



NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE DISCUSSION PAPER

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(Note: This report draws extensively on the work of Susan Phillips in a paper entitled Canada's Social Union Framework Agreement: Implications and Opportunities for the Voluntary Sector, and Susan Phillips and Havi Echenberg in a paper entitled Simon Says Take a Giant Step Forward: Advancing the National Children's Agenda. Other source documents used for reference are from the National Children's Alliance, The Voluntary Sector Initiative Secretariat, The Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations and Human Resources Development Canada.)

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years there have been some significant national initiatives within the social policy envelope that signal a change in the way in which Canadian governments do business. These changes also have important implications for the role of the voluntary sector and the way in which voluntary organizations relate to governments. This paper is intended to provide an overview of these changes, to discuss their implications for voluntary sector organizations, and to frame some issues for the National Children's Alliance to facilitate discussion about future direction and priorities. It will be important for voluntary organizations wishing to participate in national initiatives to have a good understanding of the way in which social policy decisions are currently being made in Canada, so as to be able to intervene effectively in policy development.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first presents information on the social policy context and factors that have led to some of the governments' actions on children and other social concerns. The second discusses the activities of the National Children's Alliance and implications for the future direction of the Alliance.

PART 1: BACKGROUND

Canadian society has been in a process of rapid evolution over the past quarter century, and governments have often been at the centre of this process. Constitutional and federal-provincial issues were prominent features of the Canadian landscape during the late 80s and early 90s. Although the major constitutional renewal initiatives undertaken during this time were not successful, more recently and on a smaller scale, federal and provincial governments have moved to harmonize relations and find more productive ways to collaborate. This movement has produced some significant changes within the social policy sector in how governments work together and relate to the public.

Throughout much of the 90s Canadians went through a difficult period of recession and government program cutbacks to reduce budget deficits. One of the consequences of this period of restraint was a greater emphasis placed by governments, under the heading of "disentanglement," on rationalizing jurisdictional mandates and reducing program overlap and duplication. The argument for disentanglement also provided a rationale for governments to divest themselves of some program responsibilities, and converged with their wish to reduce program expenditures for fiscal management reasons.

At the federal level, the move to disentangle responsibilities within the social policy sector led the federal government to focus on its mandate for income transfers to individual Canadians and other governments, while divesting itself of some program delivery responsibilities in favour of the provinces. One of the first outcomes of this approach was the creation of the Canada Health and Social

Transfer program (CHST), which combines health, social service and post secondary education transfers to the provinces into one comprehensive transfer program with fewer conditions attached. While the creation of the CHST was clearly part of a major cost-cutting exercise, it was also designed to reduce the federal role in service delivery.

At the same time that Canadian governments were engaged in significant expenditure reductions, there was still pressure on them from a number of sources to respond to social issues such as child poverty. The complexity and pervasiveness of many social problems called for a broadly based response, that involved all levels of government and all sectors of society. All these factors -- constitutional, fiscal and societal, led governments to develop more coordinated and multi-sectoral responses to national issues. The improvement of economic conditions in the late 90s, and the corresponding increase in government revenues have also contributed to governments' willingness to address important social issues. Canadians and their governments are now re-engaged in a dialogue on priorities for the best use of these new revenues.

Federal/Provincial/Territorial Cooperative Mechanisms

As a federal state, Canada has a long history of federal-provincial collaboration on issues of national importance. Over time a series of federal/provincial/territorial structures have been developed to deal with issues of national concern. There are now three principal structures of intergovernmental collaboration. These are:

- The Conference of First Ministers, comprising the Prime Minister, Provincial Premiers and Territorial Leaders. This Conference is the senior structure for federal/provincial/ territorial cooperation.
- A number of sectoral Conferences of Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers, such as Ministers of Social Services or Ministers of Justice. These Conferences comprise sectoral Ministers from each jurisdiction, and have a specific focus on issues within their sector.
- The Federal/Provincial/Territorial Council on Social Policy Renewal. This recently established Council differs from existing sectoral Ministers Conferences by having a broad mandate that combines Health, Social Service, Education and Justice sectors within one social policy envelope, and by having a particular focus on coordinating the renewal of Canada's social programs. The Council comprises Ministers responsible for social or related policy areas, or for inter-governmental relations, from each jurisdiction. (Quebec does not officially participate.) The Council has been given responsibility for overseeing development of the National Children's Agenda.

