

NONPROFIT SECTOR STRATEGY GROUP

# Business

The Nonprofit Sector  
and Business:  
New Visions  
New Opportunities  
New Challenges

A STATEMENT  
FOR PUBLIC  
DISCUSSION



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

## Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group

The Aspen Institute's Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group (NSSG) is a leadership forum that is addressing the most pressing issues facing the nonprofit sector in America. Formed in 1997, the NSSG convenes meetings to explore innovative ways in which the business, government and nonprofit sectors might work together to address shared concerns and promote a healthy civil society and democracy.

The NSSG is an initiative of The Aspen Institute's Nonprofit Sector and Philanthropy Program, which seeks to improve the operation of the nonprofit sector and philanthropy through research and dialogue focused on public policy, management, and other important issues affecting the nonprofit sector.

Other NSSG publications include, "The Nonprofit Contribution to Civic Participation and Advocacy" and "The Nonprofit Sector and the Market: Opportunities and Challenges."

This pamphlet provides an introduction to the work of the NSSG, followed by the group's statement, "The Nonprofit Sector and Business: New Visions, New Opportunities, New Challenges."

We welcome your comments on this publication. To share comments, request more information, or order NSSG publications, please contact:

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Information is also available on The Aspen Institute's Web site, [www.aspeninstitute.org/nssg](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/nssg).

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## Table of Contents

Introduction: The Mission of the Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group .....	2
Executive Summary .....	4
The Nonprofit Sector and Business: New Visions, New Opportunities, New Challenges .....	7
Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group Membership .....	14
Additional Meeting Participants .....	15

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## Introduction: The Mission of the Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group

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*By carefully examining the most important challenges and opportunities facing America's private nonprofit organizations, the Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group is working to stimulate a new consensus about the nonprofit sector's roles and responsibilities, and offer practical recommendations to enhance policy, practice, research, and public education on this crucial set of institutions.*

America's private nonprofit sector has long played a critical role in American life.<sup>1</sup> Its 1.5 million organizations and associations provide services to meet an extraordinary range of human needs: ministering to the sick through visiting nurses associations, hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes; educating tens of millions in its schools and universities, as well as in community tutoring programs; providing human services such as day care, meals on wheels, adoption, job placement, domestic abuse prevention, and relief for the poor; strengthening spiritual life through churches and religious associations; and promoting arts and cultural activities of all kinds.

Nonprofit organizations also connect Americans to unique opportunities: to volunteer, to advocate for public policy, to promote democratic values, to participate in decision-making processes, and—in doing so—to shape a more just and prosperous democracy.

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### RESPONDING TO A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

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In the past 15 years, the nonprofit sector, like business and government, has had to respond to a dramatically new social and political landscape.

The contours of this landscape include: a new and constantly evolving mix of peoples and cultures; instant and interactive technology in all arenas of life; downsized and devolved governments; a global marketplace; a commercial presence that reaches into almost every aspect of life; and a surging, volatile economy that is benefiting many but not all.

These new realities pose a complex mix of opportunities and challenges for nonprofit organizations. On the one hand, they

open up the possibility of productive new partnerships between nonprofit organizations and businesses and new sources of revenues that nonprofit organizations can tap. On the other hand, however, they bring for-profit competitors into traditional nonprofit fields and create commercial pressures that can threaten the ability of nonprofit organizations to remain focused on their public-service missions.

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## THE WORK OF THE NONPROFIT SECTOR STRATEGY GROUP

This changed environment gives rise to fundamental questions: What are the unique contributions of nonprofit organizations? What traditional nonprofit roles should endure and what new roles need to be imagined? What are the sector's major strengths and weaknesses? How can needed changes best be encouraged?

In 1997, The Aspen Institute, an international nonprofit educational institution headquartered in Washington, D.C., organized the Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group (NSSG) to address these questions, to examine the sector's most important opportunities and challenges and bring constructive ideas and recommendations to public attention. Funded by grants from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and The Ford Foundation, the NSSG focuses its attention primarily on the public-benefit portion of the nonprofit sector, which encompasses those organizations whose primary mission is to serve a broad public rather than their own members.

The NSSG convenes participants from a variety of backgrounds and institutions—including individuals from business, government, academia, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and the media. In addition to gathering participants for regular deliberations, the NSSG shares its findings with and seeks comments from a broad range of opinion leaders, policymakers, academic institutions, nonprofit and business groups, and journalists.

In the following pages are the results of the NSSG's deliberations on one of the core functions of the nonprofit sector: its role in promoting productive interaction between corporations and nonprofit organizations. This document is being circulated in the hope that it will add to the ongoing dialogue on this topic and provide helpful suggestions for future action.

## Executive Summary

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A significant opportunity exists at the dawn of the twenty-first century to improve the way we address public problems in this country and around the world.

This opportunity arises, in the first instance, from the growing realization that the challenges confronting us in protecting the environment, alleviating poverty, reducing crime, improving education, and fostering community are too big for any one sector—be it government, business, or nonprofit—to solve on its own.

At the same time, all three sectors are increasingly recognizing the relevance of these problems to their own missions and purposes and are reaching out to the other sectors to join in productive partnerships to respond. The result has been a significant injection of new energy and resources into the solution of public problems and the emergence of new forms of collaboration among government, business, and the nonprofit sector to respond to societal challenges.

The Aspen Institute's Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group, a group of 30 leading nonprofit, corporate, and government officials, met in June 2000 to discuss these developments and identify steps that could be taken to promote and guide the future evolution of business-nonprofit partnerships. Here are its findings.

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### CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP: THE NEW MODEL OF BUSINESS-NONPROFIT ENGAGEMENT

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- Corporations have long been involved in community affairs in partnership with nonprofit organizations. But corporate relationships with nonprofit organizations and corporate involvement in public-problem solving have broadened and deepened in both content and form in recent years.
- This development reflects a new strategic approach to philanthropy and community involvement on the part of a number of corporations. This approach seeks to position corporate philanthropy and community involvement at the intersection of business interest and societal need, tying corporate community activities much more securely to business objectives and

responding creatively to the very real limits on corporate philanthropic resources in the present competitive environment.

- Not only are some corporations applying this approach to their philanthropic activities, they are extending it to their business activities as well, adopting a concept of "corporate citizenship" that applies a given set of core values to the way they earn their income as well as how they give part of it away. In the process, these corporations are more successfully retaining valued employees, attracting dedicated customers, and fostering public support.
- One outgrowth of this new approach is a new pattern of corporate engagement with the nonprofit sector, including:
  - ✓ New forms of giving that go beyond cash to include technical and managerial knowledge and in-kind support.
  - ✓ New ways to tie philanthropy to the overall business strategies of corporations.
  - ✓ New types of relationships between corporations and nonprofits, with more emphasis on outcomes and closer operating relationships.
  - ✓ "Cause-related marketing" and "sponsorship" arrangements that consciously marry the credibility of nonprofit organizations and the public's desire to support them to business marketing goals to achieve beneficial results for society.
  - ✓ Broader "community partnerships" in which corporations join with nonprofit organizations, and often government agencies, in long-term, multi-pronged efforts to address complex societal issues, such as the improvement of public schools, preservation of the environment, and the reduction of welfare dependence.

#### SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITIES—MINIMIZING THE RISKS

Despite the considerable promise they hold, these new relationships between businesses and nonprofit organizations also confront challenges and raise a number of risks. For example, differences in mission and objectives, in cultures and skills, and in resources and power can make the relationship between corporations and nonprofit organizations unbalanced. Such relationships are also often difficult and time-consuming to establish and can run into legal and regulatory barriers. In summary, a number of risks exist, including:

- Risks that smaller nonprofit organizations will not have access to such partnership arrangements.

- Risks that over-reliance on corporations may lead nonprofits to become preoccupied with only popular concerns.
- Risks that business influences and commercial pressures will lead nonprofit organizations to take actions that undermine their central missions.

To meet these challenges and minimize these risks, a number of useful steps can be taken:

- **Improve Information** about corporate philanthropy and corporate community involvement, as well as nonprofit capabilities and contributions.
- **Expand Dialogue** between nonprofits and businesses to foster partnerships and overcome mutual misperceptions.
- **Establish Mechanisms** to link corporations with nonprofit organizations and broker cooperative ventures.
- **Improve guidelines and laws** to help steer the relationships that result.

