

GOOD GOVERNANCE SNAPSHOT: 2026 OVERVIEW REPORT





INTRODUCTION

Across Nova Scotia, we're hearing clearly that governance matters - and it's getting harder to do well.

In developing our 2025 State of the Sector report, nonprofit leaders told us they needed more support with board governance. They spoke about challenges with recruitment, engagement and ongoing board development, as well as building governance that reflects their communities, values and equity commitments.

So IONS partnered with Imagine Canada and Lisa Villeneuve Consulting Inc. to take a closer look. This snapshot shares what we heard from nonprofit leaders, board members and funders about what good governance looks like, what makes it possible and what's getting in the way. It also identifies ways to address both organizational challenges and systemic barriers to good governance in the sector.

Applying an equity lens, we prioritized engaging Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, Newcomer, 2SLGBTQI+, youth and rural leaders. Many shared their perspectives with us. Some equity-deserving leaders chose not to participate or were unable to engage. Their absence matters.

This is a snapshot, not the full picture. It is meant to expand the conversation and inform action to strengthen governance across the sector.

For those interested in exploring the findings in greater depth, a full version of this report is available from IONS.

WHAT IS GOOD GOVERNANCE?

Good governance is about having the fundamentals in place, and recognizing that governance is evolving to incorporate greater attention to equity and power in decision-making. The fundamentals of good governance include:

- Being accountable and meeting all legal and financial responsibilities.
- Having clear roles and responsibilities.
- Having effective decision-making processes.
- Cultivating trusting relationships.
- Having the skills and perspectives needed to activate the work.
- Having generative, strategic conversations.
- Giving governance the time and space it needs.

“When good governance is present...it allows for healthy disagreement, healthy tension and conflict. It allows for contradictory perspectives but at the same time it promotes psychological safety at work.”



Good governance in the world I hope we are moving towards is being accountable to someone or something. To each other, to stakeholders, to government, to a blend of all these things.

If you have good governance, things are clear. People come in and they know how to do things, who to check with. This frees up space in the organization for simpler things to be simpler, and the more complex things to have space for discussion.

Good governance is also evolving to include:

- Challenging conventional governance models and power structures.
- Making governance spaces more inclusive and more representative of the community.
- Embedding equity principles throughout decision-making processes.
- Seeing governance as an opportunity to model a better world.



“Good governance is relational, strategic and power-aware.”

“I’m proud of having a very strong African Nova Scotian presence now represented on the board...It’s not about the representation on the board as much as it is about working in the community to get the trust you need to have someone on the board.”

“Good governance can shift values and worldviews around what is authority and power. It can unsettle dominant white supremacist practices.”

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

“Good governance supporting good operations makes it possible to achieve the mandate of the organization. In the hierarchy of needs, good governance is the very base.”

Good governance makes it possible for organizations to:

- Retain strong leaders in the sector and build sustainability.
- Be accountable to communities and funders.
- Take bold action to achieve their missions and work in new ways.
- Share power and work more collaboratively.
- Understand and respond to deepening community needs.
- Foster trusting relationships that drive impact and attract opportunities.
- Meaningfully engage equity-deserving people in governance.

“The fact that my board is proactive and providing good governance frees me up to focus on my main mission, interpreting the strategic direction.”

“The first thing that drew me into the organization as the ED was the focus on governance...It was attractive to me as an ED to see a board so committed to governance.”

Organizations that challenge traditional power structures and practice more collaborative decision-making are better able to:

Share power in ways that reduce the burden on individual leaders, creating more meaningful engagement and greater retention.

Build trust and work effectively with their ED, preventing burnout and attrition from the sector.

Align services with new community needs in times of rapid change.

“Because we created space for an embedded, relational approach we are able to pivot amidst government changes that are unsettling and scary for all of us.”

Governance challenges undermine the sector’s impact by:

- Exposing organizations to risk.
- Causing EDs and board members to burn out and leave the sector.
- Making it harder for organizations to pivot as community needs change.
- Reducing capacity to deliver high-quality services.
- Eroding community trust.
- Making it more difficult for organizations to recruit, engage, and retain board members.

“If there are governance challenges that are not accounted for and not addressed properly, it slows the operations down, it burns the leadership out. The program and service delivery is held up on important decisions and direction.”

The impact of governance challenges is inequitably distributed:

- Equity-deserving groups like Black and Indigenous communities, people living with low-income, and precariously housed people have the most to lose when organizations fail.
- Small, volunteer-led, and rural organizations, particularly those that serve and are led by equity-deserving groups, struggle most to prioritize good governance. Often delivering essential services and serving community members that experience the greatest marginalization, these organizations have very little time and almost no resources to focus on governance.

“I have seen a lot of ED/CEO turnover in the last few years. Often a piece of that puzzle is related to the board of directors.”

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

Organizations experience barriers and challenges such as:

- Boards lack the basic governance skills they need to effectively lead the organization.
- Organizations struggle to recruit people with diverse perspectives and to meaningfully engage equity-deserving people in governance.
- Change is so rapid in communities that governance ends up on the backburner.
- Traditional governance structures make it hard to share power, but new governance models require new mindsets and some board members are resistant.
- Many organizations want to work in more equitable ways, but many don’t have the resources, time, or capacity to align intentions with actions.

“How can you embody good governance when you are in a constant crisis of funding and resources? It’s impossible.”

“Once we have those voices at the table, there aren’t supports to make sure they can participate. Policies, resources to help them thrive, not just be a seat at the table. A lot of organizations are struggling to make it meaningful. They want to do better but simply do not have capacity to do it.”

“Good governance ends up on the back burner. We want to revise the board manual, but there are ten more urgent things. The intention is always there but the effort is halted because there isn’t capacity or money.”

“Decolonizing our minds is a big barrier to good governance.”

Systemic barriers also make it difficult for organizations to practice good governance:

- Although good governance is the foundation of impact in the sector, it is chronically underfunded. Most organizations don't have the time or resources they need to prioritize their governance.
- Economic and political pressures are increasing, leaving organizations with even fewer resources and less capacity to focus on governance.
- It's increasingly difficult to recruit volunteers at a time when people are overburdened and the sector is undervalued.
- Boards are bringing in new voices to better represent and serve their communities, but governance structures aren't evolving fast enough to keep pace. Organizations want to work in new ways but are constrained by outdated legal structures that prevent board compensation and maintain traditional power hierarchies.



"Government says we need to professionalize the sector – that's all well and good but if you're not properly resourcing the organizations to do the work, you're setting them up to fail."

"Especially for organizations like us that work with marginalized populations, many folks are struggling to make ends meet and it can be very daunting when you have three part time jobs on the go and folks you're caring for in your life."

"Organizations ask a lot of volunteers - from strategy to fundraising to guiding the ED to serving as spokesperson. It's extractive. Just having passion isn't enough to sustain commitment. We need compensation or ways of honouring volunteer work so people can contribute sustainably."



HOW DO WE STRENGTHEN GOVERNANCE?

Organizations are addressing systemic barriers by:

- Engaging people with lived experience in governance processes outside the board room, e.g. youth advisory councils.
- Learning more about liberatory practices, decolonial ways of working, and reparations.
- Providing dedicated time and resources to meaningfully engage people with lived experience in governance.
- Offering alternative forms of compensation for equity-deserving groups, such as caregiving stipends, childcare during board meetings, grocery cards, and honoraria.



To strengthen their governance, organizations need:

- Accessible resources and tools to improve governance, such as templates, assessments, and project management platforms.
- Training to build foundational capacity in areas such as:
 - Legal and financial responsibilities
 - Board member roles and responsibilities
 - Effective decision-making processes
 - Conflict management
 - Inclusive, healthy communication
 - Trust-building on the board and in the community
 - Facilitation skills to lead generative and strategic conversations
 - Equity, diversity, and inclusion; anti-Black racism; and reconciliation
- Relational training opportunities that enable peer learning and mutual support, such as:
 - Opportunities for boards to meet in person.
 - Communities of practice and mentorship networks.
 - Coaching to address difficult issues and build leadership capacity.
- Opportunities to learn about and practice more innovative approaches such as:
 - Collaborative governance and consensus-based decision-making.
 - Afrocentric and Indigenous approaches.
 - Strategies for meaningfully engaging and providing value to equity-deserving people.

To address systemic barriers, the sector needs:

- A champion to advocate for increased government and private sector investment in nonprofit governance.
- Intentional spaces and resources for organizations to come together to advance regulatory change.
- A process for exploring shared governance platforms to reduce barriers for small organizations.

We hope this snapshot contributes to ongoing dialogue, reflection and collaboration across the sector as we collectively strengthen governance practices that are responsive, equitable and grounded in community.