Although the Council has the advantage of being able to consider broadly based responses to social issues, its creation may pose some difficulties for the non-government sector.

Provincial representation on the Council is often by a Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, rather than a line sectoral Minister. This increases the possibility that institutional and inter-government political matters will detract from consideration of substantive policy issues. A second concern is that, while line departments have usually developed reasonable working relations with their clientele, including voluntary organizations, Intergovernmental Affairs departments have fewer links to non-government sectors. Thus, although the Council calls for substantial public input and participation in decision-making about national social priorities, it is not clear how this will be done. The Council, as an internal intergovernmental structure, does not appear well suited as a focal point for public input. It will be necessary for voluntary sector organizations themselves to develop and propose new mechanisms for engaging with the Council and to advocate for Council-initiated mechanisms for public input.

In addition to the creation of the Council, other factors have led to changes in the way in which governments operate and how they relate to non-government organizations. Many of the complex issues that governments are increasingly called upon to address require a multi-department response. Central agencies such as the Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board, in the case of the federal government, are playing a stronger role in the decision-making process about cross-cutting government initiatives. Governments are turning more often to interdepartmental committees at Deputy and Assistant Deputy Minister levels, as a means of coordinating and managing comprehensive multi-department initiatives. These types of structures and internal agencies tend to operate within a relatively closed system, with limited opportunities for non-government input and influence. In brief, while governments are increasingly calling for greater public and voluntary sector involvement in national initiatives, the kinds of decision-making and management structures they have put in place to plan and oversee these initiatives tend to militate against public and voluntary sector participation.

Social Union Framework Agreement

The development of a Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) is a key achievement of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Council on Social Policy Renewal. Its stated purpose is “to reform and renew Canada’s system of social services and to reassure Canadians that their pan-Canadian social programs are strong and secure.” Although not legally binding, the Agreement commits governments to more collaborative working relationships within the social policy sector, and to accounting for results achieved under the Agreement. The Agreement was signed by the federal and all provincial/territorial governments, except Quebec, in February 1999. The following summarizes the main provisions of the SUFA.

The Agreement comprises seven sections:

1. the enumeration of a set of principles that are intended to reflect the fundamental values of Canadians, including:

- promoting equality of opportunity and a respect for the rights and dignity of Canadians;
 - ensuring access to reasonably comparable services;
 - respecting aboriginal treaty and other rights;
 - maintaining stable and sustainable funding for social programs;
 - promoting active participation of all Canadians in social and economic life;
 - and, (significantly for the work of the Alliance) working in partnership with individuals, families, communities, voluntary organizations, business and labour; thereby ensuring meaningful input by Canadians into social policies and programs.
2. ensuring the mobility rights of Canadians throughout Canada, and committing to the elimination of residency-based requirements for health, social and other services.
 3. enhancing each government's transparency and accountability to its constituents, by others; monitoring and measuring outcomes of social programs and reporting to constituents on performance; sharing information and best practices with other jurisdictions; developing comparable indicators to measure progress against objectives; ensuring effective mechanisms for Canadians to participate in developing social priorities and reviewing outcomes; and ensuring fair and transparent practices in service delivery.
 4. working in partnership with other governments, through joint planning, information sharing, working together to identify priorities for collaborative action, and notifying and consulting on significant program and policy changes that may affect other governments.
 5. committing the federal government to using its spending power in a cooperative manner that is respectful of provincial/territorial governments and their priorities, and to consulting with provinces prior to initiating any significant changes to existing transfers to the provinces or introducing new social transfers to provinces or individuals. Provinces will determine the program design and mix best suited to their needs, consistent with the objectives of the overall program, and will be able to reinvest surplus funds in similar priority areas.
 6. establishing a dispute resolution mechanism and working collaboratively to avoid and resolve intergovernmental disputes.
 7. undertaking a full review of the Agreement by the end of the third year, and making changes as required. The review will provide for input and feedback from Canadians and all interested parties, including social policy experts, the private sector and voluntary organizations.

