Working Better Together: Governance and Coordination in English-Speaking Quebec

Discussion Paper
Stephen Thompson and Brigitte Wellens
September 2026

Table of Contents

1. Preface ***2***

2. Executive Summary ***4***

3. A Brief History: From Communities to Community Governance ***5***

4. The Continuing Problem of Representation ***7***

5. A Federated Model of Community Governance ***9***

6. Conclusion: From Population to Community ***9***

Annex B — Proposed Way Ahead: From Discussion to Community Dialogue ***12***

Disclaimer

This discussion paper is an independent initiative. The authors and those who have contributed to its development are participating in their personal capacities. The views, analysis and proposals expressed here are their own and should not be attributed to any organization, institution, employer, client or network with which they may be affiliated.

No participating organization or institution should be understood to have endorsed this paper or any of its proposals unless it has explicitly chosen to do so.

This work has been undertaken on a voluntary basis and without financial compensation. The authors and collaborators have no financial interest in any of the proposals discussed in the paper or in any organization or structure that might eventually emerge from this process.

The purpose of the paper is to encourage an open discussion about how English-speaking Quebec's organizations, institutions and communities might work better together. It does not represent the position of any existing organization, nor does it presume the outcome of that discussion.

1. Preface

The origins of this paper lie in QUESCREN's March 2026 Researcher–Member Symposium. One of the panels was called Governing Community Vitality, moderated byCeline Cooper, with Stephen Thompson, Chedly Belkhodja of Concordia University and QUESCREN, Nicholas Salter of the Provincial Employment Round Table (PERT), and Brigitte Wellens of Voice of English-speaking Québec (VEQ) participating.

We came together because people had begun to ask a hard question; is the way English-speaking Quebec is organized suitedto thecurrent challenges facing the community? The discussion centred on whether English-speaking Quebec was still relying on a governance model developed for an earlier period. We considered the modernization of the *Official Languages Act* and the federal government's increasing emphasis on the protection of French, Quebec's growing control over relations between community organizations and Ottawa, the effects of government funding structures, and the lack of coordination between English-speaking Quebec's civil society.[1]

Our central conclusion was that English-speaking Quebec does not lack capable organizations, institutions, researchers or leaders. It lacks reliable mechanisms connecting them. Evidence, priorities and messages are often developed separately within regional, sectoral and funding silos. Roles are sometimes confused, regional perspectives can be overshadowed by Montréal-based organizations, and civil society has no broadly trusted process for managing legitimate differences. The community could therefore be described as organizationally capable but collectively under-governed.

In a follow-up discussion, we concluded that the way forward was not to create another umbrella organization or to require the community to speak with a single voice. The solution pointed toward a neutral, province-wide table through which autonomous organizations and institutions could share evidence, identify common priorities, coordinate engagement with both governments and manage disagreement.Any such mechanism would need to reflect regional realities, include the main sectors and institutions, operate transparently, and clearly distinguish between advocacy, representation, research, community development, and service delivery. Participation would rest on the sovereign equality and continuing consent of the organizations involved rather than on claims of hierarchical authority.[2]

We resolved to prepare this discussion paper, obtain feedback from the community and undertake regional and institutional consultations across Quebec. A "What We Heard" report and subsequent options paper would then identify practical ways to strengthen

[1] English-speaking Quebec's civil society is the network of community organizations (community sector), institutions, associations, and other non-governmental actors that represent, serve, and support English-speaking Quebecers.

[2] Sovereign equality is a principle of international law that all states have the same legal status and rights regardless of their size, wealth, population, or power.

coordination, consultation, representation, evidence-sharing and accountability. The intended outcome was not a predetermined structure, but a credible process through which the community could collectively design governance arrangements appropriate to its present circumstances. Cooper and Salter have since moved on, but we remain committed to this discussion and to the possibility of reforming the way our community is governed.

