Philanthropic Foundations: Advocacy Intermediaries?

By Kristen Pue

There is a growing body of research that examines nonprofit advocacy. It asks: which nonprofits advocate, how, and how effective are they? While significant gains have been made in answering those key questions, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of philanthropic funders in the nonprofit advocacy ecosystem. A recent article by John Chin, an American urban policy professor, addresses this gap. This blog post reviews Dr. Chin’s (2018) article and considers its relevance to the Canadian landscape. I focus on identifying lessons for philanthropic foundations about how they can – and do! – work with service-provider nonprofits to advance social-benefit advocacy.

In the nonprofit studies literature, it is common to differentiate service-provider and advocacy nonprofits. While this dichotomy is valid to an extent, it is understood that service-provider nonprofits do advocate. Recent research has sought to illuminate the advocacy activities of service-provider nonprofits (i.e. Donaldson 2007; Nicholson-Crotty 2007; Grogan and Gusmano 2009; Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014). This is the research community to which Chin’s (2018) article contributes.

The same factors that make service-provider nonprofits effective at incremental advocacy detract from their ability to conduct advocacy at a broader scale.

Chin (2018) observes that the advocacy of service-provider nonprofits tends to occur at the level of implementation or administration, where “insider” channels are available to these organizations. Service-provider nonprofits are “street-level bureaucrats” in many important policy areas (Lipsky 1980). This function, Chin (2018) argues, leads service-provider nonprofits to accumulate information from their frontline interactions which can be valuable to governments, resulting in access to civil servants. Thus, service-provider nonprofits have primarily cooperative, rather than adversarial, relationships with government. They become part of a collaborative policy network (DeLeon and Varda 2009). However, this same information, Chin (2018) argues, channels service-provider nonprofits toward smaller-scale concerns. Thus, Chin points to a situation in which service-provider nonprofits pursue incremental insider advocacy which focuses on day-to-day functional concerns, rather than a sustained advocacy agenda. Service-provider nonprofits may also lack the capacity to advocate at this scale, either due to their smaller scale (Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014; Child and Gronbjerg 2007) or environmental pressures to divert spending towards their services (Smith and Lipsky 1993).
Chin is writing about the United States, but his argument is equally applicable in the Canadian context. For example, a youth homelessness shelter in an Ontario city will have a very close relationship with the city government that funds and oversees it. Staff will interact daily at the level of frontline staff, and they will typically see one another as being on the same “team”. At the executive level, the nonprofit will have ready access to civil servants in the division that handles homelessness. This makes it easy for the shelter operator to advocate on behalf of individual clients, as well as to secure changes that the department they deal with has the power to influence. But that access does not necessarily translate to municipal political leadership, nor to influence provincially or federally. That poses a challenge for service-provider nonprofits that may wish to solve bigger problems in their area – for example, a transition to a rights-based approach to housing, legislative changes to the foster care system, or the adoption of a housing first approach.

Chin’s (2018) observations offer support for research that has cautioned about the co-optation of nonprofits by the state (Kendall and Knapp 1996; Beck 1970), the rise of “advocacy with gloves on” (Onyx et al. 2010), and the de-politicization of today’s professionalized nonprofit sector (Choudry and Kapoor 2013). However, Chin (2018) identifies a second set of actors that play a role in nonprofit advocacy: what he calls “intermediary organizations”.

**Intermediary organizations, including philanthropic funders, can help to overcome these barriers.**

Under certain conditions, Chin (2018) argues, service-provider nonprofits can develop a broader and more sustained advocacy agenda. Specifically, Chin draws attention to the role that “intermediary organizations” can play in augmenting the advocacy of service-provider nonprofits. Based on his ethnographic research, Chin identifies two avenues through which intermediary organizations can support service-provider nonprofit advocacy: addressing barriers to service-provider advocacy and undertaking advocacy coalitions.