Although the agreement has been signed for more than a year, some questions remain as to its effectiveness in furthering a new era of cooperative federalism in the social policy sector. The interests of the federal and provincial/territorial governments still diverge on certain matters -- the federal government, for example, being concerned about the accountability and reporting provisions of the

Agreement, while the provinces/territories are more concerned with implementing an effective dispute resolution mechanism. At the moment governments are cautious about not offending others, and may not be prepared to push on contentious matters. The absence of Quebec is also a significant gap in the Agreement. Despite these concerns, the SUFA presents an important opportunity for the voluntary sector to have greater impact on the social policy-making process in Canada.

Many provisions of the Agreement have significant implications for the work of the voluntary sector, and its relation to governments. The principles of providing equal access to reasonably comparable services, of enhancing accountability measures, and of working in partnership with voluntary organizations have a direct bearing on the concerns of the Alliance. These principles also provide a good starting point for engaging federal/provincial/ territorial governments in discussions about the best means of advancing the interests of children through such other initiatives as the National Children's Agenda and the Early Childhood Development Initiative (ECDI). The SUFA, in effect, provides an overall framework which establishes the ground rules under which more specific intergovernmental initiatives such as the National Children's Agenda and ECDI will be carried out.

Susan Phillips, in a paper assessing the implications of the SUFA for the voluntary sector, suggests that in order to prepare itself for participation within the SUFA process the voluntary sector should:

- develop stronger coalitions by subsector;
- coordinate provincial and national levels within umbrella organizations;
- develop better cross-sectoral discussions within the sector; and
- plan for the succession of policy expertise and leadership within national and regional organizations.

The National Children's Alliance, as a coalition of organizations concerned with children, has already begun to move in the direction Phillips suggests. The issue for the Alliance at this stage is how to build on the progress already made, especially with respect to the last three recommendations.

National Child Benefit

The introduction of the National Child Benefit (NCB) in 1998 preceded the signing of the SUFA, and was one of the early federal/provincial/territorial initiatives in the social policy sector following the major government cutbacks of the mid 90s. The NCB is a good example of the federal and provincial/territorial governments' move to "disentangle" their respective responsibilities, with the federal government focussing on income transfers to individuals, and provinces on the provision of services. The NCB provides a tax credit to low-income parents with children that supplements the basic Canada Child Tax Benefit. It is primarily designed to be of direct advantage to low-income working families, since for those on social assistance, the tax benefit can be offset by reduced social

assistance payments. As part of the agreement establishing the NCB, however, provinces agree to use any provincial funds realized from savings to social assistance payments on either enhanced benefit payments to low-income families or on social services for children and their families.

One of the elements of the NCB is a commitment by governments to ongoing reporting and evaluation of the initiative. Governments will issue annual progress reports outlining program expenditures and activities, and will track progress indicators against the goals of the initiative: reduction of the depth of child poverty, attachment to the work force and program harmonization.

National Children's Agenda

Although the NCB is a relatively narrowly focussed initiative, it has also served as a stepping stone to the development of the National Children's Agenda. In 1997 federal and provincial/territorial governments began a discussion on a broader National Children's Agenda. The National Children's Agenda was intended to present a vision and policy framework for a concerted national effort to improve the well-being of children in Canada. In May 1999 the federal government announced the National Children's Agenda, and released a document entitled Developing a Shared Vision. This document sets out a vision statement about the importance Canadians give to nurturing and supporting our children, and outlines a set of broad values and four general goals for the National Children's Agenda. These goals are to ensure the: a) physical and emotional health, b) safety and security, c) success at learning, and d) social engagement and responsibility of Canadian children. The document then proposes six areas for action:

1. Supporting parents and strengthening families;
2. Enhancing early childhood development;
3. Improving economic security for families;
4. Providing early and continuous learning experiences;
5. Fostering strong adolescent development; and
6. Creating supportive, safe and violence-free communities.

