

October 2004

“TELLING THE STORY OF CANADA’S CHILDREN”

Moving towards a comprehensive approach to accountability

The National Children’s Alliance has been working for the past two years on developing a model for monitoring and accountability to track the progress of Canada’s children. A focus of our work has been the role of the voluntary sector as “third party” in monitoring how governments are doing in meeting their public policy and international commitments. The National Children’s Alliance is committed to continuing to play a role in ensuring that in Canada we have a collective capacity to track how children are doing and how we are doing as a society to help them reach their potential.

While third party monitoring of existing commitments has been an impetus and will continue to be important, we are hoping to develop a plan for telling an inclusive story of Canada’s children that is grounded and speaks to all stakeholders. Illuminating the lives of all children means that we can better help them reach their potential. A child’s development is a unique, personal, familial and community adventure. Our challenge is to maximize their chances in many environments to be valued, nurtured, recognized, engaged and included.

Understanding and articulating how peers, families, communities, service delivery organizations, professionals and governments interact to create nourishing environments for each child is an important part of the story – but not the whole story. As we address the challenges of this complex story, we need to keep children at the centre – to find ways to help children tell their own story as well as taking care to tell our stories about them through their eyes. We need to develop frameworks that allow us to move into action to improve public policy, research, practice and behaviour. How do we collectively build and sustain ways to capture these complex stories, bring meaning to them and stimulate action that ensures all children have the chance to reach their potential?

Accountability means being responsible with a requirement to answer for one's conduct. In order to achieve this we need to be understandable and track how we are doing over time. An accountability framework includes components such as:

- Development of common objectives;
- Identification of roles and responsibilities;
- Establishment of ways to track progress;
- Analysis of results to bring meaning;
- Communications of results;
- Development of improvement plans.

Common vision and objectives were developed through the broad-based process of developing the National Children's Agenda. Canada's vision:

- We want all of our children to be loved and thrive.
- We want every child to be valued and to develop his or her unique physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and creative capacities.
- We want every child to be respected and protected, and in turn, to respect and protect the rights of others.
- We want all of our children to belong and contribute to communities that appreciate diversity, support different abilities and share resources.

To reach the vision our children need to be: healthy – physically and emotionally; safe and secure; successful at learning; and socially engaged and responsible.

How Canada's children are doing is a collective responsibility. The ecological model of human development identifies the influences on a child's life from family, to community, to the broader society. These influences are inter-related and their impact on the child is complex.

The National Children's Alliance recognized that a comprehensive model for accountability should be inclusive of:

Children – How are children and youth in Canada doing? (child outcomes)

Families – How are families in Canada doing to support their children? (family structure, socio-economic indicators)

Communities – How are communities doing to support children, youth and their families? (community level services and supports, environment, recreation)

Governments – How are governments doing to support communities, families, children and youth? (public services, government expenditures, domestic and international agreements)

The story of Canada's children needs to be told in an inclusive way. This means we need: voices of children and youth; sources of knowledge from national data sets to individual case studies; holistic approaches and an understandable narrative for this complex story. The National Children's Alliance has been discussing the potential for the development of a framework based on a clear understanding of what we are trying to achieve, the research about how children reach their potential, the perspective from which we are telling the story and the questions we need to ask ourselves.

The process used to develop and implement an accountability framework for how we are doing for our children in Canada is as important as the framework itself. It provides an ongoing impetus for all of the various stakeholders to engage in both individual and collective work on accountability. At our roundtable in August 2004, there was an intense dialogue on how to move forward with an emerging consensus that as organizations working in the voluntary/NGO sector we are in a unique position to take a leadership role in "Telling the Story of Canada's Children". In order to achieve this a sustainable mechanism is needed.

The development of a "Council of Communities for Children in Canada" would provide a framework that would support cohesive approaches to accountability. This Council would act as network (hub and spokes model) that would build the collective capacity of the voluntary/NGO sector to play a key role in public accountability. The roles that are

urgently needed to ensure accountability include: catalyst, facilitator, broker and connector.

The functions of this “Council” could include supporting the following:

- Canadian Children’s “Advocate” (similar functions to Children’s Commissioner but outside of government);
- Clearinghouse of current data and research (for increasing access);
- National Data Strategy (to identify gaps and existing data sets);
- Develop of a “story-telling” model for use at all levels;
- Reporting on children’s progress and family characteristics;
- Reporting on Government programs, expenditures, policy and legislation;
- Reporting on Community progress;
- Monitoring domestic and international agreements (CRC, ECDI, MLF, SUFA, etc);
- Evidence and data-based policy development;
- Engagement of children and youth;
- Act as a “home” for broad based coalitions.

The “Council” would be driven by the third sector – it could build on the model of collaboration and operating principles successfully established through the National Children’s Alliance and other coalitions. These networks would need to be broadened to include partnerships with researchers and academics. The work of the “Council” would be not be done centrally but shared by organizations within the network. It would act as “counterpoint” to the work within governments to encourage holistic, cross-jurisdictional and “whole of government” approached to policy.