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## CONCLUSION

New opportunities exist for productive interaction between corporations and nonprofit organizations in solving pressing public problems. Corporations are increasingly discovering the importance of community involvement and positive corporate image in order to attract employees, appeal to customers, and secure the license they need to operate in many markets. At the same time, corporations have come to understand that they cannot easily achieve these objectives without the active involvement of nonprofit groups.

Nonprofits, for their part, have come to recognize the importance of cooperation with for-profit companies in order to secure needed resources and further validate their activities.

These two sectors thus increasingly need each other to pursue their core missions. This creates important opportunities for productive cooperation even as it poses significant risks of goal displacement and confusion of sector roles.

The Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group is convinced that these risks are manageable and that significant societal benefit can be gained by fostering cooperation between these two sectors, and with the public sector as well. For this to be possible, however, some of the obstacles that now stand in the way of such cooperation must be eased and some of the risks reduced. Hopefully, the ideas outlined here, carefully monitored and amplified over time, can contribute to this goal.

# The Nonprofit Sector & Business: New Visions, New Opportunities, New Challenges

## I. BACKGROUND

The Aspen Institute's Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group, a group of nonprofit, corporate, and government leaders concerned about the future evolution of the nonprofit sector, focused on "The Nonprofit Sector and Business" in its fourth session June 22-24, 2000 at Wye, Maryland (see page 14 for a complete list of members; an asterisk indicates which members participated in this discussion). In attendance at this session were core members of the Strategy Group as well as a distinguished group of corporate, government and nonprofit guests (see page 15 for a list of additional meeting participants). This action agenda is the outgrowth of their deliberations. It is intended to identify a series of steps that could usefully be taken to promote and guide the future evolution of the important partnerships that are being forged between businesses and nonprofit organizations to solve public problems. The Strategy Group intends to explore, in a later session, the governmental role in these relationships.

## II. CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP: THE NEW MODEL OF BUSINESS-NONPROFIT ENGAGEMENT

Corporations have long been involved in community affairs and in partnerships with nonprofit organizations. But corporate relationships with nonprofit organizations, and corporate involvement in solving public problems, have broadened and deepened in both content and form in recent years.

Underlying this development have been a growing recognition of the complexity of societal problems, an expanding awareness of the business stake in their resolution, and a new appreciation of the unique resources of time, talent, expertise, and influence—and not just money—that businesses can bring to societal problem-solving. Also at work have been more practical incentives for businesses to create a positive corporate persona in order to retain quality employees, attract dedicated customers, and foster public support. These pressures make it clear that, properly designed, corporate engagement in public problem-solving can be good for business as well as for communities.

The upshot has been a reconceptualization of the role of the corporation in society. In this reconceptualization, a number of corporations are coming to accept a special responsibility to contribute to the solution of public problems. More than that, they are coming to recognize the need to imbue not only their philanthropic activities but their business activities as well with a common set of core values stressing such things as equity, diversity, the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of the environment, and the promotion of community. Corporate philanthropy and corporate community involvement are thus coming to be seen as parts of a broader "corporate citizenship" imperative that applies a given set of core values to the way corporations earn their income as well as to how they give part of it away.

In this expanded vision, nonprofit organizations have a critical role to play as vehicles through which corporations can promote their community objectives and activate their values. Nonprofits provide flexible means for addressing public problems. They also bring critical knowledge, experience, and contacts to the table, thus serving as a bridge between corporations and the problems they seek to address. Also at work have been a number of more practical pressures on the nonprofit side as well – the slowing growth of public sector support in many fields, the loss of credibility of government as a promoter of social and economic change, and the need for business involvement to help generate support for, and not just to finance, efforts to address community needs.

The result has been a surge of creativity in forging new relationships between business and the nonprofit sector, as well as between these two and government, in addressing community needs. These include:

- New forms of giving that go beyond cash and tap the other resources that businesses command, such as technical and managerial knowledge and in-kind support;
- New ways to tie corporate philanthropy, and corporate community involvement generally, to the overall business strategies of corporations, creating synergies that offer a more secure base for corporate involvement in public problem-solving;
- New ways of defining the relationship between corporations and nonprofits, with more emphasis on outcomes and deeper corporate involvement in the operations of nonprofit programs that receive corporate support;
- The extension of corporate-nonprofit relationships into the commercial sphere through "cause-related marketing" and "sponsorship" arrangements. In the former, corporations dedicate a portion of their receipts from the sale of particular products

to particular nonprofit organizations for use in addressing the problems these organizations are designed to address. In the latter, the corporation provides support for a particular nonprofit activity—e.g. a cultural event, a university-based research project—in return for public recognition from the nonprofit and, in some cases, joint ownership of the results. Both thus consciously marry the credibility of nonprofit organizations and the public's desire to support them to business marketing goals to achieve beneficial results for society; and

- Broader "community partnerships" in which corporations join with nonprofit organizations, and often government agencies, in long-term, multi-pronged efforts to resolve complex societal ills, such as improvement of public schools, preservation of the environment, and the reduction of welfare dependence.

Underlying these new relationships is a more strategic approach to corporate community involvement. This approach seeks to position corporate philanthropy and community involvement at the intersection of business interest and societal need, tying corporate community activities much more securely to business objectives and responding creatively to the very real limits on corporate philanthropic resources in the present competitive environment. Accounting for less than 10 percent of total private giving and less than 2 percent of total nonprofit income, corporate cash contributions by themselves, even if they were to double, could not possibly provide solutions to many societal ills. To have a meaningful impact, corporations thus have to be strategic in their approach, to mobilize the full array of assets that they command, including those of a non-financial character, and to leverage these resources through strategic alliances with other actors.

### III. SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITIES

The Nonprofit Strategy Group generally applauds the new strategic approach that businesses are bringing to societal problem-solving and the expansion of business partnerships with nonprofit groups to which it has given rise. At the same time, the Strategy Group also acknowledges the challenges these arrangements still confront and the issues they raise:

- Differences in mission and objectives, in cultures and skills, and in resources and power can make the relationship between corporations and nonprofit organizations unbalanced.
- Similarly, such relationships are often difficult and time-consuming to establish and can run into legal and regulatory barriers.

- As a result, there are concerns about the risks these relationships pose, including the following:
  - ✓ The risk that smaller nonprofit organizations will not have access to such partnership arrangements;
  - ✓ The risk that over-reliance on corporations may lead nonprofits to become preoccupied with only popular concerns; and
  - ✓ The risk that business influences and commercial pressures will lead nonprofit organizations to take actions that undermine their central missions.

Given the promise of the new partnership arrangements being developed between businesses and nonprofit groups to cope with a wide variety of public problems, from environmental degradation to problems of children and youth, every effort should be made to encourage these relationships and to address any risks they pose. Fortunately, a number of steps can be taken to accomplish these purposes. Some of these steps can be taken by nonprofit organizations. Others can be taken by businesses. And still others will require the intervention of the various associations that exist in both fields. Four kinds of steps in particular seem especially important:

### **1. Information**

In order to expand the involvement of businesses in community problem-solving and encourage nonprofit organizations to take advantage of potential partnerships with the business sector, a better base of knowledge is needed on both sides of this relationship. Nonprofit organizations need to know more about corporate philanthropy and corporate community involvement, and corporations need to know more about nonprofit capabilities and contributions. Also needed is better information on the effects of such corporate-nonprofit partnerships. These needs can be met by:

- Increasing the resources devoted to research on these topics;
- Establishing a system for publicly identifying exemplary corporate philanthropic and community performance to publicize corporate activity in this area and provide a way to encourage more corporations to get involved;
- Encouraging more and better attention from the media to help provide oversight of corporate-nonprofit relationships and avoid the risks that such relationships can inadvertently create;
- Encouraging corporations and corporate foundations to disclose their philanthropic activities on the publicly available documents they are required to file with regulatory authorities;

- Developing "best practices" case studies of corporate community involvement and corporate-nonprofit partnerships for broad dissemination among corporations and nonprofit organizations
- Improving the information available on nonprofit capabilities through better marketing of nonprofit activities and improved mechanisms for verifying nonprofit capacities.

## **2. Dialogue**

Better information by itself will not guarantee that the new approaches to corporate-nonprofit cooperation in solving public problems will continue to grow and develop. Also needed will be additional opportunities for dialogue and interaction between these two sectors. Such dialogue is needed locally as well as nationally. This will help lower the transaction costs involved in building corporate-nonprofit partnerships, open opportunities for partnership arrangements to a broader array of nonprofit organizations and businesses, and reduce the perceived differences in culture and skills between the two sectors. Opportunities for such business-nonprofit dialogue can be provided in a variety of ways, including:

- Convening regular meetings of business, government, and nonprofit leaders to explore common concerns both generally and in specific subfields;
- Creating regular channels for communicating business philanthropic activities to the business community and the nonprofit sector;
- Incorporating training about partnerships among the sectors into business, nonprofit, and government training programs;
- Encouraging business executives to serve on nonprofit boards.

## **3. Mechanisms**

To make it easier to forge corporate-nonprofit relations and reduce whatever disparities in power and resources they entail, a number of more proactive mechanisms could also be put in place. These might include:

- The use of new information technologies to help locate matches between corporations and nonprofit organizations interested in partnering in particular fields;
- Creating or encouraging intermediary organizations that connect corporations and nonprofit organizations and thereby fostering partnerships in particular areas;

- Establishing or promoting organizations that pool resources from corporations for distribution to local nonprofit organizations engaged in particular fields;
- Encouraging employee-driven partnerships that build on employee contacts with local nonprofit organizations;
- Creating technical assistance mechanisms that can engage small and mid-sized businesses in such partnerships with nonprofit organizations.

#### **4. Guidelines and Laws**

Existing laws may unduly inhibit creative corporate-nonprofit relationships—for example, by taxing certain kinds of nonprofit income from cause-related marketing or sponsorship events. At the same time, some types of business-nonprofit relationships can threaten the reputation or independence of the nonprofit sector or otherwise undermine nonprofit missions. To avoid these problems, a number of steps may be needed:

- Reviewing the tax treatment of cause-related marketing, sponsorship, web-based fundraising and other forms of nonprofit-corporate partnerships;
- Determining whether legal provision must be made for a new type of hybrid organization embracing elements of both nonprofit and for-profit institutions. Such "social cooperatives" or "social ventures" have gained considerable prominence in Europe but may be unduly restrained by American nonprofit law;
- Formulating guidelines on cause-related marketing and sponsorship to help inform nonprofit boards and executives about the types of relationships with business that are most appropriate and the types that may pose threats to nonprofit independence or missions or to public confidence in the nonprofit sector.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

New opportunities exist for productive interaction between corporations and nonprofit organizations in solving pressing public problems. Corporations are increasingly discovering the importance of community involvement and positive corporate image in attracting workers, appealing to customers, and securing the license they need to operate in many markets. At the same time, corporations have come to understand that they cannot easily achieve these objectives

without the active involvement of nonprofit groups.

Nonprofits, for their part, have come to recognize the importance of cooperation with for-profit companies to secure needed resources, further validate their activities, and promote their efforts to enhance people's lives.

These two sectors thus increasingly need each other to pursue their core missions. This creates important opportunities for productive cooperation even as it poses significant risks of goal displacement and confusion of sector roles.

The Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group is convinced that these risks are manageable and that significant societal benefit can be gained by fostering cooperation between these two sectors, and with the public sector as well. For this to be possible, however, some of the obstacles that now stand in the way of such cooperation must be eased, and some of the risks reduced. Hopefully, the ideas outlined here, carefully monitored and amplified over time, can usefully contribute to this goal.

## NOTES

1. *The nonprofit sector consists of a broad range of organizations that qualify for exemption from federal income taxes under any of 26 different sections of the Internal Revenue Code. A common characteristic of these organizations is that they do not distribute any profits they might generate to those who control and/or support them. As noted below, the particular focus of the Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group, and hence of this statement, is on a subset of these tax-exempt organizations—namely, those that are eligible for exemption under either Section 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4) of the tax code. For further detail on the definition of nonprofit organizations, see: Bruce Hopkins, *The Law of Tax-Exempt Organizations* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1992).*

# The Aspen Institute

## Nonprofit Sector Strategy Group

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The Aspen Institute is a global forum for leveraging the power of leaders to improve the human condition. Through its seminar and policy programs, the Institute fosters enlightened, morally responsible leadership and convenes leaders and policy makers to address the foremost challenges of the new century.

Founded in 1950, the Aspen Institute is a nonprofit organization with offices in Aspen, Colorado; Chicago, Illinois; New York, New York; Queenstown, Maryland; Santa Barbara, California; and Washington, D.C. Its conference facilities are in Aspen, Colorado, and on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The Aspen Institute operates internationally through a network of partners in Europe and Asia.

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