The National Children's Agenda provides a broad framework for advancing the interests of children in Canada. It is intended as a rallying call to all sectors of society -- voluntary, private, professional and public -- as well as to governments. Although the National Children's Agenda does not include a set of concrete proposals for new services and programs for children, it is important as an agreement among governments to work together towards development and implementation in the priority areas identified.

Early Childhood Development Initiative

The federal government's next announcement, of an Early Childhood Development Initiative,

moved beyond vision to action. The National Children's Agenda had identified early childhood development as a priority for action. This area is considered especially critical because of the increasing evidence of the importance of a child's first years in shaping developmental outcomes throughout later growth stages. In September 2000 the federal government announced the agreement by all First Ministers, except for Quebec's, for a new Early Childhood Development Initiative, that will provide \$2.2 billion of federal money over 5 years for activities designed to promote sound early childhood development. The federal government has indicated that the Canada Health and Social Transfer program will be the funding mechanism used for the Initiative. The Initiative identifies four key areas for action;

- Promote healthy pregnancy, birth, and infancy,
- Improve parenting and family supports,
- Strengthen early childhood development, learning and care, and
- Strengthen community supports.

These areas are not presented, however, as a comprehensive set of services for improving children's early development, but rather as a menu of items from which provinces may pick and choose. This approach is inconsistent with the principle stated under the SUFA, of ensuring access to a reasonably comparable set of services in all jurisdictions across the country.

As an initial step under the ECDI, governments are called on to establish a baseline inventory of current early childhood development expenditures and services, and to report this information within one year. A second step called for is the development of a shared framework of comparable indicators that will be used to report on progress. These indicators are to be developed by September 2002. The announcement of the Initiative also stated that third parties will be consulted to assist in developing indicators and assessing progress.

The ECDI is the first concrete new action by governments within the general framework of the National Children's Agenda. The Initiative represents a significant opportunity for the Alliance and other interested organizations to improve services for children, and to develop new ways of working productively with federal and provincial/territorial governments. As with the SUFA, however, there are no mechanisms established to facilitate engagement by the voluntary sector in the planning and evaluation of the ECDI. It will be important for the sector to move quickly to propose some workable models of engagement to federal and provincial/ territorial officials.

Voluntary Sector Initiative

In tandem with activities related to children's issues, the federal government over the past two years has been engaged in a dialogue with the voluntary sector, through the Voluntary Sector Roundtable. The impetus for this dialogue came from the voluntary sector itself. In 1995 a group of national voluntary organizations representing such sectors as social development, volunteerism,

international development, arts and culture, sports, health, faith communities, the environment, and philanthropy created the Voluntary Sector Roundtable to discuss strengthening dialogue with the federal government, accountability issues, and the overall recognition of the sector by governments and the public. The Roundtable discussions focussed on four themes: 1) enhancing the relationship between the federal government and the voluntary sector, 2) encouraging cooperation among organizations in the voluntary sector, 3) charitable status, and 4) tax incentives.

During this period the Voluntary Sector Roundtable also initiated a Panel on Governance and Accountability (The Broadbent Panel), that in February 1999 released its report. The Report made a number of recommendations to government:

- update the federal government definition of charity,
- create a new Voluntary Sector Commission,
- build sector capacity, and
- increase transparency;

and to voluntary organizations:

- adopt codes of governance,
- adopt an ethical code of fund-raising, and
- make charities more accountable.

The Roundtable's work to achieve greater recognition and support for the role of voluntary organizations within Canadian society led to an initiative with the federal government in 1999 to establish three joint tables on building a new relationship, strengthening capacity, and improving the regulatory framework. This culminated in a jointly issued report called *Working Together* which contained twenty-six recommendations for government.

