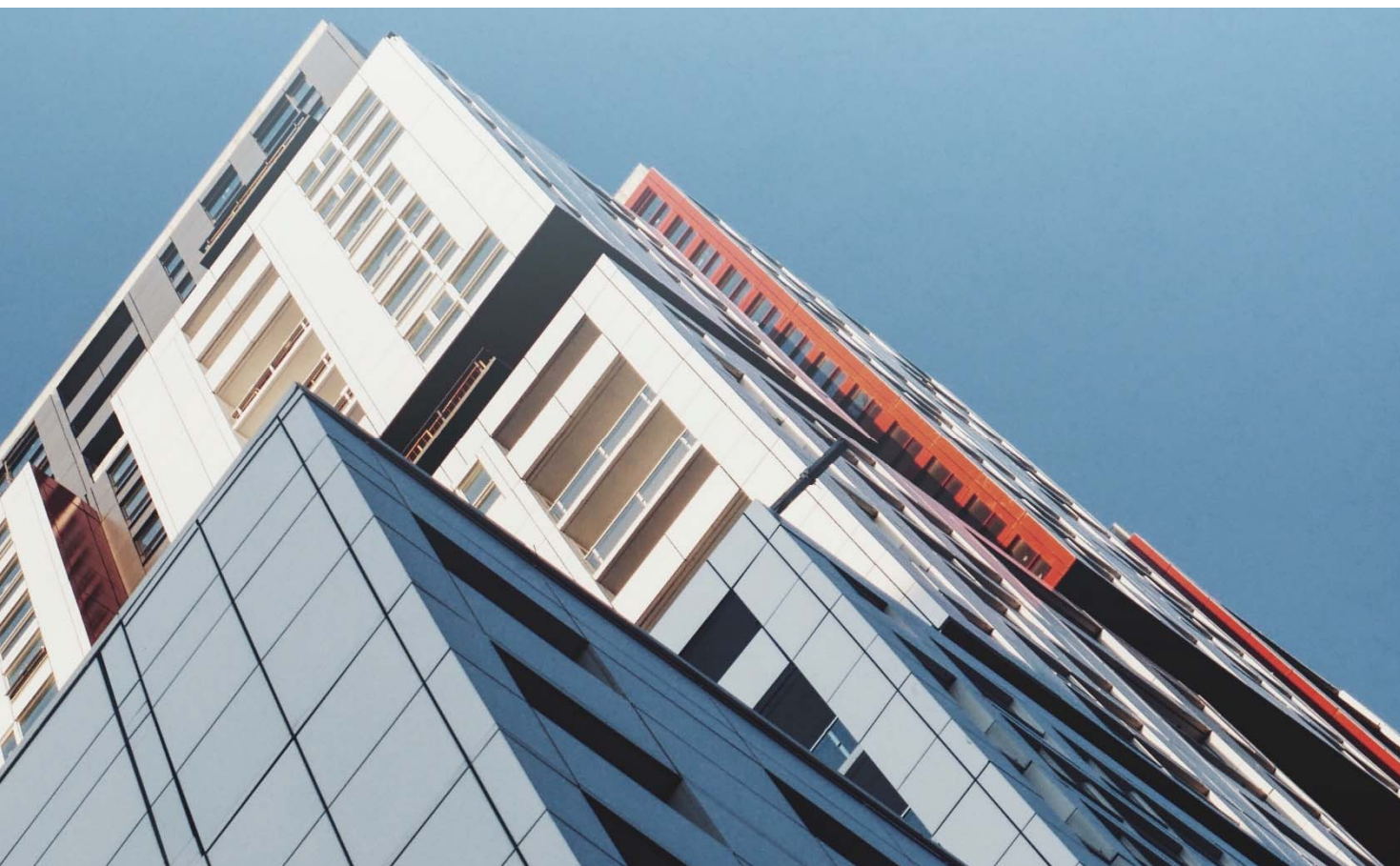# Who is Heard?

Non-government Policy Actors in the Policy Process

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ABOUT US

Austerity and its Alternatives is an international knowledge mobilization project committed to expanding discussions on alternatives to fiscal consolidation and complimentary policies among policy communities and the public. To learn more about our project, please visit www.altausterity.mcmaster.ca.

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Introduction

'Public policy governance' is one strand of New Public Governance (NPG) "concerned with how policy elites and networks interact to create and govern the public policy process" (Osborne 2010: 6). This article is an exploratory investigation of key questions and issues respecting engagement between policy workers in government and non-government organizations who engage with one another in the co-governance of public policy processes in the Canadian provincial context. The research presented here is limited and the empirical gaps raise further questions. The overarching research question is: what is the state of co-governance in the Canadian context? Subsidiary questions include: what is the role of non-governmental organizations in the provincial policy process? When and where do non-state actors participate and how frequently? Is there a hierarchy of engagement with non-governmental stakeholders? And how does this contribute to our understanding of co-production and co-construction of policy?

