

Federal cuts force child-care, welfare groups to crowdfund ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

How many infant day-care spaces exist in Canada? How much do the country's poorest receive in welfare income? Are freshwater fish harmed by cleaning products?

For decades, the federal government paid to answer these questions. Now, non-profit groups are asking the public for donations in a desperate bid to save the data from extinction.

In the past year, three groups turned to crowdfunding, using the trendy but time-consuming online campaign that raises one small donation at a time. The trio - who seek to save child-care, welfare and environmental data - have a combined goal of \$70,000.

As the onus in Canada for collecting some key data passes over to a non-profit sector reliant on one-off donations and small fee-for-service contracts, some worry about the impact of such a fragile arrangement.

"Certainly, it's a bit of a stop-gap measure," said Evidence for Democracy's executive director, Katie Gibbs. "It's pretty hard to do research under that condition of very short-term funding."

Two of the campaigns successfully achieved their goals - including a think-tank rescuing welfare data and a fundraiser held by the world-renowned Environmental Lakes Area research group, the near-demise of which garnered widespread media attention.

'Flying in the dark'

A third - Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) - is in the final week of its months-long campaign to raise \$25,000 to publish its biennial report on childcare and has reached half of its goal.

CRRU Executive Director Martha Friendly remains optimistic, but stresses that the non-profit shouldn't be in the position of fundraising in the first place.

"Lots of people have commented, ... 'You have to ask somebody on the internet to know how many child-care spaces there are in Canada... that's crazy!'" said Friendly.

The head of the Canadian Child Care Federation, who uses CRRU's biennial report, calls the data "absolutely vital."

"Without it, you're really flying in the dark. You're guessing: how's it going out there?" said Giesbrecht. "They give you really the lay of the land in terms of how child care is funded in Canada ... all that critical information that tells you: Is the sector growing? Is it not growing? What kind of spaces are there? Where are the gaps?"

For nearly 20 years, the federal government funded the unit, paying for it to nationally house research on childcare and also publish a report detailing how the provinces and territories, responsible for early childhood education but partially funded by Ottawa, were performing.

In 2007, the Conservative government shut off the tap. The non-profit CRRU produced a pared-down version in the years that followed, relying on foundation donations and one-time contracts.

Idea spreads

Unlike the U.S., where a large stock of wealthy foundations can fill a funding gap, Friendly warns that Canada doesn't have the same steady supply of donations.

Friendly stresses that she doesn't see crowdfunding as a long-term solution. "What we do should be funded by the government," she says.

The organization decided to try crowdfunding after an employee noticed a successful Giveffect campaign by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Dubbed a "data rescue," the think tank's campaign sought to save a welfare report that the National Council of Welfare (NCW) published each year. The arms-length advisory body, created 40 years ago to study and help improve the lives of Canada's poorest, was dismantled after the federal government slashed its funding to zero in the 2012 budget.

Caledon Institute President Ken Battle and Vice-President Sherri Torjman felt personally invested in the annual report on welfare incomes. Both worked at the council in the 1980s and Torjman helped create the report's methodology.

"At the time, we had no public information on welfare in Canada," said Torjman. "People really didn't know their entitlements or what to expect if they were on welfare, because everything was a closed-door system."

Caledon Institute's successful crowdfunding campaign gave the think tank an extra boost in money it needed to take on the welfare incomes report. News of the NCW's closure was too sudden for the institute to find funding for it elsewhere.

Worry about reliance on government

In the case of the Experimental Lakes Area, the 45-year-old government research program now under the International Institute for Sustainable Development, crowdfunding aimed to raise \$25,000 to help restore it to its former glory and reduce its reliance on capricious political leaders.

"We don't want to be forever reliant on government funding," said Karla Zubrycki, a project manager with the International Institute for Sustainable Development, in an interview earlier this summer with CBC Radio's Superior Morning. "We have to look in the long term. You never know what's going to happen."

What ultimately saved the influential research program, which studies 58 small lakes in northwestern Ontario's Kenora area by the Manitoba border, was a funding promise from the Ontario and Manitoba governments of \$3 million over six years.

The crowdfunding campaign benefited not only from the high-profile media attention on the program - which is renowned for research that helped tighten air pollution standards to protect against acid rain and led to the phasing out of phosphorus additives in cleaning products - but also celebrity power.

Literary icon Margaret Atwood championed the campaign, challenging her Twitter followers to donate.

The broader data picture

The trio of data sources saved by the public fundraising are just a small part of the broader picture of the state of statistics in the country.

Last week, the North-South Institute, an Ottawa-based think-tank centred on international development, closed its doors due to loss of federal funding. The 40-year-old institute tried to diversify its funding in recent years, but couldn't afford to stay open without federal funds.

Under the Conservative government, Statistics Canada has faced cost cuts since 2008 and in 2011, saw the controversial replacement of the mandatory long-form census with a voluntary National Household Survey.

The survey's come under fire for being less accurate and containing less granular information. As a result, some public health bodies are forking over money for pricey surveys to collect local data no longer accurately depicted in the new survey, or are using years-old data for decision-making, Global News reported last month.

"In order to make a good decision, you need that data," said Evidence for Democracy's Gibbs. "Otherwise, you're really just left sort of making a best guess and that doesn't benefit anybody."

The constant collection of data, using the same methodology over time, allows policy makers, advocacy groups and the public to see where various provinces stand, how Canada compares to other countries and what's changed over the years.

"If we don't even have the basic child care data that we've been putting out ... nobody will be able to say, 'We have less child-care spaces or this province is spending more money or less money, this province changed the regulations so they have a worse staff ratio for infants,'" said Friendly.

That leaves provincial and territorial governments operating without scrutiny or knowledge about the effectiveness of their plans.

Data keeps provinces accountable

Canadian Child Care Federation's Giesbrecht says the child-care data provided by CRRU keeps provinces accountable for how they spend designated federal money.

"I think that's incredibly important," said Giesbrecht. "It provides a really black-and-white roadmap of an accountability framework that says, 'Here's how it's being spent.' And I think as taxpayers we should want that."

But Friendly suggests the Conservative government may not want this much scrutiny of "unpopular issues."

"If you don't want to have a policy on something, you don't want to have data on it," said Friendly. "I don't think it's about money. It's about ideology."

For now, Friendly is crafting a plan for the future, one that may or may not involve crowdfunding, but most certainly involves fellow child-care groups, some of which also suffered from federal cuts.

"We're not alone in this," she says. "We have to figure out something."

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