in the dialogue.

IOG research demonstrates that declining levels of public trust are eroding the capacity for productive public dialogue and debate within democracies like Canada's. The research also suggests that a primary obstacle to rebuilding social cohesion and repairing public trust is neither the population nor the issues, but the *process*. While people can be united through effective public engagement processes, poor or non-existent public engagement creates divisions among citizens and may even polarize *or paralyze* public discourse. A second obstacle is often the disposition and skills of those in government and civil society who are tasked to work together.



This paper offers three recommendations to improve the way in which governments at all levels work with civil society to strengthen dialogue and debate. Collectively, these recommendations provide the foundation for a new type of engagement process that governments could use to begin rallying citizens and communities around shared goals.

Real progress will require new tools and new skills – ones better suited to the changing environment – and civil society has much to contribute here. Civil society’s role brings it into close contact with communities and citizens, who look to these organizations to help articulate public needs and concerns, and to provide many of the programs and services that citizens need.

Governments would benefit significantly from the kind of “partnership” we propose in this paper, but there is a cost: they must be willing to experiment with new and more effective processes for engaging civil society on policy, service delivery, data collection, and more.

**Recommendation 1: Strengthen government’s and civil society’s capacity for rules-based dialogue and debate.**

Advocacy and policy engagement are a big part of what civil society organizations do. From shelters for the homeless to safer streets, from health promotion to gun control, advocacy can refine government policies and practices on a wide range of issues. In the absence of a clear process and rules of engagement, however, advocacy can become an adversarial and polarizing force.

By contrast, the rules-based approach to advocacy and dialogue that we are recommending is one that promotes fair and informed dialogue, and mandates participants to work together to analyze, compare, and even consolidate, their views. Under a rules-based approach to dialogue and debate, advocates must:

- *Be open and transparent about their objectives and concerns.* If the participants are working together to find a win/win solution, then hiding information from one another will only make it more difficult to find a mutually acceptable solution. Openness involves a willingness to share views, information, and knowledge relevant to the issues being discussed.
- *Listen to one another and try to empathize with different values and viewpoints.* Empathy and mutual respect imply a willingness to seriously entertain alternative views. Without this openness to understanding, the process of respectful debate cannot get started. This rule thus obliges the participants to listen to one another and to accept that there must be give and take.
- *Respect rules of evidence.* Rules-based dialogue recognizes that evidence is often incomplete and that reasonable people may disagree. Nevertheless, participants must concede that the norm of providing and fairly assessing evidence is a critical part of deliberation. Participants must thus agree that controversial factual claims must be supported with evidence and that, where those claims are supported, participants will fairly recognize that evidence.
- *Ensure that all the parties affected are fairly represented in the process.* Inclusiveness requires that all those with a real stake in the issue be fairly represented in the dialogue. Leaving out key people would undermine the legitimacy of the process.



**Recommendation 2: Deepen government’s and civil society’s understanding of how partnerships work and why they are essential for the future.**

Civil society organizations typically work in closer contact with communities, citizens, and their needs than do governments, and as a result, they sometimes deliver services more effectively. Yet the history of government/civil society partnerships and the history of contracting demonstrates that rigid, competitive mechanisms erode trust and communication, undermining the expertise of non-government actors (e.g., expertise in the needs of local communities and in the appropriate design of services). Thus, these mechanisms may produce unintended consequences and result in a failure to address communities’ needs.

There are many ways to deepen government’s and civil society’s understanding of how partnerships work and why they are essential for the future of policy development and service delivery, including:

- Investing in academic and applied research on deliberation and collaboration
- Developing training courses to help officials, members of civil society, and the business community understand the various tools available and to build the skills needed to use those tools and to evaluate their outcomes and impact
- Creating a multi-sectoral Social Innovation Council that would provide advice and encourage stakeholder engagement in further developing the SISF Strategy. These capacities would make the council a natural leader in the areas of deliberation and collaboration. Governments could encourage this body to provide energetic sectoral leadership in these areas. Governments should also provide the funding and support required for such a mission.

**Recommendation 3: Government and civil society should develop the skills needed to assess and empathize with one another’s contexts, priorities, and concerns.**

The first two recommendations tackle an increasing lack of deference to government and political leadership and attempt to bring the controversial parts of the government process out from behind closed doors. They reinforce that government and civil society need each other if they are to achieve meaningful change. The third recommendation targets potential ambivalence about government’s and civil society’s openness to engagement.

Empathy plays a key role in sensitive enterprises such as conflict management and negotiation. Empathy is defined not as a skill but as a disposition underlying the soft skills that enable individuals to identify different perspectives and then devise solutions for the problems that those perspectives bring to light.

As with the other recommendations, there are many ways to foster the development of the soft, dispositional skills that would help us assess and empathize with one another’s context, priorities, and concerns. For example, an initiative could be launched to create reliable indicators against which governments’ progress on rules-based dialogue, collaborative partnerships, and culture change could be measured. These indicators could be backed up by some mechanism to hold government to account for a failure to make progress, such as an ombudsperson or an auditor general. One of the recommendations in the SISF Steering Group’s report calls on the government to “[a]nchor long-term action on SI/SF through legislation.” Such legislation could include performance standards for collaboration and indicators for success.