Policy co-production and co-construction are distinguished as follows. Co-production is associated with the participation of non-state actors in delivery or implementation of policy, while co-construction is concerned with the early-on conceptualization and design of policy. This distinction is important because each is closely associated with NPG (co-construction) and New Public Management (co-production). NPG contends that co-governance is increasingly characterized by a polycentric policy process model. However, this does not preclude a serious role for non-state actors in delivering and implementing policy. New Public Management, however, is primarily concerned with effective and efficient implementation. Co-construction promises a fully actualized NPG where non-state actors participate more fully in the policy process which may entail different points of entry into the process from early-on to late or even multiple points.

This paper is informed by a survey of non-government and provincial government policy workers in the provinces of Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan.[i] It seeks to assess the state of the policy process in these sub-national jurisdictions by reference to where along the NPM/NPG continuum they seem to fit. The data presented here suggests that provincial NGO policy actors are relatively active participants in one or more stages of the policy process but that this participation does tend to be weighted toward the service delivery function.

Overview of Core Issues, Key Concepts, and Literature Review

Phillips (2007) asked: "Are policy processes in Canada actually as open and as participatory as this model of 'governance' suggests?" (p. 497). Non-government

policy actors do have a significant role, but it is largely focused on implementation and service delivery rather than participation in strategically important design work. NPG scholars contend "we are witnessing a fundamental shift in governing models" marked by a "pluralization of policy making", where the neoliberal priority allocated to markets and the traditional Weberian hierarchies of public administration have given way to networks. In normative/theoretical terms the "model rests on interdependence, not power relationships, and centers on negotiation and persuasion, not control" (Phillips and Smith 2011: 4-5). Through collaboration and deliberation, various policy actors engage in policy co-production (Karkainen 2004). That, at least, is the ideal.

The term 'co-production' has been applied to different contexts including citizen participation ranging from service provision to "policy-making and policy implementation" (Pestoff 2012, 17). However, the literature tends to understand co-production as concerned primarily with "involvement of third sector actors in the delivery or implementation of public policy" (Vaillancourt 2012, 80). This framing reflects New Public Management's (NPM) concern with implementation through instruments such as special purpose agencies and contracting (Pollitt and Talbot 2004; Evans and Shields 2010). Given the broad meaning assigned to co-production, it is less precise in distinguishing how NPG and NPM conceive of citizen participation.

We propose to explore two concepts – co-construction and implementation – that differentiate NPG and NPM respectively about the role of non-state actors in the policy process. The term 'co-construction' is concerned with "public policy when it is being designed and not merely to when it is being implemented" (Vaillancourt 2012, 81). Whether that involves co-construction in design or implementation, or both, does not matter: co-construction aligns conceptually with NPG's image of a more open and multi-actor policy process. Co-production, with its emphasis on implementation, is more consistent with NPM's narrowly defined notion of co-governance, where public policy derives from state "monoconstruction" (Vaillancourt 2009, 289 and 303). If NPG approaches are taking hold, we should see the relationship between government and third sector non-state actors characterized by genuine collaboration where final decisions are the product of government and NGOs working together (Najam 2000, 382).

To what extent do NGOs participate in policy processes and what is their capacity to do so? The survey we undertook was informed by the rational policy process model, identifying five stages of policy-making: agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation (Wu et al. 2010: 7). We sought to learn where non-state actors participated in the policy cycle. Our view of authentic participation would require evidence of participation in all stages or at least at the early stages where critical design and instrument choice decisions are debated and assessed as the co-construction model suggests. While some argue that the policy cycle model has "outlived its usefulness" (Sabatier 1991: 147), it guides how governments "organize policy making" and provide policy training (Cairney 2014:

np). It continues to function as a cognitive map in planning policy work and informed how we structured our survey questions.

One of the very few empirical studies of the policy role of Canadian NGOs found that only 22 per cent of NGOs contributed to federal public policy development as part of their mission. The relatively low percentage of NGOs participating in policy processes at the federal level has nothing to do with a lack of interest but rather "they do not have the capacity (time or expertise) to engage in public policy" (Carter 2011: 431). A EKOS survey found that NGOs identified barriers to policy participation which included: lack time and staff to engage in policy development (25 per cent); lack of funding or resources to commit to public policy development (18 per cent); and a lack of expertise in NGOs to contribute effectively (13 per cent); and a lack of access to the policy process due to limited access to senior decision-makers or of opportunity to provide input (20 per cent) (EKOS 2008: 58).

One other concern is the uneven capacity across the NGO spectrum. One study, partially concerned with NGO involvement at the local level, found that business associations were the most influential in policy. This is because most NGOs have few resources, mainly engage in narrow policy fields, and are not organized sectorally. Heneberry and Laforest (2011) confirm the need for a 'broad front' strategy based on sectoral organizing as the most effective means to engage provincial government.

