



**Report to the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights on the United Nations  
Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Implementation in Canada**

**July 29, 2008**

**What young people have told the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (CEYE)**

**Background**

At the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (CEYE), our expertise focuses on Articles 12, 13 & 15 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which deal with the rights of young people to participate in decisions that affect them. We do research on how to properly facilitate healthy engagement with young people. This research enables us to support young people through various activities that engage them in their communities. It also enables us to advise and support governments and youth-serving organizations implementing youth engagement strategies and programs. Young people work as partners with adults in the Centre's work. We know that proper engagement is key to the healthy development of a child and at the core of this belief is the notion that young people are entitled to know their rights. As such, the CEYE does work around rights awareness and finding out how well young people know their rights. The CEYE has compiled several major reports and consultations over the past few years in various capacities through which we have been able to truly understand the issues young people face across the country, and, if faced with the challenge, how they would confront those issues.

The Centre is increasingly approached by various levels and departments of government throughout Canada to assist when they wish to consult with youth, and there has been a marked increase in the number of consultations and the commitment to youth engagement in various government and NGO strategies. Therefore, the Centre has been involved in numerous opportunities throughout the past couple of years through which we have consulted and engaged young people on a variety of issues that affect them. On the subject of child rights, we held numerous consultations across the country to raise awareness about the UNCRC and find out

what people knew about their rights. These workshops/consultations were conducted in various capacities. Some were done for various levels of government while others were done for Unicef with several hundred youth consulted in the process. Some of the highlights of this involvement included an international conference on child rights in 2006 and a forum between government, stakeholders and young people held by the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of the Child. Currently, the CEYE is leading a national summer project surveying young people across the country about their rights in preparation for Canada's 2009 report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. We also held numerous workshops for the "Racism, Stop It!" campaign from 2005-2006. The CEYE has also done work in the field of youth engagement and children's well-being most recently in the form of a report that was delivered to the Pan-American Health Organization for their Regional Strategy for Adolescent and Youth Health (2008-2018). Currently, the Centre is assisting in the engagement of youth for both The National Framework for Action of Alcohol and Substance Use and the national youth strategy for the Canadian Centre for Substance Use. The CEYE is also involved in developing a youth strategy for the City of Mississauga, is partnered with the City of Vancouver's Youth Outreach Team, and is assisting the Toronto Police Service and Toronto schools with youth engagement. In 2006, we conducted the Students Assembly on Electoral Reform asking young people from across Ontario about their opinions regarding the current electoral system. We have also worked closely with the Government of Ontario and the Ontario Child and Youth Advocate through the Ontario Child and Youth Summit in both 2005 and 2006 as well as 13 consultations on poverty for the government in 2008. In addition, we hosted 15 consultations for the governments on the topics of education, health, youth in the justice system, youth in care and violence in schools. In 2006, we had consultations with over 400 youth in Vancouver on the topic of homelessness. As well, the CEYE in 2008 prepared a major report for the federal department of justice on youth engagement in policy development after consulting with adults and youth across the country. Our report draws upon these various initiatives, projects and reports through which we have worked with thousands of young people talking about issues that affect them.

### 1. Youth Engagement in Decision-Making and Policy Development

Several key issues have stemmed from the outreach that deals with youth participation in decision-making processes in Canada. Although government has made a renewed effort to consult with young people on a more frequent basis, the practices that are employed to reach out

to young people are not always productive, inclusive or consistent. What this means is that these new efforts are not always effective since they are usually the result of last-minute decisions to include young people and therefore provide hurried results to complex issues. Young people are often unprepared and untrained so the opportunity to influence policy is not as valuable. Additionally, in a country as large and diverse as Canada, truly representative consultation is not always achieved and there lacks an infrastructure through which decision makers can access a diverse group of youth representative of regional and cultural differences. Often, there is a case of over-engagement so that decision-makers consistently consult a certain group of young people while others are overlooked. This building of constituency requires an investment in young people over the long-term that builds their capacity to participate meaningfully in decision-making.

According to the young people, the most significant problem with the consultative efforts of our government is the unconnected and unsustainable approach to getting feedback from young people on various issues. What typically happens, is young people are brought together for a consultation on a specific topic but their contributions are used in the interim and are, in the long-term, fruitless. What this means is that the results are used for the immediate purpose (i.e. a report) and not necessarily effective in affecting policy. This observation was key to our report on Young People's Engagement in Policy Development.

The input of young people is gathered in an ad hoc manner so that previous instances where young people were consulted are ignored. Furthermore, the young people involved in these discussions are rarely provided with the results even in the form of a simple follow-up. Instead of a cycle of feedback, there's a weak connection between young people and government through which feedback goes only one way and is not reciprocated. Young people often experience tokenism and become disenfranchised seeing no results from their participation. For many young people, it's as if they've been used to retrieve feedback but not provided with anything in return for their support. One could say that through becoming more engaged in the opportunities provided by government for young people to communicate their opinions, one becomes more disengaged. This is because results seem so distant because long-term engagement is unsustainable.

