What are the impacts of civil society in Greater Victoria?

What you need to know:
Within Greater Victoria, there are over 1,000 civil society organizations, also referred to as registered charities, delivering services and programs to citizens. Limited research has illustrated this sector’s social and economic impacts. The researchers found that the economic activity of registered charities in Greater Victoria is over $4 billion and social impacts align with a range of United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals.

What is this research about?
Interactions with civil society, also known as the charitable or third sector, are common in everyday life. There are approximately 86,000 registered charities nationwide that provide services for different aspects of an individual’s life, such as through sports groups, child care, senior services, and a number of other initiatives. However, limited research has explored the impacts of this sector and there are no consistent frameworks, indicators, or scales to measure its social and economic impact.

Civil society’s current total annual revenue is $251 billion and total annual spending is $240 billion nationally. With these numbers and questions about the sector’s contribution in the Capital region in mind, the Victoria Foundation and Dr. Crystal Tremblay, Dr. Brock Smith, and Dr. Norah McRae set out to examine the social impact and economic activity of civil society in the capital region.

What did the researcher do?
The researchers assessed economic activity and social impact via two methods:

- 2016 Canada Revenue Agency revenue and expenditure data for all of the registered charities in the capital region were reviewed.
- An online survey was administered to 828 charitable organizations. The researchers received 80 complete responses, which were used for analysis.

The researchers measured social impact against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework. Respondents were asked to select up to 3 UN goals where their organization is having an impact at an individual, community, or systems level, and to provide an illustrative quantitative (i.e. the number of people served).
and/or qualitative (i.e. stories, quotes about impact) example.

What did the researcher find?
The Victoria Foundation, Dr. Tremblay, Dr. Smith, and Dr. McRae found that the total economic activity of registered charities in Greater Victoria is approximately $4 billion. When taking into account the money spent on goods and services from local suppliers that is used by those suppliers to purchase other goods and services, the economic activity of registered charities is just over $6.8 billion. This is also known as the multiplier effect.

A total of 136 examples of social impact were provided by the 80 participating charities. While many examples of impact addressed more than one goal, organizations reported the most impact in the following UN SDGs:

- Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Illustrations of impact include providing recreation to community members; delivering vocal and choral music programmes for children and youth; supporting newcomers and refugees with access to cultural and employment opportunities; providing crisis pregnancy support; developing an Age-Friendly Committee to promote seniors' issues and activities, among many other activities and initiatives.

How can you use this research?
This study is the first of its kind to provide a comprehensive approach to evaluating the impact of the civil society in Greater Victoria. It offers important findings that can be used in the following ways:

- Information can be used by municipal, provincial, national, and First Nations governments to make more informed decisions around issues influencing the civil society and its work.
- Businesses can benefit from considering the broad opportunities to develop mutually beneficial partnerships with charities.
- Academic institutions and others can continue to build on the foundation for measuring impact established by the researchers.
- Charities can take pride in the significance of the sector, while looking for opportunities to influence collective impact.

About the researchers
Crystal Tremblay is a Special Advisor on Community Engaged Scholarship and an Assistant Professor in the Geography department in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Victoria.

Brock Smith is a Professor in the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business at the University of Victoria.

Norah McRae is the former Director of the University of Victoria’s Office of Community-University Engagement.

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