Other Canadian literature on the third sector and public policy suggest that limited capacity extent is but one constraint on NGO policy engagement. Proulx, Bourque and Savard (2007, 300) identified nine parameters shaping government-third sector relations in Quebec: 1) government openness to the third sector; 2) the inclusion of the sector's activities in government policy; 3) the sharing or lack thereof of objectives; 4) the presence or absence of standards guiding interface; 5) the degree of intensity and formalism of relations; 6) how government finances the third sector; 7) the degree of third sector autonomy; 8) the extent to which the relationship is institutionalized; and 9) are the rules and goals of the interface co-constructed or not. In other words, structural, cultural and political variables defining the state-NGO working relationship play a significant role.

The foregoing variables, whether present or absent, can influence how and when NGOs participate in the policy cycle. Participation in the early phases of the process indicates a seat at the table for NGOs in designing policy or, at least, a forum to express their preferences. The parameters identified by Proulx, Bourque and Savard above variously provide a basis for determining the robustness of NGO participation. Given that NGOs are active in bringing policy relevant issues onto the policy agenda, but few get involved in policy formulation (Carter 2011: 432), suggests an informal and unsupported structural/institutional roles in the policy process.

The cultural, institutional and policy-making context will shape the 'style' of policy work including engagement with non-government actors (Howlett and Lindquist 2004, 226). Given the Canadian focus of this article, the heterogeneity of the politics, styles of governance and size of the provinces are critical contextual

factors. Certain governments or specific departments or agencies may frequently consult with stakeholders, however defined, while others will do less. Moreover, Canadian governments tend to prefer "more selective and low-key consultations" (Howlett and Lindquist 2004, 238 and 240) as these are less resource intensive and Canada's smaller provinces obviously have less capacity.

Quebec, although not a subject of study here, provides an example of the tremendous diversity of styles in Canada. From 1980 to 2008, Quebec's approach to social policy development has been closer to what Vaillancourt (2009, 296) considers a "democratic co-construction model", where "more co-production and co-construction of social policy is to be found" with "participation of stakeholders from the market and civil society". The institutionalized partnership between the Quebec state and NGOs from the social economy sector resulted in significant social policy innovation. The depth and sophistication of this model does not exist elsewhere in Canada (Elson and Rogers 2010). Our study of three provinces will deepen our understanding of these diverse approaches to co-governance.

Exploratory Themes

The research presented here is concerned with three exploratory themes. The first is concerned with the frequency of meetings between government and non-government actors and whether these take place in response to a formal or informal invitation extended by the government. Second, we examine at which stage in the policy process do non-government organizations actually participate. And third, with whom within government do non-government actors meet with. The meaning and purpose of these measures are as follows.

Frequency and Type of Meetings

The frequency of meetings between actors from the two sectors indicates the extent to which policy ideas, issues of concern and information are exchanged on a routine basis. Further, it may also be a reasonable marker of the structuring or institutionalizing of such encounters as a valued part of the policy process. In practice, such meetings take two forms: a *formal* consultation occurs when a government issues a consultation paper and invites the 'public' to respond in a series of scheduled meetings with government policy staff and/or elected officials; an *informal* consultation occurs when experts on a given subject and/or non-government organizations are invited to meet privately with the minister and policy staff, to comment on a policy idea. This may be just a trial balloon to gauge reaction or it may be to seek technical advice. A government's invitation to engage informally or formally can be telling. Formal consultative processes tend to serve standard governmental objectives: to assist in mapping stakeholder positions, to give profile

to the government both to the relevant policy community but also to the larger public, and to canvass a broad range of policy insights which may be helpful in shaping the eventual law, regulation, program. Informal consultations – which are lower profile and more exclusive – typically focus on the 'nitty-gritty' of technical and political substance of proposals. These informal meetings can generally be understood to be more consequential in terms of directly informing policy decisions.

Non-government Policy Participation and Stage in the Process

Engagement at different stages of the policy process indicates the role government's assign to non-governmental policy actors in framing policy. NGO contributions at the early stage of the process, or all stages, can be seen as evidence of a more authentic effort by government to broaden input when critical policy objective and design decisions are made.

Whom in Government is Listening

With whom in the government hierarchy are non-government policy actors meeting with? The rank and function of the government officials being encountered offers some insight into the purpose of the meeting. If the meeting is with deputy minister or ministerial level ranks, the encounters are likely more strategic, concerned with policy setting, design, and objectives. It further expresses the technical and/or political value the government places on input from non-government actors. Conversely, meetings with low ranking officials such as branch directors, non-management policy analysts, or front-line program staff can be understood differently. Meetings with policy branch directors or policy analysts would likely involve informational exchange at the policy design stage or perhaps be perfunctory. Meetings with program level staff are always concerned with operational implementation issues. Such meetings are not necessarily unimportant, but their purpose and focus is different.

