

The Sustainability Network: From Incubation to Independence

Grantor: The Laidlaw Foundation

Grantee: The Sustainability Network

Summary: Building the capacity of environmental non profits

Non-profit organizations are much more likely to get funds for projects than for building their own capacity. Funding for training and management development is “hard money to come by,” says Nathan Gilbert, Executive Director of the Laidlaw Foundation of Toronto. Yet the Laidlaw Foundation did far more than that in 1997 when it funded the Sustainability Network, a network devoted to building capacity in the Ontario non-profit environmental sector.

Since its establishment in 1949, the Laidlaw Foundation has made grants in the environmental area, always interested in preserving the environment for future generations. In 1987, the Foundation identified the Great

Lakes ecosystem as a funding area and in 1990, established its first focused environmental program, the Great Lakes Conservation Fund. In 1992, the Foundation asked Sarah Rang, an environmental consultant, to identify needs and priorities through a consultation with many players involved in the environment. “There were a lot of good ideas, but it was going in umpteen directions,” remembers Gilbert.

The consultations yielded a road map and a number of key recommendations. The most critical decision to flow from the consultant’s report was her recommendation that the Foundation hire a part-time professional staff person to co-ordinate the program. Bruce Lourie was appointed to manage the Foundation’s Environmental Program between 1992 and 2002. The report also encouraged the Foundation to consider how it could best meet the identified needs of the environmental NGOs for organizational development and capacity building in the areas of management and administration, finance and fundraising, and communications. The Foundation was encouraged to consider supporting the development of a centre that could provide these sought after supports and skills. This eventually became the Sustainability Network.

When compared to other sectors, many of which are more solidly established - social services, education and health, for example – the environmental sector is comparatively young and immature. As a movement, it dates back only to the 1960s. The sector is made up of many, disparate, often small, grassroots organizations, dedicated to a wide range of issues. Environmentalists tend to direct their youthful energies and their limited funds toward practical issues directly related to social change for a sustainable society. The smooth running of their organizations is not always a high priority.

Young people are particularly attracted to environmental groups – new university graduates with degrees in biology, political science or environmental studies. "They start as a volunteer, they become a researcher, they become a manager, and all of a sudden, they are the executive director managing ten people and a million dollars," laughs Paul Bubelis, Executive Director of the Sustainability Network. "And they've never taken a management course." For the environmental sector to flourish over the long term, it had to become more effective and more efficient. It had to develop more capacity.

It was a strategic opportunity to initiate something that would ultimately benefit the entire environmental sector, including other foundations that fund environmental NGOs.

In 1997, The Laidlaw Foundation granted seed funding of \$30,000 to develop a capacity-building organization for environmental charities. The Foundation recognized this initiative as an important and unique opportunity. In most cases, new projects that come before foundations for funding are externally-generated. This project was different. The vision to create a new organization had come from within the Foundation. As well, for Laidlaw, it was a strategic opportunity to initiate something that would ultimately benefit the entire environmental sector, including other foundations that fund environmental NGOs.

The Laidlaw Foundation granted the initial funding to sponsor the proposed Sustainability Network and provided Foundation office space, along with administrative support and board oversight. "It came together really well," says Lourie. "It was the right idea at the right time."

The Laidlaw Foundation's endorsement and early support allowed the Sustainability Network to get underway very quickly and gave the project immediate credibility. Lourie applauds Laidlaw for "going out on a



limb." Laidlaw was already recognized in the environmental community as a serious player and had a reputation for being rigorous, fair and respectful. Thus, the high credibility of the initial grant from Laidlaw attracted other funders.

Bubelis and Lourie applied their own best practices to develop Network activities. They had emerged from the grassroots environmental sector themselves and were well-suited to design activities that reflected what environmental groups wanted – simple, small, affordable and accessible, so that anyone who came forward could take advantage. "We wanted to create something that no environmental group could say, 'no, we can't go to that,'" remembers Lourie.

Network activities focus on developing the skills environmental groups require to become sustainable, from marketing and communications to fundraising and management. Since 1998, the Network has hosted a variety of special events. It has offered dozens of full-day and half-day training workshops. For \$10, the Network offers quarterly breakfast forums, with guest speakers. These forums are so well-subscribed that the rooms have to be booked until noon to accommodate all the dialogue. They are "a surprise hit," says Lourie.

The Sustainability Network brings in knowledgeable speakers and workshop leaders who often discount fees charged for their services. Participants in Network events

have access to levels of expertise and experience that, for most of them, would be out of reach. A scholarship fund enables participants to come to training events from a distance.

Funding from several sources has made possible some unique programs. The Network offers a number of bursaries and subsidies to Ontario environmental leaders for management training and leadership opportunities. It hires consultants to work directly with individual environmental groups on specific management challenges, shouldering 90% of the costs. It partnered with GreenAbility to offer an online fundraising course. Rounding out their services are an information centre, an up-to-date website and an electronic newsletter, e-mailed to about 4,000 contacts, all of which provide information about events, capacity building tools, special projects and financial assistance.

Athough the Sustainability Network's initial focus was limited to Ontario, there was always interest to expand nationally. In 2001-2002, the Network organized free training workshops in the Northwest Territories and Whitehorse and is now seeking further funds to





build on these beginnings. Since 2002, the Network has been working with groups in Saskatchewan and in Manitoba to bring several capacity building programs to these two provinces. So the Network's influence is growing. To be truly national would be difficult but "through alliances we will have an impact beyond Ontario," says Bubelis. "Region by region, we will expand across the country."

Inherently, seed funding is temporary. From the start, the Sustainability Network was expected to leverage other funds and become independent of Laidlaw. Because of Laidlaw's endorsement, the Sustainability Network was quickly able to raise further funds from other sources, both public and private, and its success at leveraging funds has continued.

In April 2003, the Sustainability Network became an independent organization – federally incorporated with charitable status, a Board of Directors and its own offices. Laidlaw's contribution was a tremendous return for a relatively small investment. "We have directed about \$1.8 million into capacity building in the [environmental] sector since we began. Laidlaw's grants totalled \$115,000 or about six percent," notes

Bubelis. He sees Laidlaw's support during the early incubation period as an excellent model. For many organizations, all too often the first years are fraught with simply staying alive, limping from project to project. Laidlaw's strategic philanthropy allowed the Sustainability Network to flourish from the start.

The Laidlaw Foundation recognized a groundbreaking idea and gave it the support and encouragement required to develop. "Five years ago, capacity building was not a priority among funders. Now some funders recognize it as a key area of activity. Laidlaw and the Sustainability Network can take some credit for recognizing it early on," says Bubelis.

Nathan Gilbert views the Sustainability Network as "one of the signature grants for Laidlaw. There's no question about that. The Network has become a model management service organization for a community and a model for other sectors."

For more information visit the Foundation
Web Site: www.laidlawfdn.org

Five years ago, capacity building was not a priority among funders. Now some funders recognize it as a key area of activity.

