

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

Strategic Directions: Building on Momentum

**Discussion Paper
March 2002**

BUILDING ON MOMENTUM

INTRODUCTION

The National Children's Alliance has been meeting since early 1997 when a small group of executive directors of national organizations got together to explore the need for closer collaboration. A subsequent conference in May of that year, hosted by the Child Welfare League of Canada, began a broader discussion about the need for an agenda for children. The National Children's Alliance formed over time as a result of open monthly meetings of national organizations to share information and strategies on children's issues.

When the groups decided to name the collective the National Children's Alliance, it was clear that developing a new national organization would not further their interests. Instead, a set of principles were agreed upon to guide the work. The groups would collaborate to get children's issues on the federal government agenda. The policy recommendations adopted by the Alliance would be drafted by working groups and would only go forward only if there was a consensus. The leadership of the Alliance would be shared by the member organizations. The name and logo would be used by member organizations in conjunction with their own logos. There would be no membership fees and the National Children's Alliance would not compete with the member organizations for funding projects.

For the next two years, the National Children's Alliance focused on a government relations strategy to get children's issues on the agenda. In May 1999, the federal/provincial/territorial governments signed an agreement to move towards implementation of a National Children's Agenda. The members of the Alliance agreed that the best starting point for an agenda was the early years. The Alliance continued to work with federal policymakers and in September 2000 the federal government announced 2.2 billion dollars towards the federal/provincial/territorial Early Childhood Development (ECD) agreement.

Since the federal funding started flowing to the provinces and territories in the spring of 2001, it has been increasingly clear that due to the nature of the agreement, and consistent with the Social Union Framework agreement, third party monitoring is critical. The Alliance has played an important role in promoting dialogue about the role of the voluntary/NGO sector as the third party in monitoring in the context of the ECD agreement. The Standing Committee on Finance recently adopted our recommendation to fund third party monitoring. The year 2002 is earmarked for a review of the Social Union Framework agreement and the first reports on progress of the ECD agreement will be publicly released.

Members of the Alliance felt that it was an opportune time to carefully consider our collective strategic directions for the next two years. At the December meeting a process began to identify how best to build on our strengths in order to address the upcoming challenges. In January a small group (the project steering committee) met in a retreat setting to review our progress and to draft recommendations for our future directions. The recommended strategic directions were discussed at the February Alliance meeting. This paper is the result of the collective work and will be used to help set the stage for further dialogue at the national workshop March 22-24, 2002 in Ottawa.

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS – WHAT WORKS?

Identification of the collective strengths of the Alliance was the starting point for work on the strategic directions. It was the first time that the Alliance as a whole stepped back to take a critical look at what are the strengths that have contributed to success.

Unique style of Leadership:

One of the areas that came forward in the brainstorm session held in December 2001 at our regular meeting, was that the experience in working as part of the National Children's Alliance has been somehow different than other coalitions or alliances. There were many areas that were identified as strengths and leadership was not one that was explicitly

identified. However, when the group met in January to begin to pull together the results, leadership was clearly one of the collective strengths of the Alliance. Many of the areas identified described the unique style of leadership that the Alliance as a whole has adopted as the way of working. This unique style of leadership is characterized by:

- Shared model of leadership for internal and external relations;
- Active participation of organizations in the decision-making process;
- A decision making model that is based on consensus;
- Transparency and openness in process;
- Decision makers from organizations are at the table; and
- “Right” mix of leadership and process has evolved.

In practice this means that policy positions are drafted by open working groups. Drafts are shared for feedback in order to integrate it into the work. Any organization has the opportunity to put forward suggestions for collective policy or conversely to prevent a position that is contrary to their organization’s policy from being adopted. Leadership comes from the member organizations and there is the opportunity for anyone to be proactive in putting a new initiative or policy on the table. There is no system of officers, although there is a steering committee with voluntary membership to oversee accountability for projects with funding. Different individuals and organizations speak publicly on behalf of the Alliance at different times. Meetings with government are often open to anyone who is available to attend.

Structure:

Another area that was strongly identified as a strength was the structure of the Alliance. The choice to remain a collective without an organizational structure and formal rules of operating was clearly articulated as a strength. There are no officers or by-laws and fiduciary responsibility for funding is through the Coalition of National Voluntary

Organizations, that acts as the secretariat for the Alliance. The strength of this approach for the Alliance is:

- Non-institutional and non-traditional model;
- NVO as the secretariat;
- Engages only as a collective;
- Uses creative ways of working;
- Light, nimble and responsive;
- Consistently builds on the existing strengths, expertise and resources of the member organizations; and
- Maximizes limited resources and staffing to benefit the collective.

In practice this means that the success of the Alliance is dependent upon the engagement, participation and contributions of the organizations and individuals involved. There is a joint commitment to maintaining the flexibility afforded by the lack of a formal structure at the same time as ensuring effective accountability through transparency and communications. This is achieved by dialogue and by the role that individuals play at the table in balancing the lack of structure with ongoing watchfulness in keeping the collective working to its principles.

Principles of working together:

Without a formal structure one of the areas of strength that was identified was the principles of how the Alliance works together among its member organizations. Although the principles have never been formally adopted or even explicitly articulated, there seemed to be a common understanding of how the collective operates. The key principles that guide how we work together are:

- Respect for both independence and collaboration;
- Work on issues that can be better worked on together rather than individually;
- Stay working on outcomes – not only dialogue;

- Maintain an open table with respect and goodwill;
- Keep room at the table for critical thinking and disagreement;
- Speak as a collective only when consensus has been reached;
- Keep government and media interventions strategic; and
- Manage input and consultation effectively.

In practice this means that the Alliance does not promote itself as an entity unless it is in the context of specific collective work. At different times member organizations will speak together publicly on behalf of the Alliance when a strategic opportunity has been decided upon. The Alliance is not in the business of producing and disseminating communications materials as a central body but does so through its member organizations. In all of our work, the Alliance members bring their issues to the table but in the spirit of the collective interest.

Strategies for Success:

Although the Alliance has not adopted any formal models of strategic planning, the work that has been accomplished and the ongoing relationship with government has been effective. There has been a balance found between process for consensus and policy content. The successful strategies were identified as:

- Working across government departments – promotes holistic policy and prevent silos;
- Staying with the substantive issues at a time when the federal government has a focus on process;
- Communications works provided a “song book” for policy dialogue at all levels;
- Maintaining a strong analytical focus with a collective voice;
- Achieving engagement of the Alliance members and constituents without and undue focus on details; and
- Keeping to the high ground at the level of principles.

This has meant that we have consistently used the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as our framework for principles. By maintaining the “child’s lens” on policy the Alliance has been able to keep our policy recommendation true to a holistic model that blends income support and tax policy with services and community supports. This approach has allowed the Alliance to have a concrete policy focus without driving down to a level of detail that would act as a barrier to reaching consensus. While the Alliance engages in federal government policy development processes, we also maintain strong independence in developing policy capacity within our collective constituencies.

Focus on Results:

As part of the preparation for looking at the upcoming challenges, it was recognized that the Alliance has not identified or celebrated achievement. It is important to focus on the results that we have accomplished before moving forward. To date the Alliance has:

- Built a high level of credibility;
- Been able to effectively communicate who we are;
- Fostered new partnerships and initiatives among member groups;
- Shared learning across sector and informed the work of individual organizations;
- Success at the federal level with the ECD agreement;
- Fostered trust among groups who have not traditionally worked together;
- Changed attitudes about making cross-sector linkages through the regional workshops and connections;
- Gained legitimacy from the capacity to speak on a holistic level;
- Impacted member organization’s capacity to keep their constituents informed on broader issues;
- Developed a high profile; and
- Overall have achieved more than we would have predicted when we started.

CHALLENGES and OPPORTUNITIES

Economic changes

As we move into the twenty-first century, the trend of eroding family security has not abated. The structure of the labour market means there are many workers without job security or adequate benefits. Income distribution and job quality data continues to show the “good jobs – bad jobs” dichotomy. Non-standard jobs are now common and yet we haven’t even been able to meet the needs of 9 to 5 workers for quality child care. In our increasingly consumer oriented society fueled by the impact of technology, children in families on the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder face barriers to active participation that are higher than ever before. The haves and the have-nots are further distanced by their differential access to technology.

As the complexities of urbanized modern life intensify, the capacity of the community to respond to the deepening needs of children and their families is eroding. The destabilization of child/family serving organizations continues as government downloading of service delivery is further complicated by the entry of the private sector into public services. A workforce deficit is predicted in community based services due in part to the quality of jobs as a result of government restructuring. At a time when the research tells us that a substantive proportion of children from all family types and income levels are experiencing difficulties, our collective capacity to respond with appropriate integrated services is in decline.

On the front lines there have been big losses in funding over the past five years. Critical community services are struggling to serve the needs of children and their families. Changes in the types of funding have had as much of a negative impact on service delivery as have declining levels of funding. The trend to shorter term project funding by all funders has eroded the core capacities of organizations, in particular their ability to provide integrated service delivery and to respond to emerging needs. For children and

families, access to a system of quality, co-ordinated community services directly impacts on their potential for healthy outcomes.

Political context:

Since September 11th, competition for the public policy agenda now extends beyond the economic to public security. Interest in children's issues is waning now that the signing of the ECD agenda puts a check mark beside kids as "done". This is exacerbated by the continued jurisdictional instability of the f/p/t processes. Although the ECD agenda is signed and money is flowing from the federal coffers, progress has been slow on development of a joint government monitoring framework. A number of Alliance members participate on a federal advisory group on this issue which provides an opportunity to shape federal government policy directions. However, this not does provide any direct access to the federal/provincial/territorial processes. The Alliance's ongoing research project on monitoring and indicators will help strengthen our collective policy positions.

It is still early days but the recent announcement of a national skills and learning agenda has not been strongly linked to the National Children's Agenda (NCA). The federal government discussion paper does reference both the ECD and the NCA agreements. It will be an ongoing challenge to move federal policy directions towards a holistic approach to skills and learning inclusive of the broad determinants of social and human development.

Health care has been the recent focus of public policy debate in Canada. Over the past several years the focus of the debate has been on the acute care aspect – from hospital beds to MRI machines. The Romanow Commission has provided an opportunity for the Alliance to consider the implications of health care system reform in the context of the broad determinants of health.

The shift to an economic agenda over the past decade has had a significant negative impact on the stability of Canada's infrastructure of social and community services. There is reason for optimism however, as the importance of quality of life issues and their link to economic growth and well-being becomes more evident. Canadians' taste for tax cuts is tempered by their commitment to public health, education and social services. Within the dialogue of national security issues is a heightened sentiment of the importance of the role of government.

SETTING STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

In setting strategic directions the following criteria were considered:

- Organizations cannot effectively “go it alone” – a collective voice is needed;
- Fills a gap in the current policy dialogue;
- Has the potential to “fit” the agendas of government;
- Consistent with the Alliance vision; and,
- Potential to “excite” constituencies and mobilize.

Building on the work over the past five years, the strategic directions (not in order of importance that have been developed to date are to:

- Promote the vision of a National Children's Agenda;
- Support the ECD agreement – including work on monitoring and child outcome indicators;
- Develop a national strategy for children 6 – 12;
- Work with regional constituent groups;
- Promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child through closer ties with the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of Children (CCRC); and
- Address youth issues in collaboration with the National Youth Serving Agencies (NYSA).

At the March 22-24 meeting there will be an opportunity to discuss the strategic directions. Through our work during the weekend the components of a work plan will be developed. Moving forward in all of these areas requires policy directions as well as an advocacy and communications plan. In the planned workshops for the weekend we will work together on how we can make a difference through our collective efforts on children's issues.