Data and Research Methods

In January 2012, two survey instruments were sent to 2458 provincial government policy workers and 1995 NGO-based policy workers located in Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan. A database containing the e-mail addresses of the sample population was constructed from publicly available sources such as online directories, using keyword searches terms including policy analyst, researcher, analyst, advisor, coordinator, director, and planner, appearing in job titles or descriptions. Such job titles were searched for both government and non-

government organizations so that consistency in the type of function captured would be maintained. In some cases, additional names were added to lists from hard-copy sources, including government organization manuals.[ii]

The provinces of Ontario, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan were chosen because they represented heterogeneous cases in terms of politics, history and economic and demographic scale. Four policy domains were selected– environment, health, immigration, and labour – to provide variation in the profile and breadth of issues and policies which NGOs might engage governments on. These characteristics varied with respect to political profile (health and environment were high; labour and immigration were low), evidentiary bases (health and environment were strongly science-based, labour and immigration were more politically-driven), and the extent of direct service delivery (health and immigration involved direct delivery; labour and environment had a regulatory focus). Each domain had a significant number of non-governmental stakeholders with policy interests. These characteristics depend highly on contextual forces. Due to space constraints, we only present aggregate data analysis and break-out for each province. See Appendix A for additional information respecting the survey data.

A total of 1510 responses were collected; the final response rate was 33.99 percent. With the exception of the NGO labour respondents, the percentage of respondents corresponded closely with the population identified by the authors. The resulting data were weighted using an iterative proportional fitting or raking method.

The surveys were designed to elicit responses on how policy workers in government and NGOs, view the work they do, how they go about different kinds of policy work, and how they understand their role in the policy process. The objective was to gain initial insight into the day-to-day work of these actors and their perceptions of this work. Questions concerned with changes over time were not posed in the surveys.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the mean responses to survey questions. The Tukey HSD test was used for post hoc comparisons. Cramer's V was used to examine strength of association between variables of interest. The alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.[iii]

Findings: Perspectives of Government and NGO Policy Workers

This section examines the survey data on the perceptions of government and non-government respondents about policy engagement. We consider how often NGO stakeholders meet with government officials on an informal or formal basis, at what stage in the policy process does participation take place, and at what level of the government hierarchy do non-government actors engage with government officials.

Frequency and Type of Policy Engagement

The data indicate that government respondents tend to more frequently invite stakeholders to work with them on a policy matter on an informal basis. Invitations to participate informally were extended by 52.2 per cent of government respondents. Formal invitations were considerably lower at 38.1 per cent (Table 1).

Table 1. Engaging stakeholders (government)

Inviting stakeholders to assist	Informally		Formally	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Never	103	19.4	100	18.8
Annually	52	9.8	113	21.2
Semi-Annually	99	18.6	116	21.8
Quarterly	121	22.7	122	22.9
Monthly	157	29.5	81	15.2
Total	532	100.0	532	100.0
Missing System	150		150	
Total	682		682	

There is considerable variation in government respondents' answers by province, but the patterns are largely consistent across the informal/formal dichotomy. For example, Saskatchewan respondents engage stakeholders most frequently regardless of whether formally or informally (Table 2). They reported that 57.9 per cent invite stakeholders to work with them informally on a quarterly or monthly basis. BC respondents are least likely to do so, with 46.1 per cent inviting stakeholders on a monthly or quarterly basis. Invitations to participate more frequently in a formal process are less common but the interprovincial differences are much more significant. Again, Saskatchewan government policy respondents indicate that 48.7 per cent invite stakeholders to participate on a monthly or quarterly basis. At the other end, BC respondents, again, were least likely to participate in formal policy engagement (only 26.1 per cent indicated they extended invitations to stakeholders).

Table 2. Engaging stakeholders by province (government)

Inviting stakeholders to assist	BC		ON		SK	
	Informally, %	Formally, %	Informally, %	Formally, %	Informally, %	Formally, %
Never	20.0	22.3	18.1	18.3	21.9	15.9
Annually	13.1	30.0	9.4	21.1	7.0	11.5
Semi-Annually	20.8	21.5	19.8	21.1	13.2	23.9
Quarterly	24.6	16.9	21.2	24.6	24.6	25.7
Monthly	21.5	9.2	31.6	14.9	33.3	23.0
Total N	130	130	288	289	114	113

NGO respondents, similar to government respondents, indicate that informal invitations to provide input on policy issues are more frequent than formal ones (Table 3). Quarterly or monthly informal invitations were reported by 33.6 per cent of NGO respondents compared to 22.3 per cent reporting formal invitations. Interestingly, 30.3 per cent of NGO respondents indicated they had never received formal invitations, while 28 per cent reported not ever having informal invitations. The most frequent NGO response was no invitation to any form of consultation with their provincial government. This was followed by an annual invitation.