The starting point for the paper is positive. English-speaking Quebec possesses an exceptionally capable network of regional, sectoral and institutional organizations. These organizations are doing important work, often with considerable expertise and strong relationships with the communities they serve. The problem is not the quality of the organizations or the commitment of the people leading them. It is the absence of sufficiently credible, trusted and broadly accepted mechanisms through which they can coordinate their efforts, identify common priorities and act collectively when circumstances require it.

This challenge is becoming consequential. English-speaking Quebec is entering unfamiliar policy territory. Federal official-languages policy is evolving, including through the implementation of the modernized *Official Languages Act* and consultations leading toward the next federal Action Plan for Official Languages. At the same time, concerns about the effects of provincial legislation on the rights, institutions and vitality of English-speaking Quebecers have increased. Governments are changing the ways in which they understand, consult and support English-speaking Quebec, while community organizations themselves have become larger, more specialized and more capable of dealing directly with public institutions.

These developments create both a need and an opportunity to reconsider how English-speaking Quebec works together. The question is not how to create another organization claiming to speak for everyone. It is how independently legitimate organizations can cooperate more effectively while preserving their own mandates, relationships and authority. The history examined in this paper suggests that sustainable coordination must be built on trust, consent and federation rather than centralization.

This paper is offered as a contribution to that discussion. Its purpose is to understand how the present community sector developed, what its history tells us about the recurring problem of representation and governance, and what lessons might help English-speaking Quebec build more effective mechanisms for collective action as it enters the next period of official-languages and minority-community policy.

2. Executive Summary

English-speaking community life in Quebec long predates modern official-languages policy. For much of Quebec's history, English-speaking Quebecers organized through churches, schools, universities, hospitals, charities, cultural associations and other institutions rooted in religion, ancestry, place and local circumstance. These institutions formed a substantial community infrastructure, but they did not generally conceive of themselves as representing a single province-wide English-speaking community.

That began to change in the 1960s and 1970s. Federal official-languages policy created a new framework that identified English-speaking Quebecers collectively as an official-language minority, while the Quiet Revolution and Quebec's language legislation created practical reasons for English-speaking people to organize more explicitly around language. In the regions, this produced locally governed organizations such as the Committee for Anglophone Social Action and the Townshippers' Association, whose legitimacy came from serving particular geographically defined communities and responding to concrete needs in areas such as health, social services, education and community development. Montreal followed a different path, relying more heavily on established institutions and developing stronger political advocacy organizations.

From the 1980s onward, the federal government helped build a more formal provincial community sector. Alliance Quebec attempted to combine regional organizations and Montreal-based advocacy within a single provincial structure. Its eventual collapse illustrated the fragility of a centralized representative model whose authority depended heavily on government funding, political circumstances and continued organizational participation. The Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) later emerged as a federation of member organizations, while new sectoral networks developed in health, economic development, education, arts, research and other fields. The result was not one integrated community organization but an increasingly complex system of overlapping regional and sectoral networks.

The Government of Quebec became a more significant participant after the creation of the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise in 2017. Provincial funding supported new organizational capacity, including the Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT) and expanded activity by the Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN), and gave regional and sectoral organizations additional opportunities to develop direct relationships with government. This further reduced the ability of any single provincial body to function as the indispensable intermediary for the community.

The unresolved issue throughout this history has been representative legitimacy. English-speaking Quebec is a coherent population for statistical, legal and government policy purposes, but it is not a single sociological community. It consists of communities that differ substantially by geography, history, ethnicity, class, institutional attachment and access to services. Regional and sectoral organizations derive their legitimacy directly from the

communities, constituencies and institutions they serve. Provincial representative bodies do not possess the same independent foundation. Their authority is derivative and depends upon the continuing confidence and participation of their constituent organizations. The collapse of Alliance Quebec and the 2019 rupture within the QCGN illustrate the recurring instability that results when a provincial centre begins to treat its representative authority as independent of its members.

