

Child Rights Public Awareness Campaign Project Backgrounder

Issue

Knowledge of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and children's rights generally, is lacking at all levels of our society – government, community, families and children and youth themselves. The purpose of the child rights public awareness campaign project is to increase public awareness of child rights in British Columbia

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Project Partners

The Child and Youth Officer for BC, the Society for Children and Youth of BC and the Institute for Safe Schools and Communities of BC are similarly mandated to advocate for the rights and further the well-being of children and youth in British Columbia. The agencies are well positioned to facilitate a process by which representatives of community and all levels of government can work together to develop and implement strategies to increase the public awareness of child rights. A project advisory committee has been established with representatives of the federal and provincial governments, and community agencies to represent the diversity of British Columbian society.

Guiding Principles

- All adults share the responsibility to ensure that child rights are realized in their families, communities, and society at large.
- Children and youth are fully citizens. However, we must recognize and support their evolving capacities. Therefore while children and youth have the right to advocate for and participate in the promotion of their rights, adults are the “duty bearers” and have the responsibility to ensure that child rights are fulfilled.
- Public awareness is the foundation on which understanding and empowerment are built. Greater public awareness can lead to:
 - increased political will, implementation monitoring, research, education, inclusion and participation of children, and society at large, in rights initiatives;
 - increased advocacy by children and adult supporters;
 - positive proactive responses to advocacy by family, community, funders, and politicians;

- increased funding and services; and,
- the realization of children's rights and improved well-being.

Project Description

The multi-phased initiative has a three-year time frame and will consist of the following components:

- Baseline survey
- Focus groups
- Multi-media campaign
- Regional youth-led forums
- Provincial Conference

Child Rights Laws

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the *Convention*) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. Canada, supported by all provinces and territories, became a signatory to the *Convention* in 1991. The *Convention* affirms children's entitlement to development, protection, participation and non-discrimination. It also acknowledges that the realization of these rights for children can only be accomplished through the care and assistance of adults with the active and meaningful participation of children and youth themselves. While parents and legal guardians are primarily responsible for nurturing children and ensuring that their rights are upheld, the community and government also have important support roles to play. We have a shared responsibility for the welfare of all of BC's children.

In 2002, an international action plan, *A World Fit for Children*, was approved by 180 nations, including Canada, to further the vision set out in the *Convention*. Canada then fulfilled its commitment to establish a national plan of action when *A Canada Fit for Children* was released in 2004. *A Canada Fit for Children* specifies four priority areas: supporting families and strengthening communities; promoting healthy lives; protecting from harm; and, promoting education and learning.

In addition to the *Convention*, the rights of British Columbia's children are protected through other forms of legislation such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and federal and provincial human rights laws. The provincial government has also recently articulated a vision of supporting children "*to be the best they can be physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally.*"¹

Public Awareness

In the 2005 report *Who's in Charge Here? Effective Implementation of Canada's International Obligations with Respect to the Rights of Children*, Canada's

¹ StrongStart BC Committee of Cabinet. (2006). Vision statement (unpublished).

Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights found that there is a pervasive lack of awareness of the *Convention* within Canadian society:

*“...the Committee has heard numerous witnesses express concern about the lack of awareness, both in government and among the public, of the Convention and the rights enshrined in it. Throughout its hearings, the Committee has become aware that there is very little knowledge of the Convention outside academic and advocacy circles. In government, even among those dedicated to protecting children’s rights, knowledge of the 15 year old Convention is spotty at best.”*²

Particularly disturbing is the committee’s finding that “*awareness of the Convention only occasionally filters down to those it is meant to protect*”³, children and youth themselves. The committee was told by many witnesses that child rights cannot be realized and upheld if children, their caregivers and the public are not aware of and able to act upon those rights. Not surprisingly the committee concluded that without a high level of public awareness of the *Convention*, we cannot be confident of its effective implementation in Canada.

To commemorate International Day of the Child, 2005, Save the Children Canada commissioned the Ipsos Reid market research group to conduct a survey themed *Canadians Reflect on the State of the Child in Canada*. The survey polled 1,002 participants across Canada, 132 from British Columbia. The survey, released on November 19, 2005, concluded that “while most Canadians believe children are faring well in Canada, a significant minority do not.”⁴ Across Canada, 61% of those surveyed agree with the statement that “children’s rights are being fully realized in society”. Of the BC respondents, 48% agreed with the statement. Only 46% of those surveyed across Canada were aware of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. In BC alone the figure was only slightly higher at 48%.