The engagement of young people in creating public policy is crucial to their meaningful contribution to decision-making. It's not just charity towards young people but an investment that Canada makes in a sustainable future. The engagement of young people can strengthen policies and services and promote social justice. Apart from the lack of follow-up about results of consultations of young people, policies and programs developed for young people are rarely evaluated. Young people want to be a part of the monitoring and evaluation processes and not just the developmental/consultative phases. For any policy that government wants to develop, youth should be present in the design, implementation, evaluation and monitoring processes. This was a key recommendation delivered in our report to the Pan American Health Organization. This engagement should occur over the entire course of the decision making process and should happen before any decisions are made so that a broad number of youth can voice their opinions and provide context for the discussion. Perhaps the most significant part of this sustained engagement is in the methodologies that are used to engage young people. Effective practices for youth engagement are non-prescriptive; rather, they emerge from a deep and authentic commitment to the value of engaging young people. Part of this means that there is no universal formula for engagement; different methods should be geared towards different individuals and contexts. Most of all, the engagement of young people cannot be only in the context of the UNCRC and children's right to have their say. It must be looked at from a holistic perspective in terms of all children's needs under the UNCRC. The right to participation is key to children's development, safety and protection.

One of the main reasons that these various problems with engagement exist is because of the lack of a formal, sustained body (although it might operate informally) that links young people with government to make decisions. Such a body would help connect the various youth-serving agencies that work to fill the void of government in the field of children's rights. The CEYE is currently creating a mechanism to fulfill this need called the Young Decision Makers (YDM) project network. Decision-makers are able to access young people through this network, and young people interested in policy become members of the network, providing a sustained, accessible channel for young people to develop increased skills expertise and knowledge in areas of policy of interest to them. YDM is a project-based network that can respond to various projects and consultations as they arise. The YDM is being created through a Canada-wide process of discussion, surveys, face-to-face meetings and online activities, with young people

hired to sustain the process, conduct research and organize meetings. Young people have set up its operating principles.

## 2. Insufficient/non-existent rights education and awareness

Over the past few years, the CEYE has done extensive research on awareness of the UNCRC across the country. Our research has shown very little knowledge of child rights on the part of young people and adults. In 2005, an Ipsos-Reid survey of 1,000 adult Canadians produced an average score of 33% on knowledge of basic children's issues. Although many young people are aware that they may have special rights, they are unaware of what exactly their rights are under the UNCRC. This was one of the main outcomes of our report for the Public Health Agency of Canada on National Child Day. One of the primary reasons for this is because rights education doesn't exist in most educational systems in Canada. In addition, many decision-makers (i.e. judges, teachers) are ignorant of the rights young people are entitled to under the UNCRC so these rights are frequently violated as was stated by Save the Children Canada in their presentation to the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights in 2005.

## 3. The condition of Aboriginal children

Canada's treatment of aboriginal children is a key aspect of child rights issues in the country. In many of our aboriginal communities, access to health education, proper nutrition, racism, poverty, and a lack of youth engagement are all issues that must be addressed to provide adequate opportunities for aboriginal children to succeed. In our UNCRC Awareness Workshop report, we identified four barriers affecting these youth; they are 1) separation/isolation, 2) boredom, 3) racism and 4) poverty. The first barrier is one that is prevalent in our aboriginal communities on reserves. Reserves are typically so small that aboriginal children must travel to bigger cities to attend schools away from their homes. This isolation from home and things that are familiar create a culture shock for these youth. Within these schools, there lacks a component of education about native culture so there tends to be a lack of cross-cultural awareness in schools that aboriginal people attend while away from their communities. Boredom is also a huge issue in these communities because of the lack of programming available to aboriginal youth. The primary reason for this is because of the regionally isolated location of these communities and their small size. What's more is that these communities are not connected so it isn't easy to travel between them. Although these issues aren't all specific to aboriginal

communities, they are very prevalent in these communities and are a staple point of some of the failures in terms of children's well being in Canada. The CEYE's work in this area is also highlighted in one of its major projects called "Focus Three" linking three self-identified "at-risk" communities in Canada, two of which are aboriginal. The project funds various programs and works with these communities to deal with their individual challenges, which include suicide, gun and gang violence, and substance abuse. Sustaining relationships with stable mentors and supports, for both individuals and for organizations inside the communities to resources outside the communities is emerging as a common theme from these very different, yet similar communities as they struggle to address the issues of children and engage children in the effort to become healthier.