The central conclusion is therefore institutional as much as historical. A federated system is the only durable basis for province-wide governance of English-speaking Quebec. Such a system recognizes that legitimate authority begins with local communities, sectoral organizations and institutions and is delegated upward for agreed purposes. Provincial bodies can coordinate, advocate and articulate common positions, but they cannot permanently absorb or supersede the authority of their constituent organizations. Representation must move from the community upward rather than from a provincial centre downward.

Over fifty years, governments have helped define, finance and strengthen English-speaking Quebec as an official-language minority, but they have not created a single homogeneous community and cannot confer representative legitimacy on one organization simply for administrative convenience. The enduring strength of the community sector lies instead in its network of independently legitimate regional, sectoral and institutional organizations. English-speaking Quebec can act collectively, but its provincial voice will remain credible only when it is grounded in that federated reality.

3. A Brief History: From Communities to Community Governance

English-speaking Quebecers organized through churches, schools, universities, hospitals and cultural associations for generations. Federal official-languages policy - particularly the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1960s) and the *Official Languages Act* (1969) - created a new framework by identifying them as an official-language minority. Quebec's Quiet Revolution and language legislation gave them practical reasons to organize explicitly around language and access to services.

Regional communities and English-speaking Montrealers responded differently to these changes. Outside Montreal, locally governed organizations emerged to represent and serve particular communities. The Committee for Anglophone Social Action (CASA) was established in the Gaspé in 1975, followed by organizations such as Townshippers' Association in the Eastern Townships in 1979. These organizations were rooted in the regions they served and combined community development, services and representation.

Montreal followed a somewhat different path. Its English-speaking population could draw on a much larger network of established institutions and organizations, including universities, hospitals, charities and community groups. As a result, its organizational development was less centred on creating a single regional community organization and

was more dispersed across existing institutions, sectoral organizations and advocacy groups.

Alliance Quebec, created in 1982, tried to bring much of English-speaking Quebec under one umbrella and give governments a single organization to deal with. Over time, however, it became heavily dependent on federal funding while losing members, affiliated organizations and broader community support. It also faced governance and financial problems. By 2005, federal funding accounted for most of its revenues. When Canadian Heritage ended that funding after Alliance Quebec failed to provide required audited financial statements, the organization could no longer continue.

Its experience offers an important lesson. The problem was not simply the loss of government funding, but the vulnerability created when representation, organizational capacity and financial support are concentrated in a single organization. Community organizations with strong local roots, broader sources of legitimacy and greater independence are generally better able to survive changes in government funding and policy.

The Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) began modestly in 1995. With encouragement from Canadian Heritage, 13 independently governed regional and sectoral organizations came together to coordinate priorities, strengthen cooperation and provide the federal government with a province-wide point of contact.

Over the next two decades, QCGN grew considerably in both size and role. It established a permanent office and staff, expanded into policy, advocacy and community development, and grew from 13 member organizations in 1995 to more than 56 by 2018. It also led community-wide planning exercises and developed an increasingly important role in representing English-speaking Quebec to both levels of government.

By 2018, QCGN was quite different from the coordinating network created in 1995. It had developed its own institutional capacity, policy expertise and public voice, and was recognized as English-speaking Quebec's principal interlocutor with Canadian Heritage. Because Canadian Heritage played a central coordinating role in federal official-languages policy, QCGN increasingly became the de facto point of contact for English-speaking Quebec across the federal government. Canadian Heritage also turned to QCGN to help identify community priorities for new federal funding. In practice, this gave QCGN a representative role extending well beyond its original function as a network through which independent community organizations coordinated their work.

This growth gave English-speaking Quebec greater capacity and a stronger voice with the federal government. But it also changed the relationship between QCGN and its members. What began as a network through which independent organizations worked together had become a substantial organization with a representative role of its own.

That evolution raised an important governance question: how can a province-wide organization speak and act collectively while respecting the mandates, independence and community legitimacy of the organizations that make up the network?