Table 3. Engaging stakeholders (NGO)

Invitation for input		Informally		Formally	
		N	Percent	N	Percent
	Never	132	28.0	146	30.3
	Annually	103	21.8	125	26.1
	Semi-Annually	78	16.6	102	21.3
	Quarterly	96	20.4	78	16.3
	Monthly	62	13.2	29	6.0
	Total	471	100.0	480	100.0
Missing	System	132		123	
Total		603		603	

Table 4a. Comparisons of means between the provinces (NGO)

Invitation for input	BC	ON	SK
Informally*	2.87	2.69	2.34
Formally**	2.51	2.50	2.04

(Based on 1-5 scale where 1=never, 2=annually, 3=semi-annually, 4=quarterly, 5=monthly)
*statistically significant difference between Saskatchewan and British Columbia
**statistically significant difference between Saskatchewan and the other two provinces

Table 4b. Comparisons of means between the provinces (government)

Invitation for input	BC	ON	SK
Informally	3.15	3.39	3.40
Formally*	2.61	2.97	3.28

(Based on 1-5 scale where 1=never, 2=annually, 3=semi-annually, 4=quarterly, 5=monthly)
*statistically significant difference between British Columbia and the other two provinces

Policy Process Stage and NGO Participation

How do the three provinces line up with respect to the NPG and NPM models of engagement? Have they moved to a more distributed, polycentric form of co-governance? Or, do they remain embedded in the NPM model? Or is there a mix of policy governance approaches? The NGO respondents across provinces indicate 42.9 per cent were involved at all stages or the early stage of policy development (Table 5). A slightly larger number, 46.5 per cent, said they participated only after the key design decisions had been made or at the implementation stage.

Table 5. Stages of NGO participation in the policy process (NGO)

Stage of participation	N	Percent
At all stages	121	25.8
Early stages	80	17.1
Design already determined	169	36.2
Implementation stage	48	10.3
Not at all	50	10.6
Total	468	100.0
Missing System	135	
Total	603	

Given that only 10.6 per cent of NGO respondents reported no role in the process, it appears that co-governance is healthy in the three provinces surveyed here. NGO participation in policy co-construction and co-production are balanced, which suggests that the governance model in these provinces occupies the mid-range between NPG and NPM. Unfortunately, without previous data with which to compare we cannot determine if there is movement toward one model or the other.

There are differences among the provinces (Table 6). Ontario respondents reported higher levels of participation in the policy process in all stages or the early stage where substantive and design decisions are made (47.5 per cent). This is

modestly larger than Saskatchewan (40.5 per cent) and BC (38.6 per cent). BC mainly involves NGO input at the implementation stage, after key design and substantive decisions were made (52.6 per cent). The relationship between provinces and the stage of invitation of NGOs in the policy cycle was statistically significant (Chi square = 16.916, p=0.031) but weak (Cramer's V =0.135).

Table 6. Stages of NGO participation in the policy process by province (NGO survey)

Stage of participation	BC		ON		SK	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
All stages	42	24.3	63	30.7	16	17.4
Early stages	25	14.3	34	16.8	21	23.1
Design already determined	70	40.9	71	34.6	28	31.1
Implementation stage	20	11.7	19	9.5	8	9.3
Not at all	15	8.8	17	8.4	17	19.1
Total	172	100.0	205	100.0	91	100.0
Missing System	44		62		29	
Total	215		267		120	

The data suggest that new governance images of a pluralist and inclusive policy process are not universally and evenly in place but instead are found distributed in an uneven fashion across provinces. A contextual explanation for the Ontario results may yield some insight for that jurisdiction. Ontario's apparent receptivity to engaging with NGOs at the critical early design stages of a policy process has been described by one senior ranking public servant as a function of the McGuinty government's "undisciplined" policy process which was characterized by "a lot of responsiveness to stakeholders especially in the Premier's Office" (Personal Correspondence with former Deputy Minister November 24 2013). Was this openness to external engagement unique to the McGuinty premiership? The previous Ontario Conservative government was characterized by a disinterest in consultation on policy as these issues had been set in the party's 1995 election platform. Indeed there was a prohibition on meeting with trade unions. So, assuming that the energetic and inclusive approach to engagement was a function of the bridge-building strategy of a particular government, can we assume further that if not for this factor, would Ontario appear similar to the other provinces? Again, another question requiring further research.

A statistically significant (Chi square = 31.908, p=0.001) but weak (Cramer's V=0.152) relationship was found between the size of the NGO as measured by number of staff who work on policy issues and the stage of the process in which they become engaged. No discernable relationships are apparent. Perhaps

predictably, NGOs not involved in any stage of the process are most likely to be the smallest in terms of policy staffing (Table 7). One would think that the largest NGOs would be involved at all stages but the data do not demonstrate such. Indeed, NGOs with 6 to 10 policy staff are the most likely to be involved in all stages while the largest (20 or more), while ranking second, are considerably behind the 6-10 grouping. Participation does cluster across the NGO size in the all stages and after key decisions have been made stages. This may indicate a mid-range form of co-governance in these provinces, comprising a mix of co-construction, co-production and hybrids of both.

