

But do not look for direction in the fashionable phrase “civil society,” an expression generally defined (or not) according to the interests of the person using it. The bald fact is that there is among Canadians no consensus, and significant disagreement, on who is in “civil society” and who is not.

Recommendation: Whenever possible, the department should identify interested or potentially interested groups and leave them free to nominate their own participants in consultation. A valuable model can be found in the UNCED experience, in which a small steering committee from the NGO community served as the centre of a wide network of NGOs active in development and the environment. An otherwise unwieldy proliferation of interest groups thereby became both manageable and effective in helping the government define policy. The added benefit of having earned a reputation for openness, of course, is that ministers and officials are then freer to meet whomever they choose without reproach.

Best practices: what works, what doesn't

1. Lasting relationships. The most productive consultations have been conducted in the course of developing strong, institutionalized relations with interested Canadians in and out of the NGOs. The annual meetings of officials on human rights were mentioned above, but there have been too few similar examples. Relationships instruct; they build trust; they reassure members of the broader community; they lay the groundwork for public understanding and acceptance of future decisions and conduct; they create valuable partnerships for domestic implementation.