

Putting the poor back on the political agenda [CA] ^[1]

Opinion

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Source: The Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Aug 2002

AVAILABILITY

Text below

EXCERPTS:

The Liberal party leadership race will undoubtedly feature children as central planks in competing platforms. It's an easy prediction.

At various times over the past decade children have risen to the top of the agenda, only to fall from the arms of government whenever there is an economic downturn, a budget deficit, a federal-provincial relations crisis or, more recently, a concern over terrorism and national security.

This fickle commitment has seen children and families lose ground and social exclusion sink deep roots in Canada. The facts are as compelling as they are chilling:

Our once proud record of diversity is threatened by the over representation of racial minority families living in poverty in large cities.

The number of poor children has increased by 43 per cent since 1989.

The failure to provide a secure future for young people is embodied in one of the highest rates of youth incarceration among Commonwealth countries.

The fastest growing groups of users of Toronto's homeless shelters are children.

Children with disabilities are excluded from the National Children's Agenda, from definitions of "healthy" child development and, all too often, from community life.

At the recent City Summit and People's Summit in Toronto, participants recognized the city as the first place where children experience exclusion or inclusion.

They called for a social inclusion framework to expand the focus on municipalities to ensure that a social and community dimension becomes a central feature of any new deal for cities.

Social inclusion has its roots in Europe. It arose as a policy concept responding to the growing social divides resulting from new labour market conditions and the inadequacy of existing welfare provisions to meet the changing needs of more diverse populations.

The Laidlaw Foundation first began to explore social inclusion as a new way of looking at the well-being of children and families and for its potential to frame a national dialogue around the creation of a just, healthy and inclusive society.

As a tool it turns public policy making upside down. Rather than making it incumbent on the individual to fit the program, social inclusion starts from the experiences of the individual and challenges society for its own good to provide a meaningful place for everyone.

Whether the source of exclusion is poverty, racism, fear of differences or a deficit of political clout, the consequences are the same: a lack of recognition and acceptance; powerlessness and economic vulnerability; diminished life experiences and limited life prospects.

These have profound effects for the individual; for a country, the social exclusion of individuals and groups is a major threat to social cohesion and economic prosperity.

Why a new approach? Attempts to deal with exclusion through individual redress have proven to be inadequate to address the personal and systemic exclusions experienced by children and adults. People with disabilities are leading the way in calling for approaches based on social inclusion to deliver what human rights claims alone cannot.

A "one size fits all approach" has never been effective in advancing the well-being of children and families.

Public policy born of social inclusion links the experiences of children and families, both in terms of the actual programs and in the process for arriving at those policies and programs. Citizens are engaged in policy development. The emphasis is on universal programs and policies serving all children and families. These provide a stronger foundation for improving well-being than residual, targeted or segregated approaches.

Through a series of commissioned papers, a national conference and countrywide community soundings, the Laidlaw Foundation has identified five critical dimensions, or cornerstones, of social inclusion:

- Valued recognition: Conferring recognition and respect on individuals and groups. For example, policies and programs that recognize the differences in children's development and do not equate disability with pathology; support for community schools that are sensitive to cultural and gender differences.
- Human development: Nurturing the talents, skills, capacities and choices of children and adults to live a life they value and to make a contribution both they and others find worthwhile. For example, ensuring learning and developmental opportunities for all children and adults; community child care and recreation programs for children that are growth-promoting and challenging rather than merely custodial.
- Involvement and engagement: Having the right and the necessary support to make and be involved in decisions affecting oneself, family and community, and to be engaged in community life. For example, youth engagement and control of services for youth; parental input into school curriculum or placement decisions affecting their child; citizen engagement in municipal policy decisions; and political participation.
- Proximity: Sharing physical and social spaces to provide opportunities for interactions and to reduce social distances between people. For example, shared public spaces such as parks and libraries; mixed income neighbourhoods and housing; and decent public transit.
- Material well-being: Having the material resources to allow children and their parents to participate fully in community life. This includes being housed securely and having an adequate income.

Terminology aside, the Laidlaw's community soundings indicate that people intuitively understand inclusion.

Its presence or absence is played out in their cities and communities where the well-being of their families is closely tied to where they live, the quality of their neighbourhoods, and the "social commons" where people interact and share experiences.

They also realize that social inclusion is not just about bringing "the outsiders" in, but, equally important, about closing physical, social and economic distances separating people.

Questions remain, however. Is there local and national leadership capable of grasping social inclusion and translating it into policies that will allow families access to the public goods necessary to be contributing members to the social, culture and economic life of their communities?

Or will social inclusion be used to spin ineffective policies and programs that continue to leave large numbers of children and families behind?

reprinted from The Toronto Star.

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