Table 7. Stage of participation and Number of dedicated policy staff (NGO)

How many people in your organization are dedicated to policy-related work?	At what stage of the government policy process is your organization typically invited to participate?					
	At all stages	At the very early stages	After the key design/content elements have been determined	At the implementation stage	Not at all	Total (Number)
1-5	19.6%	19.3%	37.7%	11.4%	12.0%	316
6-10	50.8%	9.5%	27.0%	4.8%	7.9%	63
11-20	24.4%	12.2%	43.9%	12.2%	7.3%	41
More than 20	34.1%	12.2%	36.6%	7.3%	9.8%	41

Government Hierarchy and NGO Participation

Overall, the data suggest a hierarchy of engagement with non-governmental stakeholders (Table 8). Seventy-one percent of respondents indicated that senior ranking public – servants such as directors – meet with external stakeholders monthly or weekly. The second most frequent level of contact was with working level staff (in field/program offices). At the other end of the continuum, 61.4 per cent of respondents reported that deputy ministers met with stakeholders either weekly or monthly. Meetings with the minister or minister's staff were slightly more frequent at 62.3 per cent. Monthly or weekly meetings with mid-level public servants such as researchers and policy analysts were, surprisingly, not much more frequent than this at 62.9 %.

Table 8. Consultations with stakeholders (government)

How often do the following consult with stakeholders:	N	% weekly or monthly
Minister/Minister's staff	435	62.3
Deputy Minister	430	61.4
Assistant Deputy Minister of the relevant division	439	65.7
Senior level civil servants (e.g., Directors)	462	71.0
Middle level civil servants (e.g., Policy analysts, Researchers)	476	62.9
Working level staff (e.g. Field Officers)	458	69.0

Comparing the three provinces revealed no statistically significant difference among them. The aggregated sum of the frequencies where NGO policy workers report engaging with government officials displays the same hierarchy as that reported by government policy workers (Table 9). The most frequent level of interaction with government reported is with front-line staff where 59.4 per cent reported quarterly or monthly encounters. Quarterly or monthly interactions with mid-ranking government managers or professional staff were less frequently reported at 43.1 per cent and 40.3 per cent respectively. As might be expected, the frequency of interactions with the most senior bureaucratic and political levels was the smallest. Only 21.1 per cent of NGO respondents reported meeting with senior government managers on a monthly or quarterly basis; a smaller number of 18.5 per cent reported meeting with cabinet ministers or their staff.

The government rank/function where the most frequent interaction occurs is with front-line staff. One in six NGO respondents indicate quarterly or monthly meetings with the minister and/or the minister's staff. About 21 per cent of NGO respondents express that quarterly or monthly meetings take place with senior ranking public servants.

Table 9. Interactions with government (NGO)

How often do you interact with the following in the course of your policy related work:	N	% quarterly or monthly
Minister/Minister's staff	478	18.5
Senior level provincial government management	472	21.1
Middle level provincial government management	476	43.1
Professional government staff	470	40.3
Front line staff	476	59.4

There is no statistically significant difference found among the three provinces on any of the frequency questions posed. The data suggests that, at certain points in the policy process, government and NGO-based policy actors have different perceptions of shared policy engagement activities and inconsistent views of their own activities. Table 5 shows that nearly 43 per cent of NGO respondents are involved at all stages of the process or the early-on stages. However, Table 3 indicates that only 13.2 per cent of NGO respondents are invited to meet with government on an informal basis monthly. Formal monthly invitations from government are fewer still at an issuance rate at 6 per cent. The reported data suggest a significant discrepancy between participation at a specific stage and invitations, formal and informal, to meet with government officials. Other data suggest the government and NGO respondents have sharply different perceptions of the frequency of their meetings with various ranks of government officials to discuss policy matters. For example, Table 8 reports the perception of government-employed policy staff of how frequently various ranks of government officials, from Ministers and their political staff at the apex to front-line program staff, meet with non-governmental organization representatives, or stakeholders, as they are often referred to. Table 8 reports only the most frequent number of meetings chosen: weekly or monthly as these indicate a rather dense volume of traffic between the two sectors. Seventy-one per cent of government respondents perceived that senior level, but not executive, ranking public servants (such as branch directors) meet either weekly or monthly with non-government representatives. In contrast, NGO responses perceive the frequency of meetings at this level as is much lower at 21.1 per cent (See Table 9).

Discussion and Interpretation

Such discrepancies require explanation and clarification. First, with respect to the policy stage and frequency of invitations to consult whether on an informal or formal basis with government. These survey elements are intended to capture data which can be used to understand whether there is a case for NPG type co-governance and to what extent is a model of co-construction, co-production or a hybrid of both suggested. The NGO perspective on how frequently they are called upon to participate with their government in policy co-governance tends to support the observation of Capano, Rayner and Zito (2012) in their study of post-secondary, environment and forestry policy in Canada, the UK and Germany. They concluded that within the context of a "general tendency towards polycentric governance" the predominant style was "characterized by the persistence of … more state power" (68). In other words, co-governance tends more toward a co-production model rather than one where the power to shape policy is shared. Comparing NGO and government responses regarding the frequency by which invitations are received by NGOs, or sent by government officials, reveals different perceptions of frequency. Government respondents believe that they invite non-government stakeholders to

meet more often than NGO counterparts believe to be the case. This may be less a matter of different perceptions and more an expression of selectively inviting of non-governmental stakeholders for a policy discussion. NGO respondents are a mix of insiders, outsiders (Evans and Shields 2014, 119), and hybrids -- this will vary from issue to issue, the party in government, and in the stage of the electoral cycle. Consequently some NGOs find that they are never or rarely the target of an invitation or may suffer from consultation fatigue depending on what their relationship with the sitting government is.