The process of discussion between voluntary sector organizations and the federal government resulting in *Working Together*, and the work of the Broadbent Panel, have now been incorporated within a larger voluntary sector/federal government undertaking, called the Voluntary Sector Initiative. The federal government has committed about \$94 million over the next 5 years to the Initiative, for a range of activities intended to further broad development across the sector. The new Initiative has two overall objectives: to increase the capacity of the voluntary sector to meet the demands placed on it by Canadian society; and to improve the government's policies, programs and services to facilitate work of the sector.

The new Voluntary Sector Initiative will also use the process of joint discussion tables with representation from the voluntary sector and the federal government. There will be six tables dealing with developing a voluntary sector accord, improving the regulatory framework, building capacity, increasing public awareness, improving access to information technology and strengthening

volunteerism. The discussion tables will involve about 65 people with equal representation from the voluntary sector and the federal government.

The federal government has allocated \$28.5 million in funding for the sector over the next 5 years to support capacity-building projects related to policy development. Funding is available for individual projects of up to 2 years duration. This funding may be helpful to the Alliance in supporting work on developing mechanisms for engagement in the policy-making process on children's issues. Overall, the Voluntary Sector Initiative will be addressing many of the issues that are important to the Alliance, and the Alliance should consider the advantages of maintaining a close working relationship with the VSI Secretariat.

PART 2: FUTURE DIRECTION

National Children's Alliance: Background

The National Children's Alliance was started in the spring of 1996 to provide a forum for national organizations to work more closely together. It comprises more than 30 organizations having an interest in children and families. Since its beginning, the Alliance has met with federal Cabinet Ministers, MPs from all parties, and officials responsible for children's issues, to advocate for the adoption of a national children's agenda. Over the past two years the Alliance has undertaken a number of activities, including a concept paper on the impact of the SUFA; a National Think Tank in March 2000 to discuss the National Children's Agenda and the voluntary sector's role in moving the Agenda to implementation; and a series of twelve Regional Forums in the late spring of this year, to facilitate discussion on how the voluntary sector can contribute to the National Children's Agenda.

The Alliance has been successful to date in what we have set out to accomplish. The federal government has now announced a comprehensive National Children's Agenda, and followed this with the announcement of the ECDI, along with a commitment of up to \$2.2 billion for the Initiative over the next 5 years. Although the Alliance has not been the only influence that led to these decisions, our work has helped move the agenda forward. Now that we have progressed to this point, however, we need to assess our current situation and determine where we go from here.

The context outlined in the previous part of this paper -- new federal/provincial/territorial decision-making processes, the announcement of new initiatives for children, and an expressed willingness on the part of governments to collaborate with the voluntary sector -- presents both new opportunities and some uncertainties for the Alliance. Following the November 27, 2000 election, the federal government has a renewed mandate, and will likely continue to pursue the course it has been following on children's issues. In addition to the National Children's Alliance's efforts, the Voluntary Sector Initiative will be addressing some of the same concerns -- developing effective engagement mechanisms for voluntary sector participation in the policy-making process, building capacity and better

utilizing new technology. In effect, there appears to be a critical mass forming for moving on both children's issues and the role of the voluntary sector in addressing a variety of issues in partnership with governments.

Obstacles

Although governments have indicated a willingness to have voluntary sector organizations participate in key aspects of the National Children's Agenda and the ECDI, there are few established models for sector engagement with federal and provincial/territorial governments. While it may be possible for some organizations to continue their working relations with line departments, such as Health or Social Services, around particular elements of the ECDI, it will also be necessary to engage governments at a higher level on such issues as accountability and the development of indicators. Although the SUFA holds some promise as a protocol for ensuring greater input and accountability for the children's initiatives, it still leaves some matters unresolved, including the great variability of services for children among provincial/territorial jurisdictions across the country, and the reluctance of provinces/territories to participate in a national accountability framework. Voluntary organizations may be able to play a useful role in relation to the accountability framework, both by encouraging their respective jurisdictions to participate, and by proposing a framework that is less bound by federal-provincial issues.