By 2019, tensions had again emerged over how a province-wide organization should relate to regional and sectoral organizations with their own mandates, boards and community support. Several organizations left QCGN, and the Regional Development Network (RDN) was established to strengthen cooperation and development among regional English-speaking communities.

The result was a more plural community landscape. QCGN remained an important province-wide advocacy and membership organization, but it no longer occupied quite the same position as the broad coordinating network that had developed over the previous two decades. Regional and sectoral organizations increasingly worked through their own networks and partnerships, creating several centres of expertise, representation and community development rather than a single predominant structure. QCGN changed its name to TALQ in 2025.

This history points to a recurring challenge in English-speaking Quebec: province-wide coordination is valuable, but the organizations being brought together have their own legitimacy and responsibilities to the communities they serve. Durable governance therefore depends less on centralizing authority and voice than on finding ways for independent organizations to work together while preserving their autonomy.

After 2017, Quebec's creation of the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise further decentralized authority by funding regional and sectoral organizations directly. These organizations developed their own capacity and government relationships, reducing dependence on a single provincial intermediary.

4. The Continuing Problem of Representation

The growth and diversification of the sector eventually brought a question that had been present from the beginning to the surface: who can speak for English-speaking Quebec, and on what basis?

In 2019, a significant group of organizations withdrew from QCGN following disagreements over its leadership, direction and relationship with its members. Regional organizations subsequently came together, with support from Quebec's Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise, to establish the Regional Development Network (RDN). RDN created a separate structure for regional organizations to cooperate and support the vitality and socioeconomic development of English-speaking communities. In 2025, QCGN became TALQ, with a strong emphasis on advocacy and representation.

The landscape today is considerably more diverse and decentralized than it was under Alliance Quebec or during QCGN's early years. Regional organizations have developed

substantial capacity and legitimacy of their own. Sectoral organizations in health, education, employment, arts and culture, research and other fields have expertise and direct relationships with the government institutions responsible for their areas. RDN provides an independent network for regional organizations, while TALQ continues to provide a province-wide advocacy voice.

There is another important part of this landscape: major institutions that serve English-speaking Quebec. English-language universities and CEGEPs, school boards, health and social-service institutions and other public bodies play an essential role in the vitality of English-speaking communities. But they are not community organizations. They are provincial public institutions, operating within provincial legislation and accountability structures, and have responsibilities that extend beyond the English-speaking community. This makes it difficult to bring these institutions under a single community representative structure. TALQ, for example, is a community advocacy organization, but its operations are funded almost entirely through the federal Official Languages framework. Quebec public institutions, by contrast, have their own mandates, governance and accountability to the Government of Quebec, and cannot easily be incorporated into a representative structure led by a federally funded advocacy organization.

This evolution makes the governance challenge clearer. English-speaking Quebec's civil society cannot be represented through a single organization. It is an ecosystem of independently governed community organizations, sectoral networks and major public institutions, each deriving its authority from different mandates, communities and accountability structures. The task, therefore, is not to determine which organization speaks for everyone, but to create a structure through which these different voices can work together without surrendering their independence, mandates or legitimacy.

English-speaking Quebec is a population in the statistical and official-languages sense. But it is composed of many communities that differ by geography, history, class, ethnicity, institutional attachment and access to services. No single organization can derive a permanent mandate to represent all of them simply because government requires a convenient point of contact.

Regional and sectoral organizations have legitimacy of their own. Their purpose and authority come from the communities, sectors and institutions they serve. They can leave a provincial umbrella organization and continue their work.

A province-wide representative organization is different. Its ability to speak for the broader community depends on the continuing support and participation of the organizations and communities it claims to represent. The wider that support, the stronger its representative voice; when that support narrows, so does its claim to speak for the community as a whole.

5. A Federated Model of Community Governance

The historical record therefore points toward a federated system as the only durable model of province-wide community governance.