Second, the survey element capturing the frequency of invitations from government to consult on an informal or formal basis is intended to capture some insight into the structuration or embeddedness of policy dialogue between government and non-government actors. It is not only that these elements of the survey seek to provide some useful insight into the type of policy work the process tends to engage non-governmental actors in but also, by asking about the frequency of formal and informal consultations, we gain some perspective on the extent to which government specifically is interested in utilizing NGO input. NGO responses indicate rather frequent calls to discuss policy with their government on an informal basis. Such informal consultation may be more meaningful as they are selectively invited to deal with a policy matter in a low profile and confidential manner. This is real business, not just public positioning. As noted, informal consultations are typically concerned with either important technical details or canvassing non-government actors whom the government takes very seriously. Only certain voices are heard. In addition, these consultations, both formal and informal, may take place at any stage of the process. Indeed, informal consultations may well take place prior to any process as a means to assist government in weighing options and determining policy agenda priorities, what to move on and what to defer or abandon. It should be further noted that such consultations are variable in terms of how many are held, if at all, and consequently have an ad hoc aspect as they are conducted on an 'as needed' basis. They may, or may not, actually lead to any identifiable output. Thus, while there will some overlap between the two, it is not necessarily the case. They can be distinct exercises which do not intersect. However, this explains, at least in part, how we might understand the discrepancy captured in the government and NGO responses.

The data raise questions respecting the transparency and perhaps inclusivity of policy engagement, given how common the informal process is across jurisdictions. Both models (formal and informal) are widely applied by governments but the patterns suggest that informal engagement is more frequent than formal approaches. However, formal invitations tend to be more frequent on an annual basis. Again, this likely reflects that formal processes, being more structured, planned and of greater profile, will be less common given that they require considerable resources to launch and manage stakeholder and perhaps public expectations.

It should be noted that frequency, whether numerous or nominal, is not necessarily a gauge in assessing the robustness of policy engagement. Infrequent meetings may nonetheless be substantive. More numerous encounters may well be less so. However, more frequent meetings, at a minimum, is indicative of a governments' interest in hearing from stakeholders and/or creating the space to raise issues with the ministry's external policy community.

Explaining the differences between the provinces can be attributed to varying 'styles' of governance noted earlier. However, one would expect that Saskatchewan, as the smallest, significantly so of the three, would employ informal consultations substantially more than Ontario but they are not dramatically different here. However, Saskatchewan is significantly more likely to use informal consultations in comparison to British Columbia. There is no empirical data to explain why the largest province and one of the smallest would both very nearly equally utilize informal approaches. Why BC would lean toward a practice of less frequent and somewhat more formal approaches to policy co-construction raises a question about the governance style in that province as well.

We now turn to explaining the discrepant accounts of the frequency of meetings between non-government actors and various ranks in the government hierarchy. The hierarchy of who NGOs meet with in government indicates the role assigned to NGOs as primarily a source of policy ideas and innovation or as more of an operational partner concerned with implementation and delivery. The more senior level interactions can be understood as concerning policy matters and the political management of the policy community involved while engagement with front-line and perhaps even mid-level public servants may be concerned with more operational issues stemming from program delivery and implementation. Not that these latter dimensions are unimportant but frequent meetings with deputy ministers and ministers or their staff reflects the political centrality of NGOs in a policy community to a government.

The government survey data suggest that up and down the government hierarchy there is considerable engagement with the NGO policy communities. Predictably, the frequency of meetings declines as one moves up toward the deputy minister and minister's offices. Still, the frequency of reported weekly/monthly meetings is significant. The NGO survey reflects a similar overall pattern. Interactions with senior ranking public servants are an indication of a purely NPM-type model. Encounters at these levels may not be frequent, but a case can be made that there is no need for frequent meetings at these levels as the number of opportunities for such access will be more limited as the policy window does not open frequently. At this level of the hierarchy, encounters, while less frequent, are going to be both strategic and substantive in nature. This suggests that the NPM co-production, with a focus on implementation/operational issues, is the preponderant paradigm of governance. However, as with other paradoxes here, this may reflect the transitional stage of co-governance in the provinces.

