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## Editor-in-Chief's Introductory Note

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Dennis R. Young

## **Abstract**

This issue of Nonprofit Policy Forum is our first special issue and it is led by an editorial team of our partners in Sweden – Marta Reuter, Filip Wijkstrom and Johan von Essen. The issue analyzes a development of growing worldwide interest – the emergence and evolution of formal “compacts” between the nonprofit or voluntary sector and the government in a given country. As the authors here explain, the first compact was established in the United Kingdom in 1998 and has led to adoption and adaptation of compacts in many more countries since then. Moreover, the concept is being pursued not only at the national level, but also in local jurisdictions within federally structured countries as well. In addition, the compact idea has crossed over the boundaries of British commonwealth countries into countries with other policy and governance traditions, including Scandinavia, where the concept has taken on new directions and meanings.

**KEYWORDS:** worldwide, institutional partners, compacts, agreement, framework, government, nonprofit organizations, civil society, social problems

### **Editor-in-Chief's Introductory Note**

One of the great strengths of *Nonprofit Policy Forum* is its worldwide reach – manifested most explicitly by our network of eighteen institutional partners in eleven different countries. This network allows us to stay in touch with research and policy developments in our common area of focus – the nonprofit sector and public policy- throughout the globe and to take advantage of the talent and varying perspectives of our international editorial board. This issue of *Nonprofit Policy Forum* is our first *special issue* and it is led by an editorial team of our partners in Sweden – Marta Reuter, Filip Wijkström and Johan von Essen. The issue analyzes a development of growing worldwide interest – the emergence and evolution of formal “compacts” between the nonprofit or voluntary sector and the government in a given country. As the authors here explain, the first compact was established in the United Kingdom in 1998 and has led to adoption and adaptation of compacts in many more countries since then. Moreover, the concept is being pursued not only at the national level, but also in local jurisdictions within federally structured countries as well. In addition, the compact idea has crossed over the boundaries of British commonwealth countries into countries with other policy and governance traditions, including Scandinavia, where the concept has taken on new directions and meanings.

At one level, the idea of a compact is deceptively simple – a formal agreement defining the roles of the nonprofit sector and government and their relationships to one another. But as the authors here observe, the purpose and content of a compact in any one country is quite complex, multifaceted and variable over time, and when it crosses from one national context to another or from one level of government to another, it can mutate in interesting ways, reflecting the particular venue. In the words of Reuter, Wijkström and von Essen, “...compacts act as early windows or mirrors that ... reflect the current state of the direction of relations between the voluntary sector and the state”.

In my reading of this, the pursuit of compacts between the nonprofit sector as a whole and government reflects efforts to grapple with the big picture of where nonprofits fit into the larger society and what their roles will be in the future. Thus, the particular results or impacts of existing compacts are not as important as the idea of the compact in facilitating the conversation and serving as a catalyst for appropriate actions, programs and policies. A compact is neither a constitution, i.e., a document that establishes an overall process of governing a society, nor is it so vague and global as a “social contract” which defines the legitimacy of governing institutions through consent of the governed. Rather, these compacts offer frameworks and processes through which government and nonprofit institutions can collectively work out their differences and develop

solutions to address, multiple complex social problems and issues which neither sector can successfully accomplish by itself.

In the U.S., the notion of nonprofit-government compacts has not caught fire, and given various countertrends and the more decentralized context here, cited by Steve Smith in his note in this issue, it may never formally do so. But one never knows. Certainly government in the U.S. faces enormous challenges in the coming years, no matter the direction – conservative or liberal - that politics will take over time. Similarly, the nonprofit sector is challenged in a variety of ways, not the least of which is flagging support yet increasing reliance on it by government. This situation certainly calls for conversation. Compacts have now enabled such conversation in many countries, and directly or indirectly, it could conceivably do so in the U.S. and in other national contexts as well.

We hope you enjoy this issue and find it stimulating and relevant, whatever your particular venue or field of interest. We thank our Swedish colleagues for their excellent work in putting this special volume together.

Dennis R. Young  
Editor-in-Chief