Federation does not mean that every organization must agree on every issue, nor does it require another large umbrella organization. It means recognizing where authority and legitimacy already exist.

Regional and sectoral organizations draw their legitimacy from the communities and fields they serve. English-language school boards have elected commissioners and constitutionally protected responsibilities. Community organizations are accountable to their members and communities. Cultural, health, education and other institutions have their own mandates, governance structures and areas of expertise.

A federated model brings these different voices together without asking them to give up their independence or transfer their authority to a central organization. A province-wide federated structure can coordinate these organizations, develop common positions where agreement exists and provide a collective voice where one is needed. But it cannot permanently absorb their authority. In a workable federation, representation must move from the community upward, not from a provincial centre downward.

Provincial bodies act on matters delegated to them by their constituent organizations. They provide coordination; they do not command. They represent consensus where consensus exists and acknowledge difference where it does not. Their legitimacy is renewed through the continuing participation of the organizations they represent.

This may be more cumbersome than having governments deal with a single designated representative, but it is a more accurate reflection of English-speaking Quebec.

6. Conclusion: From Population to Community

The history of English-speaking Quebec since the 1960s can be understood as a gradual movement from population to community: from a large population defined mainly by language to a diverse community of communities increasingly able to organize, represent and sustain itself. That process is still ongoing.

Both governments have played important, but different, roles in that development. Federal official-languages policy identified and counted an English-language minority in Quebec and provided funding that helped communities build organizations, develop expertise and represent their interests. At the same time, Quebec's political and linguistic transformation gave English-speaking Quebecers practical reasons to organize around language.

The Government of Quebec has played a central role in sustaining the institutional base on which English-speaking community life depends. English-language schools and school boards, CEGEPs and universities, and health and social-service institutions operate within

Quebec's public systems and receive substantial provincial support. The relationship has not always been easy, and questions of access, governance, language rights and institutional autonomy continue. Nevertheless, the development and vitality of English-speaking Quebec cannot be understood without recognizing Quebec's role in maintaining these institutions.

Community organizations developed alongside this institutional base. Regional organizations turned the broad category of an English-language minority into locally rooted communities able to identify needs and act on them. Sectoral organizations developed around particular areas such as health, education, employment, culture and economic development. Provincial advocacy organizations sought to bring these different interests together and provide a collective voice.

The result is a diverse and increasingly capable civil society, but not a single integrated community. It is doubtful that one English-speaking Quebec "community" exists in a simple sociological sense. There are English-speaking communities in Montreal, the Gaspé, the Eastern Townships, the Outaouais, Quebec City, the North Shore, the Lower North Shore and elsewhere. These overlap with communities based on ethnicity, religion, profession, institutions and shared interests.

What connects them is partly language, partly their experience as English-speaking people within French-speaking Quebec, and partly the common legal and administrative frameworks created by federal and provincial language policy. These connections can create common interests, but they do not erase regional, institutional or sectoral differences.

English-speaking Quebec's civil society reflects this history. It is neither a single system nor simply a collection of government-funded organizations. It is an ecosystem of communities, institutions and organizations with different sources of authority and legitimacy. Regional organizations are rooted in particular places. Sectoral organizations derive their authority from the people and fields they serve. Public institutions have their own statutory mandates and governance structures. Provincial advocacy organizations depend, in turn, on the confidence and participation of those in whose name they seek to speak.

This brings the history back to the regional organizations that began appearing in the 1970s and, behind them, to the older institutions and associations that sustained English-speaking community life long before the modern language-policy era. Their durability rests on something deeper than government recognition or funding - continuing relationships with people, institutions and places.

Governments helped make modern English-speaking Quebec possible in different ways. Federal official-languages policy made the English-speaking minority more visible as a population and helped finance the community organizations through which it could act. Quebec built and continues to support much of the public institutional infrastructure through which English-speaking Quebecers receive education, health and social services. But governments do not themselves create community legitimacy. Representative

legitimacy ultimately begins with the communities, organizations and institutions being represented.