In Canada, within many of our aboriginal communities, suicide rates among aboriginal teens are much higher per capita than with other Canadian youth and youth cite the factors above as part of the reason. It's important to note, however, that there are aboriginal communities with very low rates of teen suicide, and in these communities rates of community engagement are high, particularly in areas of cultural reclamation, land claims, child protection and police services. Young people in unhealthy communities are susceptible to higher risks due to substance abuse problems on reserves. Young people have told us over the course of our consultations, that one of the major barriers in their communities deals with jurisdictional issues that constantly arise when dealing with different situations. Because of the division of powers between provincial and federal governments, issues such as policing become very complicated since responsibilities are shared. Young people involved in these situations are the ones who suffer the consequences for the miscommunication that frequently ensues.

#### 4. Other Issues

Throughout our consultations and interactions with young people, racism and identity issues were still prominent despite investments by the federal government in the past decade. Our work, together with that of many others, continues to demonstrate that there is a positive correlation between the socio-economic status of children and the quality of life they experience in terms of rights violations. Additionally, bullying has become an increasingly reported problem in our school system.

Although many Canadian children are doing well, our priority lies in helping those kids who are falling through the cracks including our aboriginal youth, disabled youth, incarcerated youth, low-income youth, homeless youth, youth with mental illnesses, sexually exploited youth, refugee youth, and children in care. Canada still has one of the highest child poverty rates in the developed world according to a 2005 report from Unicef. We must create opportunities for these youth to participate in their communities, succeed in sports, arts, cultural and community programs with strong adult role models and developmental assets. We must ensure that they have access to an education that is geared towards their personal needs and skill sets.

## **Recommendations**

### **Government**

The government needs to establish a children's commissioner to monitor the state of child rights across the country. In Canada, there is a wide consensus among stakeholders that this Children's Commissioner is the primary recommendation for government in terms of realizing children's rights. This is a recommendation supported by the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Child, Unicef Canada, Save the Children and the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement. Young people have told us that they want to be involved in making the criteria for the selection of this person and that a youth committee be established to advise the children's commissioner on youth issues. Young people need to be heavily involved in the rights monitoring and rights awareness activities that are conducted. In addition, rights-based education should be a part of school curriculum. As evidenced by various reports in Canada, in particular, the Voices for Children report from November 2004 and Hampshire Initiative report, knowledge of your rights causes increased self-esteem, acceptance of minority children and socially responsible behaviours. Government should also educate stakeholders within government (such as police, teachers, etc.) about the rights that young people have by mainstreaming the UNCRC within all government agencies and departments.

Government must be accountable to the public. Where policies or programs are implemented, they need to be concretely monitored so results can be gauged. These results need to be made public so that the national condition of children's well being will be statistically monitored on a yearly basis.

Ongoing support for the Centre for Excellence for Youth Engagement will be a positive signal to Canadians, old and young, as well as the international community that Canada is serious about engaging its young people. The CEYE both practices effective youth engagement, and its assists youth-serving agencies and governments to do so, through hands-on support and providing evidenced-based tools. It is building a network of partners through research and practice that involves young people. The Young Decision Makers project is building a resource that is increasingly being accessed by all levels of government. Many of the services that are needed to address the child rights issues in Canada exist already but need much sustained efforts and funding so that we can keep developing better and more numerous opportunities to young people across the country with a greater capacity in systems at all levels for the meaningful participation of children in achieving their rights.

In our aboriginal communities, young people advised that two specific actions be taken to promote the rights of aboriginal youth. The first is a refocusing of resources into the community. Our Focus Three work, and work with the North-South partnership suggest that the refocusing includes a link to a committed stable set of supports outside the community, chosen by the community. With better financial, educational, and personal resources available to these communities, they can create solutions from within a partnership with the federal government. The second action was the creation of a special government role for an Aboriginal children's commissioner to monitor the condition of aboriginal children's rights. The idea is that this commissioner will not only be an advocate but an agent for Aboriginal cultural awareness on the part of all Canadians.

#### Child-serving agencies

Child-serving agencies must be involved in the evaluation of government-funded programs and policies that affect young people such as rights monitoring activities. In addition, they need to be a part of the creation of strategies and policies that are geared towards the well being of children and youth. These agencies need to be a part of activities that engage youth in decision-making in order to help diversify the pool of youth who are included in these activities. These agencies will ensure that there is less isolation of communities and less classism so that disadvantaged youth within Canada are part of the process.

## Young People

Young people need to participate and engage themselves in activities created for their engagement. Through activities like the YDM project, young people will research issues, discuss them, build constituency with their peers, learn about others who are different from themselves and through this cycle, will become more sophisticated in their participation. Young people should be supported to build their capacity to be aware of each other's rights and whether or not they are being met, so that they can speak not just for themselves as individuals, but knowledgeably for others as well.

Young people also play the most crucial role in raising awareness about child rights in their communities. They must also raise awareness about the benefits of getting involved in knowing children's rights and the UNCRC and how it impacts life choices such as staying in school. Informed knowledge of child rights creates empowerment for young people and therefore an obligation to report witnessed rights violations to people in their lives who they trust.

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