

Speaking Notes

Pre-Sessional Working Group of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

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Members of the Committee and Invited Guests, we are both honoured and saddened to share further information with you today about Canada's lack of progress towards realizing rights in early childhood, particularly as elaborated in General Comment (GC) 7 of the CRC. We focus on two key issues identified in the 2003 Concluding Observations: child poverty and child care.

Our February 2011 public report "A Tale of Two Canadas" documents, on the one hand, a country that is consistently and simultaneously ranked among the wealthiest in the industrialized world and the weakest in public support for families with young children. As a result, child poverty in Canada is high, access to quality, affordable child care services is low, and many of Canada's youngest children are cared for in unregulated settings.

The child care crisis is a serious population health issue that applies across the socioeconomic spectrum. Our young children's healthy development at risk. Families – and particularly women – are struggling with work/life balance. And the resulting family stress is linked to a range of issues that you will hear about from others today, including increased poverty, mental health concerns, violence and substance abuse.

Yet, behind the statistics, the research and the evidence are the lived realities of children, women and families in Canada, like ...

Mary, a single mother living on welfare, who was waiting 3 years to be accepted into nursing school. When she is finally accepted, she is unable to go because she cannot find child care for her children.

Women working night shift jobs, forced to leave their children sleeping in cars in parking lots outside their workplaces because child care is not available.

Professionally trained early childhood educators, like Carmen, who are leaving the work they love because they cannot feed their families on the poor wages they receive. Neither can they enrol their own children in the programs they work in because they can't afford the fees.

However, government's public reports tell the tale of a very different Canada – one in which child care is okay, or at least improving. For example, the federal government claims that its approach "allows parents to choose the child care option that best suits their family's needs".

But, government's reports do not meet Canada's own public reporting guidelines because they are lacking in: comparative data (even where that data exists), key indicators, civil society input and overall transparency.

These reporting weaknesses were shared with governments by our organizations between 2004 and 2007. Nonetheless, they are still observed in Canada's 2009 report to the CRC and in our 2011 alternative report. Recently we again reviewed the Government of Canada web site which is supposed to have links to the annual early years public reports for all Canadian jurisdictions. Consistent with our earlier observations and concerns about transparency, we found that half of the links were inactive or otherwise unhelpful in accessing the reports. The other half led fairly easily to the reports, but only two reports are reasonably up to date and none substantially meet the above-noted reporting guidelines.

We suggest that Canada's weak public reporting is a barrier to realizing rights in early childhood. It prevents both the Canadian public and the international community from reconciling and resolving the *Tale of Two Canadas*, allowing Canadians to think we're doing better than we are at supporting families.

Our solution? Comprehensive and practical recommendations that are consistent with GC7: We urge federal, provincial and territorial governments to inform Canadians about, plan for, invest in and monitor the results of our country's support for young children and families.

As it has for almost 30 years, the child care NGO community in Canada stands ready, willing and able to help implement these recommendations. In 2004, we completed the first two decades of advocacy for publicly-funded child care by designing the system, laying out an implementation plan and developing a budget. Since that time we have worked with parents and other experts to refine our benefit/cost analyses; introduce timelines, system benchmarks and key indicators, and; detail the planning in several provinces.

In short, Canada's lack of progress on realizing rights in early childhood is not for lack of evidence, not for lack of identified need, and not for lack of detailed solutions and recommendations.

Nor should economic uncertainty be a barrier. Multiple analyses consistently show that the social and economic benefits of child care substantially outweigh the estimated cost of 1% of GDP.

And still governments do so little.

As Canadians we profess that nothing is more important than our children. We say we would do anything for their well-being. But, as we have detailed in *A Tale of Two Canadas* and this *Briefing Update*, Canada is not living up to these ideals.

Are the rights of young children in Canada being upheld and advanced? We think not.