The central lesson of fifty years of community-sector development is therefore institutional as much as historical. English-speaking Quebec needs province-wide coordination, but that coordination must recognize where authority and legitimacy already reside. A federated model offers a way to bring regional, sectoral and institutional voices together without requiring them to surrender their independence or agree on every issue. The history suggests that structures are most durable when province-wide representation grows from these independently legitimate parts of the community rather than attempting to replace them with a single representative centre.

Annex B — Proposed Way Ahead: From Discussion to Community Dialogue

This paper is meant to start a conversation. We have offered our reading of the challenge facing community governance - the way we work together and suggested that a more federated approach as a way forward.

The next step is to test these ideas with the people, organizations and institutions that make up English-speaking Quebec's civil society.

We suggest a consultation process built around two simple questions:

1. What is working — and not working — today?
2. How can we work better together in the future?

Open the conversation

We are sharing this discussion paper to start a wider conversation across English-speaking Quebec. We want organizations, institutions and individuals to challenge our thinking. Does the history reflect their experience? What have we missed or misunderstood? Have we described the governance problem fairly? What is already working well that we should build on? And who else needs to be part of the conversation?

We are not looking for approval of a predetermined model. People should be free to agree or disagree with the paper, challenge its history or analysis, and suggest different ways forward. Written comments would be welcome throughout the process, including comments provided in confidence.

At the end of this stage, we would revisit the paper in light of what we have heard and publish an updated version. It would reflect areas of agreement, important differences of view, and questions that still need more work.

Take the conversation across Quebec

We would like to hold a series of conversations across Quebec so that different regions, sectors and institutions can bring their own experience to the discussion.

We want to hear from English-speaking communities in the Eastern Townships, Quebec City, the Gaspé, the North Shore and Lower North Shore, the Outaouais, Montérégie, Laval, Montreal and elsewhere. Regional realities differ considerably, and those differences need to be reflected in any approach to working together.

We also want to hear from organizations working in areas such as health and social services, education, employment and economic development, arts and culture, youth, literacy and research. These organizations bring expertise and relationships that are different from those of regional community organizations.

Our major public institutions also need to be part of the conversation. Universities, CEGEPs, school boards, and health and social-service institutions are important to the vitality of English-speaking Quebec, but they are not community organizations. They have their own mandates, governance and responsibilities. We need to hear directly from them about whether and how they could take part in stronger province-wide coordination.

Final Step — From Consultation to Options

At the end of the consultation, we would report back to the community on what we heard. A public **What We Heard** report would identify areas of broad agreement, important differences of view, and issues that need further discussion. It would also highlight the relationships, networks and institutions that already work well and should be built upon.

The purpose would not be to manufacture consensus. Where regions, sectors, organizations or institutions see things differently, the report should say so.

We would then use what we have learned to develop a small number of practical options for working better together. These could range from improving coordination among existing organizations and networks, to creating a standing province-wide table, to developing a more formal federated mechanism. Keeping the present arrangements should also remain an option.

Each option would need to explain what problem it would solve, who would participate, how decisions would be made, how it would relate to existing organizations and institutions, what resources it would require, and how the independence of participating organizations would be protected.

Those options would then go back to the community for discussion. If there is support for a permanent province-wide mechanism, its form should emerge from this process rather than be decided in advance. An important part of that discussion would be deciding who could credibly bring such a mechanism together and how it would remain accountable to those taking part.

Success does not necessarily mean creating another organization. It could mean better ways to share information and evidence, stronger relationships between regions and sectors, clearer ways to identify common priorities, and more effective ways of working together when our interests are shared.

The question at the heart of the process is simple: How can we work better together while respecting the independence, authority and different responsibilities of the communities, organizations and institutions that make up English-speaking Quebec?