In recognition of the public’s lack of awareness, advocating bodies in British Columbia have recently brought a sharp focus to how child rights are being upheld in the province. Fact sheets released by First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, in November 2005, illustrate BC’s rate of child poverty in 2003 as the highest in Canada at 23.9% (the national child poverty rate in 2003 was 17.6%⁵). First Call’s report, *Child Poverty and Income Inequality in British Columbia – A Status Report* (February, 2006), also highlights the relationship between child and family poverty, with the acknowledgement that “children remain poor because their parents remain poor”⁶. The role of parents/caregivers as primary duty-bearers in ensuring children’s rights is being undermined by,

² *Who’s in Charge Here? Effective Implementation of Canada’s International Obligations with Respect to the Rights of Children*, Government of Canada, November 2005, p. 65.

³ *Ibid*, p. 67

⁴ Ipsos Reid, (2005). NATIONAL CHILDREN’S DAY 2005, *Canadians Reflect on the State of the Child in Canada, Factum*. <http://www.ipsos-na.com/news/pressrelease.cfm?id=2870>

⁵ First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. (2005). BC Campaign 2000: BC Had the Worst Record, Fact Sheet #2.

⁶ First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. (2006). *Child Poverty and Income Inequality in British Columbia: A Status Report*.

among other factors, high levels of poverty and inequitable distribution of wealth within BC. The provincial budget of 2006, announced on February 21, 2006, also focused on children, specifically increasing funding to restore resources to the child welfare and protection system to ensure that the rights of children in care are being met or addressed, “to enhance services for children with special needs, and to better support caregivers and family members caring for children and youth at risk”⁷.

The Society for Children and Youth of BC (SCY) has an extensive history of policy analysis that assesses BC legislation’s compliance with the *Convention*. *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Does Domestic Legislation Measure Up?* (1998) analyzed the compliance of provincial legislation to the *Convention* using a four-point scale rating system. The results of this comprehensive analysis found that of 43 statutes relevant to children’s rights, 14% rated as excellent, 52% as good, 26% as fair, and the remaining 8% as poor or non-compliance⁸. SCY’s report *Perspectives on the Rights of Children with Disabilities in British Columbia* (2003) continued this analysis by examining the specific rights of children with disabilities and *Convention* compliance in public policy. SCY’s most recent work in its Rights Awareness Program includes an analysis of the rights of youth with disabilities in conflict with the law and the development and implementation of A People’s Project, a rights-based monitoring project completed in Vancouver in 2005. Both of these projects raised awareness and educated youth about their rights under the *Convention* and allowed them to assess how their rights were being violated and upheld in their respective systems and communities. Akin to the findings of the Senate report was the realization that youth were not aware of their rights and that community mobilization, through the coordination of individuals, the larger community and government, was imperative to the realization of children’s rights.

In the issue paper *The Convention on the Rights of the Child: A Framework for Public Policy in British Columbia*⁹, released in September 2005, the Child and Youth Officer for BC encouraged the provincial government to:

“Develop a targeted strategy to increase public awareness of the Convention, and use the Convention as a motivational tool to engage various sectors of our civil society in British Columbia (including Aboriginal communities, ethnically diverse populations, non-profit and business sectors, and all levels of government) in collaborative action designed to improve outcomes for children and youth in British Columbia.”

⁷ BC Government. (2006). “Budget 2006 Concentrates on B.C.’s Children”.

http://www2.news.gov.bc.ca/news_releases_2005-2009/2006FIN0004-000111.htm

⁸ Society for Children and Youth of BC. (1998). *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Does Domestic Legislation Measure Up?*, 133.

⁹ Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia. (2005). Issue Paper 2: *The Convention on the Rights of the Child: A Framework for Public Policy in British Columbia*.

http://www.gov.bc.ca/cyo/down/uncrc_issue_paper_sept2005.pdf

This advice was given in recognition that the first step towards community mobilization to further the rights of children and youth in British Columbia is to increase the public understanding of what those rights are. The advice is also supported by Article 42 of the *Convention* which obliges signatory nations to "...make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike."