

Children and the Right to Food in Canada

Notes for Presentation to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

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Introduction

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the right to food is specifically addressed within Article 24 on health. Under the general principle of a right to the highest attainable standard of health, Article 2.c. calls for particular and appropriate measures:

“To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology and through the **provision of adequate nutritious foods and clear drinking water**, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution.”

I will focus on questions of governance, since the issues are canvassed in the written submissions. The range of issues is illustrated quickly by the following facts:

- 38% of the users of food banks are children - and therefore food-insecure (approximately 300,000 children in a typical month);
- 1 out of 9 children live in poor households, which means less nutritious food choices;
- A high and growing rate of Type 2 Diabetes and unhealthy weight gain in children, both of which are related to nutrition.

The facts are known and Canadian research on the social determinants of health shows the impact for child development. What is missing is good governance for children. Children's rights are not taken seriously. Following are two tools of governance that could make a big difference toward fulfillment of the right to food for children in Canada.

1. Child Rights Impact Assessments

Considering the impact of policies for children before adopting them could make a substantive difference. Examples:

1. **Income and food security:** When social assistance is primarily designed to force adult recipients to seek work, it ignores the importance of nutrition for the different stages of child development. A child rights impact assessment would focus attention on children's nutritional needs that cannot wait until a parent finds well-paying employment and lead to increases in income support for children in poor households. If impacts for children were taken seriously, Canada would increase the National Child Benefit enough to fulfill children's right to adequate, nutritious food.
2. **Unhealthy weight gain:** Responding to childhood obesity by giving tax credits for sports equipment benefited wealthy households, but not low-income households, violating the right of children to equitable treatment. A child rights assessment

- would also show that this policy option provides less return for public dollars spent than other options available, including attention to the nutrition aspects of unhealthy weight gain as well as promoting exercise.
3. Unhealthy Retail Foods: The recent policy choice to allow voluntary, slow phasing of salt reduction in retail foods responded to the interests of manufacturers, but did not take into account impacts for children. A child rights impact assessment would have highlighted the need for action now. Under the current approach another generation of children will reach adulthood before improvement in something that is well-known to impact the healthy development of children.

If impacts for children were taken seriously, all levels of government in Canada would take greater action to reduce or counter the targeted marketing of unhealthy foods to children and focus on increasing affordable access to healthy foods.

II. Rights-based mechanisms as a solution to the challenges of federalism in Canada

A major challenge to fulfilling children's right to food in Canada is the division of jurisdiction over relevant causal factors between federal and provincial governments. While many children in Canada do well, children in vulnerable circumstances fall through the cracks of fragmented social support systems. Canada lacks any effective mechanisms to ensure equitable treatment of children across jurisdictions.

Rights-based mechanisms, such as investigating complaints, rigorous frequent reporting, and a children's advocate would put the focus on outcomes and the actual situation of children. It could facilitate the allocation of resources to fill gaps between children who have adequate food and children whose full development is at risk because of poor nutrition. UNICEF research has shown that such approaches can make significant improvements and provide a good return for public finances.

I hope that reinforcement of rights-based mechanisms in your report could help advance the evolution of governance in Canada to better protect the right to food for all children.