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Function ▶ Form ▶ Future

Community organizations that are resilient, responsive, relevant and effective have greater capacity to fulfill their mission. Ideally the form an organization takes serves its function and supports these four dimensions. Judi Piggott is concerned that the perceived lack of options, and a "generation gap" between established institutions and emerging associations, is harming the sector.*

What's your place in/take on this dynamic?

* Trillium Foundation report

Let's say **institutions** are organizations that have matured beyond the grassroots forms of community action to become more structured and strategic in their approach.

In contrast, **associations** may form around an imminent event or urgent issue, with direct involvement and action by their members.

If organizations in this emergent stage (the '**youngsters**' of our sector) hold the view that our institutions (the '**oldsters**') are bureaucratic, irrelevant dinosaurs, they are less likely to make contact. As they begin to consider formalizing their structure, this view – valid or not – may represent the most serious challenge to the renewal and regeneration of our sector.

The '**generation gap**' between institutions and associations has been widened not only by shifting demographics but also by the lack of basic, ongoing funding for sector organizations. As we struggle to do more with less and to face ever more complex issues, we're less able to maintain relationships across the sector and between sectors, and to initiate relationships with emerging groups.

At high cost: healthy communities depend on there being a **diversity of structures** which can be adopted as groups form and mature. We need the roots of formal, established institutions as much as we need wings to fly and respond quickly and flexibly to changing conditions.

Instead, the ecology of our sector has deteriorated over the 'lean' years, while **our attention was focussed on 'silos' of funding and on distinguishing our organizations and our programs as unique from all 'competitors'**. Institutions have become specialists in survival

behaviours for this environment, which has reinforced the negative stereotypes. **This paradigm must shift.**

For those who are attempting to collaborate, communicate and mentor, it takes courage and energy beyond our ability to sustain it as a voluntary practice. This tends to limit the membership in formal networks to those organizations with the paid staff to participate.

Yet - difficult, time consuming and confusing as it may be - a **support system for networks and networks of networks** is a precondition of sector survival. Organizations at all stages of development need easy access to each other.

What to do?

We must have mechanisms for supporting emergent groups to explore next-step options – e.g. fiscal sponsorship, clustering, or partnering. And we our institutions must demonstrate their availability to collaborate, sponsor, mentor, and contribute actively to "interstitial" sectoral evolution.

Existing and nascent networks must be recognized for their catalytic role in community capacity-building. To make this happen effectively, networks -- the 'connective tissue' that bridges the generation (and silo) gaps -- must be consciously valued and flexibly maintained.

In this way our sector's rich ecology of organizational forms can be visible and available -- a source of constant renewal and a training ground for the skills of active democracy.

Judi Piggott, Interim Executive Director for the Centre for Sustainability, describes her work as "moving mountains and facilitating chaos".