



### Next Steps for PHAC funded youth initiatives

In 2007, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) worked with the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (CEYE) and the First Nations Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) to sponsor and support eight youth from across the country attending international conferences in 2007. It's been almost a year since the expeditions and it's due time to critically review what worked and what we could have done better to improve the youth engagement process. This report is supplementary to our presentation at the Public Health Agency of Canada headquarters in Ottawa in August 2008.

This report was written in its entirety by the young people who attended the two international conferences; the World Fit For Children +5 at the United Nations in New York and the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Congress on Children and Adolescent Rights in Barcelona, Spain. The following are our reflections (both personal and procedural) and recommendations with the hope that they will serve to foster to future PHAC & youth-related partnerships. The CEYE's engagement framework at the end of the document will help summarize our outcomes.

#### The 3<sup>rd</sup> World Congress Trip (November 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007)

“As a youth who has attended multiple conferences, I believe my experience cannot be fully represented by anyone else but me. The purpose of this reflection is to share my thoughts on the experience as a whole, what was successful, what didn't work and my suggestions on how to ensure better results for young people in general.

Before I begin, I would like to thank the Public Health Agency Of Canada for making this trip possible. The thought of spending a week in Barcelona, Spain discussing social issues with other enthusiastic youth and adults still seems almost too good to be true to me. I really believe in the power of conferences and opportunities such as this to inspire young people to become positive leaders and role models in the their communities, and this opportunity was no exception.

What usually happens on week-long conferences such as this is the emergence of meaningful friendships between the delegates and it was no different this time around. I cannot stress the importance of these friendships in some of our lives. This friend may be the first real friend that does not know about our past, does not put us down, and is a friend for no other reason but to really get to know us. This is an aspect of the experience that is often overlooked by the organizers and funders, but is arguably one of the best parts of the conferences for the youth. Personally, I made friends from Nunavut who I keep in touch with to this day and it was truly a honour to share our life experiences and



to learn about how different, yet how same, we all are. I argue that this observation is often not recorded because of the little to none evaluation conducted after these kinds of opportunities. Organizers, funders and supporters should truly focus on the outcomes as much as the experience itself.

Another factor that is not often taken into account is how much social experience we gain by going on independent trips with people we barely, or don't, know at all. Personally, I learned how to board planes, share a room with a "stranger" who I made friends with instantly, travel in a foreign subway system, and attempt to communicate with someone who does not speak English, amongst other things. These are valuable experiences that translate into more confidence (which ties into being a better leader and simply a happier person). I doubt many people sit back and look at how much they have really learned other than what was "taught" at the Congress. Again, this feeds back into the point of meaningful and thorough evaluation after every opportunity for every young person.

As far as the Congress is concerned, it was extremely disappointing. Rarely in my life have I been more disrespected, less valued and more tokenized. To best understand my point of view and how the group felt as a whole on some level, let's review the entire process. When I first found out that I would be going through an application process that involved me writing an essay on children's rights which was judged by independents working in the field, I was enthused. I was excited at the opportunity of connecting with adults and youth from around the world and absorbing their life experiences and teachings. I was expecting a synergy between youth knowledge and ideas and those of the adults. First of all, the preparation before going to the Congress was minimal. We didn't receive the child-friendly agenda until we got there, meaning we had no real idea of what was to entail beforehand. I had worked in the field of child rights with the CEYE before or else I, like many of my team members, would have no idea what the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) document is and how it connected to the Congress and its purpose. In short, the CRC is a United Nations document that has been ratified by every country in the world (with the exception of two) that outlines the special rights that children and adolescents have. It would have been beneficial to organize a full day preparation for the group to get to know each other and review the materials, such as the CRC.

What I realized when we arrived at the Congress was a segregation between the adults and the youth which truly hindered the success of the Congress. There was little translation from Spanish to English and vice versa in the Children's Forum, which made it very difficult for the youth to connect to each other and have meaningful discussions. On the second or third day of the conference, there was a collective feeling amongst the Canadian delegates and chaperones that this Congress is not what we thought it would be, so we asked ourselves "how can we make it better?" I believe this question was the difference between this trip being a truly educational opportunity, and a mini-vacation in Europe sponsored by the government. We decided to have our own discussions on the CRC (since a conference on child rights didn't mention the CRC), and explore how to



take what we have learned so far back into our communities. I found it to be very thoughtful of the chaperones to be flexible and responsive to the situation. I noticed how the chaperones were excluded from certain discussions about children's rights, although they work closely with youth in their own communities. There should have also been a program at the Congress specifically for chaperones.

When we arrived back, I was eager to help PHAC not make the same mistakes twice with other young people they would send to other conferences but there was no real sustainable follow-up process. The CEYE contacted me for my input in their Barcelona Report that was submitted to PHAC but I personally never received word on how the government was reacting to my input until the August of 2008 (a nine month gap).

Regardless, I would still like to thank you for having the faith in me, and youth in general, to take leadership roles in their lives and communities. Despite the quirks, I assure you I have learned a lot and have found meaningful ways to connect what I have learned there, to how I can use the knowledge here. I have gained confidence in traveling and "going out there" on my own. I have worked closely with the two youth who attended the other conference in this report and together we have made recommendations to better the experience of young people who PHAC sponsors.

*Written by Romil Dharia, one of the six Canadian youth delegates.*

#### The World Fit For Children +5 Trip

In November of 2007, at their first conference in Barrie, Ontario, the Young Decision Makers (YDM) project democratically elected two young people to attend the World Fit for Children +5 Commemorative Plenary at the United Nations in New York City. The YDM project aims to connect young people to decision makers and government through facilitating an inclusive process where young people are engaged in a meaningful way in conversations around decisions that affect them. This selection process was one of the first tasks of the YDM project. The delegates for the conference had to be selected less than two weeks before the plenary began.

The background on the conference in December goes way back to an event in 2002. During this previous event, world leaders from all around the world came together to draft a special document to advance the cause of children's well-being in the world. It was called the Special Session on Children. The document was seen as a follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals that set out a list of eight goals to reduce global poverty by 2015. The outcome of the Special Session was a document called a World Fit for Children that outlines four major goals to address children's issues, also by 2015. The document addresses four areas, which are 1) Promoting healthy lives 2) Providing quality education 3) Combating HIV/AIDS 4) Protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence.

At the Special Session, there was a unique opportunity for young people to participate in the creation of the document. While the Special Session was the largest



gathering of world leaders in UN History, it was also the first time that several hundred young people were equal partners in the process, serving as official delegates at the Session, leading roundtable discussions, hosting events and making speeches throughout the conference.

Our expectations for this commemorative plenary in December were of a similar process as was demonstrated at the Special Session. We hoped to talk to decision makers, share some of our own experiences working in the field of children's rights, learn more about the issues facing young people around the world, make recommendations on how to successfully implement our targets for children's issues and most of all, network and build community with the other young people at the conference. However, we did not feel that our engagement was meaningful or valued here. We often felt tokenized and unable to provide the feedback and input we so desperately wanted to convey to decision makers.

At the UN, our ability to meet such incredible young people who inspired us to take action in our communities was the highlight of the week. These youth came from diverse experiences and backgrounds but their passion to effect change in their communities was a constant, and was reinforced by their amazing stories of involvement. The conference was an amazing team-building experience and allowed us to form many long-lasting relationships with people from places such as Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Niger, Australia, Nigeria, United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany. Many of these connections are still active and have helped us shape projects in our own communities using the innovation of the young people we met in New York. The highlight of the week was a great team-building activity where we skated at Rockefeller Plaza. Being at the UN was also an incredible opportunity to learn about the bureaucratic/political process at the centre of world affairs. Although sometimes frustrating, it was an opportunity for us to see some of the issues around getting all the countries of the world to work together.

Our participation in the conference was an aspect of the event that did not meet our expectations. One of the main principles of the YDM project is around the notion of representation and what it means to actually represent the points of view of many people and how the process through which those views are collected is facilitated. Knowing all of this, we knew that we were not representing Canada or Canadian youth but still expected a more active role in the conference. Our participation was overshadowed by the pre-selection of 20 NGO youth delegates from a previous UN resolution in July. When the UN got together to decide to host this follow-up to the Special Session, they decided to have only 20 young people involved in the conference. They delegated the responsibility for the selection of these 20 to Unicef and an organization called the Global Movement for Children. The UN resolution that contained this information stated that only these 20 young people were allowed to be official participants in the conference. Several weeks after the UN passed this resolution, governments realized that they would not have their own youth participating in the conference. They asked that they be allowed to add young people to their delegations, however these young people would not be



official participants. Instead, Unicef created a parallel youth conference for all the young people to come together, discuss the issues and prepare the 20 NGO delegates to represent this Children's forum, and arguably, give a voice to every young person not at the UN. Although this was a big task, none of us, as governmental delegates, were able to make meaningful contributions to this responsibility. We were not informed of our limits to participation and this was evidenced by our inability to speak in any sessions or participate meaningfully at the UN in spite of the fact that much of the material (speeches, statements, documents) prepared for the 20 young people included huge contributions from the government delegates including ourselves. What this meant is that there was a huge sense of tokenization on the part of the government delegates.

At the children's forum itself, the process served as an incredible opportunity to network with other young people and share ideas. We had discussions on a variety of topics through creative activities and heard from many insightful speakers. However, some parts of the conference were poorly organized including the fact that many of the delegates didn't have access to translation services and were often out of the loop when their chaperones were not beside them simultaneously translating. This role often had to be filled by people like us who spoke other languages. This limited our participation in the sessions as well.

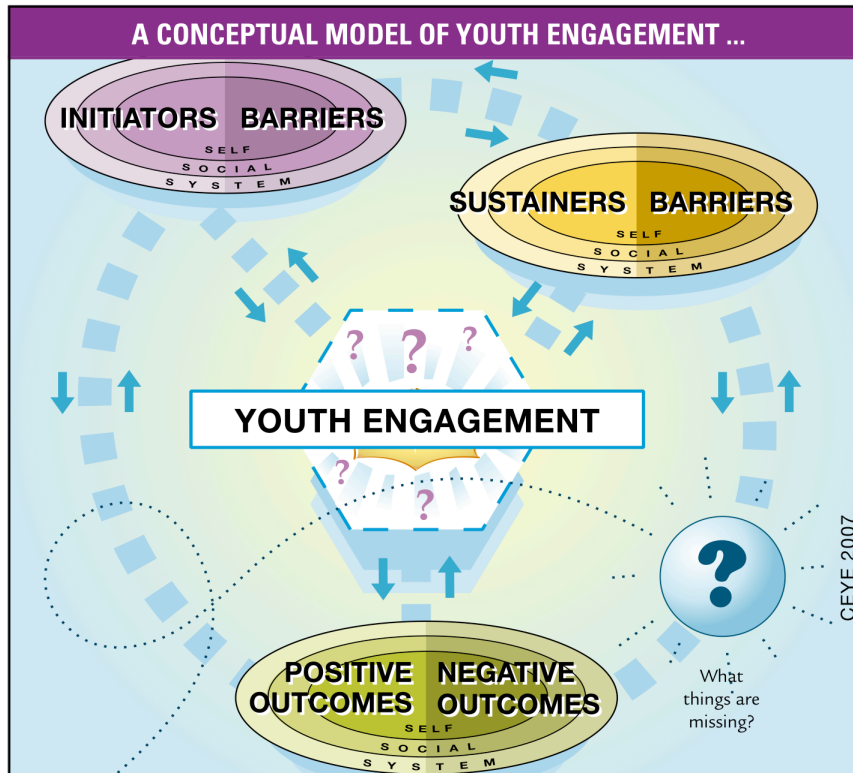
The major frustration was that we were very limited in terms of the contributions we could make at the plenary. Before the plenary took place, we put in an official request to the Department of Foreign Affairs to participate in speaking at the conference. We never received a reply to our request. At the actual session, we requested, once again, that we be allowed to say a few words to the General Assembly during Canada's remarks. During the conference, we prepared a brief statement to the GA that we submitted to some of the delegates for approval. This request was also declined for various reasons that were outlined to us at the Canadian Mission to the UN. Even within the Canadian delegation, there was no opportunity for us, as young people, to sit down with the other delegates and talk about our concerns and opinions on the World Fit for Children document. Our input was not part of the delegation's contributions to the session. Our intent was to deliver a government statement while following each paragraph with our own feedback as youth delegates. However, our requests to speak at the roundtable were consistently overlooked as we had our flags up in the session for about two hours. Although we submitted our statement to the UN after the session, our remarks are still unavailable on the UN site. Although all of these events were unfortunate, we used the experience to help make our participation more meaningful at the session. We organized our own discussions amongst ourselves and attempted to get our voice heard through our peers at the session, some of who were allowed to speak publicly through their governments.

*Written by Joseph Singh with Ashley Teo, the two Canadian youth delegates (not representatives).*



How can CEYE's Youth Engagement Model help

We believe that understanding the youth engagement model is key to understanding how to facilitate better youth experiences at any event. On the Centre's website, <http://www.engagementcentre.ca>, there is massive amounts of information on this topic but here's what youth engagement means in a nutshell.



This model helps look at what gets a young person involved in an activity, what sustains them and what are the outcomes of that involvement. The very fluid process of engagement follows these three stages.

- 1) **Initiators** – These factors that initiate engagement can come from the individual themselves, from social factors like friends, or from systems like organizations or communities. For example, these conferences got some of us really hooked on the idea of children's rights. As for the barriers to this initiating process, there was a lack of effective translation, insufficient preparation before the meetings, and dismissal of young people and their ideas at both meetings, which certainly discouraged some of us from getting further involved.
- 2) **Sustainers** – Sustaining comes right after the conference. Is there an infrastructure in place to support young people so they can (a) share their experience, (b) undertake projects they were inspired to lead / get involved with, and (c) sustain the relationships they have made during the trip. Indeed, it may not



be PHAC's responsibility to play this sustainer's role but maybe they should support other initiatives already underway such as the Centre's Young Decision Makers project. Visit <http://ydm.engagementcentre.ca> for more information

- 3) **Positive / Negative Outcomes** – No matter what the experience, there are bound to be outcomes. The key is understanding whether the outcomes are positive or negative. Outcomes can be classified into three categories: self, social and system. The group experienced various outcomes, both positive and negative, ranging from increased self-esteem, greater social development, more knowledge on children's rights, communication skill development, greater cross-cultural knowledge, and networking to frustration, isolation, reinforcement of the idea that "adults don't listen", discouragement from attending another adult-youth event, and everything in between. As you can tell, all the above outcomes are self and social-based. No real systemic outcome has resulted yet, which is what this report aspires to help achieve.

### Our Recommendations / The Bigger Picture

Despite the vast differences in the themes and goals of these conferences, there was an underlying message we all received: young people were thought of as a last minute addition to the event, and not as an integral part of the process. Two different events organized by different parties, attended by a set of different delegates with similar experiences for young people indicated a systemic misunderstanding of young people's abilities and their potential. The bigger picture is a culture of respect that needs to be established when working with youth on any scale. So how can PHAC, on an individual scale, help create this culture? Our recommendations can be seen as starting points and they are as follows:

- ***Young people need clearly defined roles and need to be adequately prepared before the meeting dates.*** This preparation must occur way before any consultation occurs so that the youth are ready for whatever role they are playing in such a consultation. Again, we push for a day's worth of preparation that includes team-building and material review.
- ***Additionally, the feedback cycle between young people and decision makers must be constant. Whenever young people provide their input on a certain issue, they must be apprised of what the outcomes to their contributions are.*** This means that young people need to be aware of what is being done with their contributions and the effect that it has had on the purpose of the consultation.
- ***Further to this, youth must be involved in all stages of the process whether it is a conference, policy development or any other form of consultation.*** Young people need to be involved in the planning, design, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of a project. Consistently, young people are consulted in a hurried and ad-hoc manner so they don't feel as though their contributions will have any great effect. Often they feel that they are just an afterthought. It is only through



this form of long-term, sustained engagement that a young person can truly make a lasting contribution to the process and also maximize his/her experience.

- ***There must be strong adult and youth partnerships in order to create a setting where young people feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and opinions with adults, and adults can respect the points of view of young people.*** The support staff working with the young people must be able to relate to young people and connect with them in order to guide the young people through the process and create team-building opportunities between youth. These adults should be trained in such a capacity before undertaking a facilitator / chaperone role. Even more than this, there must be close interaction and exchange between decision makers and young people so that they feel they are making a meaningful contribution to the dialogue.
- ***Even within formal settings and protocols, there must always be opportunities for young people to express themselves informally and creatively within a safe, open space.***
- ***The process and outcomes of the process must be consistently evaluated.*** There needs to be an opportunity (like our presentation to the PHAC) for young people to give feedback on their thoughts on the process.
- ***Provide translators when young people are participating in a process that isn't occurring in their native tongue.*** Not only should this translation be provided orally, but in all other outcomes of the process, such as documents, policies, etc. PHAC or other agencies involved should take responsibility for ensuring that proper translation is available, for the fate of the delegate team's experience rests on effective communication with the group. For example, the Barcelona Declaration, a document that was worked on by the young people who attended the Congress is *still* not available (or accessible) in English.
- ***Envision the experience through the CEYE's youth engagement model lens.*** In other words, is this experience a good initiator, do we have / support a sustaining process (which includes evaluation) after they come back, and what do we think will be the outcomes for the young people, are some of the questions PHAC should ask itself as the process is taking shape.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this report is not only to share our stories, but more importantly to serve as inspiration to answer the big question: *how can the PHAC help in building better youth engagement experiences?* We believe that with the goal of trying to establish the culture of respect for young people at every interaction and by following the CEYE's youth engagement framework, PHAC can certainly help foster healthy & sustainable outcomes for young people. The young people who wrote this report would more than welcome the opportunity to work with PHAC on future youth-adult events.

