

**Beyond Roads and Sewers:
The Need for Social Infrastructure**

The Research:

The National Children's Alliance is a group of 60 national organizations that work collaboratively on public policy issues to improve the well-being of Canada's children and youth. In all of its evidence-based policy work the Alliance uses a framework that includes: income support; programs and services; as well as accountability measures.

Research is clear that an adequate family income, while important, is not sufficient to ensure that children have an opportunity to reach their potential. Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth indicate that while poor children are at higher risk, there are increasing numbers of vulnerable children across all socio-economic groups. In fact, there are more children living in middle class families that are at risk than there are children living in poor families. (Willms, 2002) The research findings are unequivocal that the determinants of health for children and youth are largely dependent upon the social context in which they grow up.

Community matters. Family-enabling environments are required in order to provide much-needed support for parents and children, ensure positive and nurturing experiences to children and help parents cope with the stresses of raising children. (Torjman, 2004) The ecological model of human development emphasizes the importance of taking into account the rich and inter-connected influences of parent, family, neighbourhood, community, public services and public policies. Inclusion of all children, irrespective of ability, cultural group, socio-economic status or geography, is dependent upon vibrant communities that ensure each child has the opportunity to participate as an active member of society.

It is commonly understood that communities need physical infrastructure to enable economic development. In a knowledge-based economy, inclusive social infrastructure is essential to human development and therefore a necessary condition for economic growth. Social infrastructure encompasses the inter-dependent mix of places and spaces, programs and services, and networks at all levels. Emergent research indicates that creating the environment for healthy child development involves a profound degree of inter-sectoral collaboration, multi-disciplinary approaches, co-ordination of programs and services and vibrant community support networks. (for examples see *Understanding the Early Years, Better Beginning Better Futures Ontario, The Community Asset Mapping Project Vancouver, Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force Toronto*)

Place-based Solutions:

There is an opportunity for federal leadership through the “Cities/Communities Initiative” to promote a social agenda. The federal government has a long recognized role in creating enabling environments. Municipal and local governments are particularly sensitive to the social needs of their communities. Expanding the dialogue and the policy platform of the Cities/Communities agenda to include social infrastructure would allow the federal government to address pressing social issues. It would also provide a platform to build local multi-sectoral partnerships with all levels of government, the charitable non-profit sector and business.

Investing in developing local inclusive social infrastructure could be achieved through a funded federal program, such as a “Community Social Infrastructure Initiatives Program”. Funding for social infrastructure would include not only “bricks and mortar” but inclusive programs, services and network-building. Local leadership with citizen involvement in identifying and addressing solutions to urgent community needs would be a key component for success. The role of the charitable non-profit sector as a broker and catalyst for community development is undisputed. Partnerships and multi-sectoral approaches that promoted a high degree of co-ordination could form the basis of criteria for funding.

The National Children’s Agenda could be furthered through this type of federal program. There is rising concern in many communities about the health and well-being of Canada’s children and youth. Over the past decade in Canada there have been serious cuts to programs and services, increasing user fees and barriers to accessing public spaces.

“Public Spaces – Family Places” is an example of an initiative that could be funded through a “Community Social Infrastructure Fund”. Over the past two years the National Children’s Alliance has been working with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities out of a shared understanding of the importance of quality, safe and accessible recreation opportunities for children and youth. More than twenty-five percent of our children are not active enough to promote healthy growth and development. Access to any after school programs, sports and recreation is simply not available for 15% of boys and 11% of girls. Research indicates that participation in arts and sports protects vulnerable children from emotional and behavioral problems. (Browne, 1998)

Public parks and community centres do not just benefit children, they also promote vibrant neighbourhoods. “Public Spaces – Family Places” would support development and maintenance of inclusive community play spaces, recreation opportunities and family-oriented community centres. It would also be important to include funding for pilot programs that engage citizens in service delivery through multi-sectoral partnerships. It provides a way to support distressed neighbourhoods and communities and to address revitalization of urban cores.

Investing in inclusive social infrastructure contributes to quality of life and economic development. For the National Children's Alliance it is an opportunity to level the playing field for all of Canada's children and youth.