First, intermediaries can alleviate certain barriers to service-provider nonprofit advocacy. This has to do, chiefly, with the capacity and resources to advocate. By funding advocacy, philanthropic funders can help to balance the environmental pressures that prompt service-provider nonprofits to focus exclusively on service provision. Philanthropic funders can also offer training to increase policy advocacy capacity amongst nonprofits. The [Maytree Policy School](#) is a good example of this kind of initiative.

Second, coalition advocacy can be used to leverage the strengths of service-provider nonprofits, without exposing them to the risks of going-it-alone advocacy. Chin’s (2018) focus is on an advocacy coalition, [Project CHARGE](#), which was supported by philanthropic foundation funding. As a coalition of service-providers, Project CHARGE experienced many of the limitations to service-provider advocacy. The organization primarily engaged in incrementalist insider tactics, generally at the state and local levels. After its advocacy granting expired, the group returned to its focus on service collaboration. Chin’s (2018) case analysis suggests that service-provider coalitions cannot by themselves overcome the barriers that service-providers face in advocacy. External supports are needed to enable service-provider advocacy to extend beyond local-level functional concerns.
Ultimately, then, coalitions are helpful for service-provider nonprofits, but they require financial support to truly be advocacy enablers. This financial support is often wanting, since governments are reluctant to fund advocacy, and philanthropic foundations increasingly emphasize short-term, tangible outcomes in their granting practices (Ochs 2012). One way to support service-provider advocacy, then, is to support service-provider advocacy coalitions, such as the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness.

But I would submit the Project CHARGE case study presents several other lessons about advocacy coalitions. The first of these is that service-provider coalitions most naturally advocate at the local and provincial levels, since this is the level at which they are best-suited to advocate. Second, service-provider coalitions most naturally use insider advocacy tactics, rather than public-facing campaigns, since this is the type of advocacy that their members most usually utilize. Third, service-provider nonprofits have strengths, such as frontline expertise and a constituency of clients and volunteers, that advocacy coalitions could draw upon in their work. All three of these points suggest the need either for pluralistic advocacy coalitions or for linkages amongst advocacy coalitions at different levels, and possibly both.

What this means for the Canadian context

Chin (2018) offers useful insights about the barriers to service-provider nonprofit advocacy, as well as the opportunities for philanthropic funders to help overcome them. Philanthropic funders can enhance service-provider nonprofit advocacy at two levels. First, they can offer resources and capacity-building assistance to individual nonprofits that want to advocate. Second, they can support advocacy coalitions themselves, through participating in them and providing sustainable funding for their administrative arms. In considering the latter option, foundations should pay attention to the need for advocacy at different levels and audiences.

In the Canadian context, CRA rules about political activities do shape the nature of advocacy support that philanthropic funders provide. And despite the completion of the Consultation Panel on the Political Activities of Charities, the debate about the legitimacy of advocacy as a charitable function is ongoing. Whether one views existing rules as overly restrictive, there remain many activities which are integral to advocacy (in the sense of influencing policy) but which are not considered political activities — policy research, public awareness campaigns, and issue-area conferences, for example. Thus, while there may be limits on how much philanthropic funders can do in terms of directly funding advocacy by individual nonprofits, there remains a swathe of other activities that they can pursue.

One interesting question raised by Chin’s (2018) article is how the “community entity” model of funding nonprofit-provided services affects the advocacy of service-provider nonprofits. Homelessness in Canada is a key example of this policy model. At the federal level, for instance, Homeless Partnering Strategy funding flows through an identified community entity. In some cases this is a municipality, but in other instances they were philanthropic organizations — often local United Ways. How does granting this special status to philanthropic funders affect the advocacy ecosystem? Does it reduce the influence of service-provider nonprofits by positioning community entities as the middlemen through which they must operate? Or, might it increase the advocacy potential of the sector by empowering advocacy intermediaries with access to the state as well as the capacity to develop a sustained advocacy agenda?
Bibliography


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