Interestingly, government respondents were substantially more likely than non-government respondents, across all the occupational ranks provided, from front-line to Minister, to believe that these officials met with non-government representatives on a weekly or monthly basis. This may be a case of both being correct in their assessments. Government respondents may in fact see a large number of more frequent meetings but these are with 'insiders' – policy actors "who have ready access to policy systems" but this is not the case for all as "certain groups of actors are often excluded" (Mayer, van Daalen and Bots 2004, 180). NGO respondents, a broad and heterodox group, would be composed of both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Some will have greater access than others. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (AFC) provides a variation on this insider/outsider dichotomy. A core contention of AFC is that "policy participants will seek allies with people who hold similar policy core beliefs among legislators, agency officials, interest group leaders, judges, researchers, and intellectuals" (Sabatier and Weible 2007, 196). Actors not sharing these core beliefs will be excluded from the coalition and would find accessing the policy process more challenging. Both the critical participatory policy analysis perspective and that of AFC help explain the discrepancy expressed in the data.

Conclusion

Our findings have implications for further research and the practice of policy co-governance. With respect to the style of policy engagement, all governments surveyed here favoured inviting non-government actors to meet on an informal basis. Perhaps the most insightful finding about the state of co-governance was that 43% of NGO respondents were involved at all stages or at the critical early stages where key design and goal decisions are determined. A marginally larger number, 46.5%, found their participation confined to the latter stages, thus excluded from shaping key strategic decisions. Only 10% had no role. In addition, differences between the provinces are discernible suggesting particular policy engagement styles or cultures exist within each province. And less unsurprising is the finding that non-government actors tend to consult with senior ranking public servants who occupy positions below that of the executive cadre. Policy directors and managers serve as gatekeeper for which policy proposals and issues of stakeholders get brought to the attention of more senior ranking officials. More routinized interactions took place between front-line government staff and non-government actors.

We can conclude that co-governance in these three contexts presents elements of co-construction and co-production. Characteristics of new governance arrangements co-exist with those associated with New Public Management approaches. While the Canadian literature on co-governance is not extensive, key contributions tend to critically question the extent to which genuine new governance practices exist, except for Quebec (Elson 2011; Laforest 2011; Phillips 2007;

Vaillancourt 2012). Our findings suggest that a great deal of policy co-construction occurs in practice, at least more than the critics suggest. However, our results indicate there is nevertheless considerable opportunity for expanding meaningful policy engagement. When managing processes, if governments are serious about constructing and practicing a robust process of policy engagement with NGO stakeholders, they need to establish more opportunities for access and full participation by non-government actors. Importantly, this should include external stakeholders possibly deemed less significant in political and technical terms by the government. Governments might consider how to identify how NGOs with less capacity can be enabled to participate. This might involve institutionalizing co-governance structures to provide the space and resources necessary for ongoing dialogue.

The survey findings suggest several lines for future research. First, and most intriguing concerns better understanding the different perceptions government and non-government policy workers of the frequency of engagement on a formal or informal basis. One avenue might be to draw on the insider/outsider dichotomy as a possible explanation for the perceived differences. Exploring precisely how the characteristics of an NGO i.e. size, functional specialization, relationship to the government etc. inform the policy role, if any, of the NGO would be revealing. Second, a comparative assessment of the characteristics of NGOs by policy domain, and the roles they are assigned by government, would deepen our knowledge of how political factors and evidence work inform policy development and if patterns vary by policy area. Third, further qualitative research on participation in formal and/or informal consultative processes might produce insight on whether more meetings invariably signal more robust policy co-governance, fewer meetings stand as evidence of a shallow degree of engagement, and whether the ostensibly status assigned to NGO access necessarily means less influence at different stages of the policy cycle. Finally, we could learn more about different provincial 'styles' of co-governance and what explains those differences. Elson's (2014) examination of network governance structures at the provincial level is the most sophisticated effort to date examining the provincial/third sector policy relationship. This work establishes the foundation for further research into how structures created by the provinces to facilitate policy engagement contribute to co-governance. In this respect, given the diversity of approaches to network governance identified by Elson, the role of the political environment in shaping/informing policy engagement promises to yield applied and theoretically rich insights.

In short, while the research presented here was exploratory, many interesting questions emerge from the analysis. This data provides a baseline which can be used to compare co-governance practices over time. Our intent is to continue pursuing these questions and deepen this project of Canadian co-governance research.

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Appendix A

Table 1 – Province location

Province location	NGO		Government	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
British Columbia	215	35.7	165	25.1
Ontario	267	44.3	355	54.0
Saskatchewan	120	19.9	137	20.9
Total	603	100.0	657	100.0

Table 2a – Self-identified sector (NGO)

NGO	BC		ON		SK	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Environment	40	18.5	54	20.3	29	24.5
Health	62	28.8	104	39.0	41	33.9
Immigration	33	15.2	47	17.5	10	8.2
Labour	81	37.5	62	23.2	40	33.4
Total	215	100.0	267	100.0	120	100.0

Table 2b – Self-identified sector (Government)

Government	BC		ON		SK	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Environment	23	19.3	43	14.9	15	13.5
Health	45	37.8	102	35.4	20	18.0
Immigration	29	24.4	127	44.1	60	54.1
Labour	22	18.5	16	5.6	16	14.4
Total	119	100.0	288	100.0	111	100.0