



“Beyond the Horizon”: National Workshop Proceedings

December 2000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Children's Alliance is a network of more than 30 national organizations committed to improving the lives of children and youth in Canada. The Alliance hosted a National Workshop in December for the purpose of establishing strategic priorities for the next two years. The participants included representatives of national member organizations as well as individuals from across the country who are engaged in working in provincial/territorial coalitions of organizations serving children and families.

The workshop began with a review of the history of the Children's Alliance, given by Dianne Bascombe, who has been involved with the Alliance from the beginning. Ms. Bascombe noted that children's policy is at a crucial juncture, and the voluntary sector must make use of this opportunity to ensure that policy development is participatory and meets the needs of all children in Canada. The Alliance is treating the Early Childhood Development (ECD) agreement as the “test case” of children's policy within the social union framework agreement, and as such, is putting significant effort into engaging with governments and the voluntary sector on the implementation of the agreement.

The ECD agreement is a positive step but there are several challenges. Firstly, the four priority areas it sets out are a menu from which provinces /territories can choose, not a comprehensive basket of services. Secondly, the indicators for success will be difficult to arrive at in the context of jurisdictional constraints and there will likely be considerable debate around them. Thirdly, the accountability mechanisms will be difficult to reach consensus on, to implement, and to monitor. Lastly, the money will come through the CHST in block funding - making accountability that much more difficult. The voluntary sector will have to be active in ensuring that the

dollars allocated are in fact spent on early childhood development programs. Dianne noted that this is a crucial time calling for action on the part of the Alliance to ensure the effective implementation of the ECD agreement.

Following the introductory session, participants were engaged in the development of a vision for children's programs five years down the road. The vision included:

- the engagement of citizens, communities and organizations in decision-making processes toward the implementation of the National Children's Agenda;
- services for children and youth which are culturally appropriate, high quality, coordinated, equitable, accessible, well funded, integrated, community driven, and comparable across all regions of the country;
- adequate, sustained and flexible funding from federal, provincial and territorial governments, delivered through a mechanism which fosters accountability and transparency;
- the realization of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the provision of adequate income security, education, nutrition, safe housing, a nurturing environment, the right to family services and the inclusion of special needs; and
- the establishment of a Children's Bill of Rights, and a commission designed to protect these rights.

After developing a vision, workshop participants were given an update on the National Children's Agenda and Early Childhood Development processes by Marta Morgan, Director of Children's Policy at Human Resources Development Canada. Ms. Morgan noted that the ECD agreement establishes a new way of developing social policy which encourages collaboration between the two senior levels of government. The structure and content of the agreement will be precedent-setting for child and family policy, and potentially for other social policy areas. Ms. Morgan pointed out that the voluntary sector has a crucial role to play in contributing to the development of mechanisms for citizen engagement and for evaluating outcomes.

Subsequently, workshop participants analyzed the current status and political context of the Children's Alliance in order to decide how to build on

existing strengths and opportunities, while bearing in mind how to minimize weaknesses and external threats. Participants suggested that the Alliance's strengths include: skills; experience; policy capacity; human resources; "good timing"; and an inclusive and democratic way of operating. The weaknesses of the coalition were generally agreed to be: limited financial resources; the challenge of mobilizing at the provincial/territorial level; the need to fill gaps in representation; and the need to further develop relationships with policy makers at all levels. In terms of the external environment, opportunities include: a newly elected government with a mandate to pursue social development and a commitment to children's programs; the growing influence of the voluntary sector; and the ability to collaborate with governments on the development of citizen engagement and evaluation mechanisms. Participants noted that threats to their work include: the shifting of roles and power within government; the impact of globalization on policy making; the unpredictability of political will; and increasing polarization in media and public opinion.

Taking into account these considerations, participants developed strategic priorities for the next two years. These priorities were comprised of:

- broadening, strengthening and supporting the development of provincial/territorial coalitions by providing communications tools and participatory mechanisms, and by sharing the policy expertise of national member organizations
- working with communities, governments and the voluntary sector on the implementation of the ECD agreement
- ensuring participation in federal/provincial/territorial decision-making processes, especially with respect to
 - 1) accountability and transparency
 - 2) developing indicators to measure progress, and
 - 3) encouraging citizen engagement
- advocating for the implementation of the National Children's Agenda to improve the well-being of children and youth of all ages through enhanced programs and services.

In addition to participating in the establishment of strategic priorities, representatives from the provinces and territories had the opportunity to share strategies for organizing provincial/territorial coalitions, and to provide feedback to the Children's Alliance on how the national structure can facilitate this work. Although some jurisdictions have progressed further than others in the development of coalitions, all participants were eager to exchange reports and strategies, and were enthusiastic about collaborating with each other and with the national member organizations on expanding and strengthening these alliances in order to engage effectively with provincial/territorial governments and, ultimately, to ensure the development of children's programs appropriate to their populations.

The full proceedings of the national workshop can be obtained from the National Children's Alliance.