The question of resources for children's programs also needs further attention. While the \$2.2 billion over 5 years committed by the federal government to the ECDI is a start, it is clearly not sufficient to meet the goals of the Initiative. Finally, the fact of Quebec's non-participation in the children's initiatives and the SUFA presents some difficulties for determining how to involve Quebec voluntary organizations in the work of the Alliance. The Quebec government and other non-government organizations in the Province have been proactive on many children's issues, and it would be of great value to have their input on national children's initiatives.

Goals

To focus its efforts over next year, the Alliance will need to select a manageable number of goals, and develop implementation strategies for each of them. For discussion, the following are some goals that the Alliance may want to pursue:

- develop an overall vision statement that describes our expectations of the National Children's Agenda and the ECDI, and what we wish to see for children as a result of these initiatives.
- establish mechanisms for voluntary sector engagement in federal/provincial/territorial decision-making processes concerning children.

- further develop cooperative working relationships with federal and provincial/territorial governments, at both ministerial and administrative levels.
- reach agreement with federal/provincial/territorial authorities on the content and implementation of an accountability framework for monitoring the progress of national children's initiatives.
- build and strengthen provincial/territorial Alliance networks.
- increase public and community awareness of children's issues, the national children's initiatives, and voluntary sector's involvement in advancing the interests of children.

Strategy Issues for Discussion

The following is a series of discussion points concerning the development of implementation strategies for the Alliance.

The ECDI likely provides the best entrée into issues such as developing an accountability framework and engagement in the policy-making process. The Alliance could address these larger issues within the context of a tangible initiative, that will have immediate practical consequences for all involved. At the same time, this approach can be reinforced by remaining involved with the VSI, who will be dealing with similar issues at a higher level of generality.

A strategy for working simultaneously at the political level with relevant Ministers, and at the official level with federal and provincial personnel responsible for children's initiatives is critical. The identification of key Ministers who are sympathetic to our position, and who can serve as advocates for us within the political decision-making process would be useful. Officials at the ADM and other levels, where many of the more concrete implementation issues are discussed and decided, are key actors in policy-making.

With the changing political landscape, a two-tier strategy is needed directed at a) the national level, involving the federal government and federal/provincial/territorial decision-making structures, and b) the provincial/territorial level, where many of the issues concerning service delivery and access to programs will be determined.

The Alliance may want to consider the issue of a "focal point" for children, within federal/provincial/territorial governments. Experience with such focal points has not always been positive, but they may be useful as internal advocates for children's concerns within government systems, and may provide a useful channel for communication. Alternatively, they may become an obstacle to being able to deal directly with relevant decision-makers within government. Different approaches in different jurisdictions will likely be required.

Consideration of a media strategy is important to accompany a political strategy. The Alliance should consider the creation of visible public support and interest in children's issues and in our work to advance the interests of children. Such public support is a critical back-up to a strategy to achieve greater political support for children's initiatives. Are there any media "events" that we could organize, any high profile Canadians - entertainers, sports figures, politicians - that could give our message greater prominence?

As part of a media/public awareness strategy, the Alliance could look at developing greater awareness at the grassroots level through organizations' memberships and volunteers. Organizations might also want to consider how they can use such activities as newsletters, annual general meetings and community meetings as a way of increasing awareness of the Alliance's agenda.

It may be useful to inventory the existing capacity of Alliance organizations with regard to policy development, community networks, cooperative arrangements with federal/provincial/territorial/municipal governments and the private sector, and other relevant activities. The Alliance should build on the things that organizations are already doing, and find ways of better linking activities that have common elements.

The Alliance should develop and communicate its position quickly, especially regarding access to reasonably comparable services, before the federal and provincial/territorial governments lock into their positions.