

Canada_statement

Canada's appearance before the United Nations

Committee on the Rights of the child

OPENING STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Canada is honoured to appear virtually before the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child from the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg. Today, it is known as Gatineau, Quebec, Canada. We are here to discuss Canada's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Canada's delegation, which consists of representatives from the federal government and three provinces, thanks the Committee for scheduling this appearance and for welcoming that it take place virtually in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Canada knows that Canadian civil society, Indigenous representatives, and UN Member States hold Canada to high standards for upholding human rights principles, especially those that affect the lives of our children. We thank them for their efforts to hold us to account. Today, I would like to highlight the actions Canada has taken as a federation to advance child rights over the reporting period. At the same time, I would also like to acknowledge the concerns we have heard from civil society, Indigenous representatives, and from children and youth themselves on the state of child rights in Canada. We know that advancing these rights is a continual and collective effort for all levels of governments in Canada, as duty bearers under the Convention, in consultation with rights holders and their advocates. Canada looks forward to continuing to work with stakeholders to this end.

CANADA'S COUNTRYWIDE COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

As the Committee is aware, Canada is a federal state, where power is constitutionally divided between the federal government and 10 provincial and 3 territorial governments. One of the main characteristics of federal states is the distribution of legislative powers between two or more orders of government. In Canada, there are two orders of government: federal and provincial. Territorial powers are devolved from the federal government. All work together to implement Canada's obligations under the Convention. While no level of government can compel another to take specific actions, Canada's cooperative approach towards the implementation of children's rights includes mechanisms for co-operation, coordination and dialogue, which allow governments, including municipal and Indigenous governments, to generate and exchange a wide array of ideas and approaches for advancing children's rights. All levels of government adopt measures that improve the lives of children across Canada, including through policies and programming. The constitutional division of powers allows provincial and territorial governments to adopt measures tailored to the needs of their population, which is critical in a country as vast and culturally diverse as Canada.

The year 2021 marked the 30th anniversary of Canada's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This anniversary served as a reminder that the Convention was a catalyst for the development of Canada's earliest and long-standing children's community-based programming, including the Community Action Program for Children, the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program, and the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities Program that were implemented shortly after ratification. Since that time, Canada has continued to make progress to advance children's rights, including in response to new challenges and realities, such as those created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our commitment to upholding the Convention is supported by children's rights stakeholders and rights holders working in Canada, which include children and youth, civil society organizations, Indigenous representatives,

child and youth advocates, and human rights commissions. Canada appreciates their commitment to child rights issues and their role in challenging governments to uphold their commitment to the Convention. We have engaged with these stakeholders and rights holders leading up to our appearance and are committed to continue constructive engagements with them after receiving the Committee's Concluding Observations.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN CANADA IN 2022

Children are the future of Canada. In 2016, there were just over 7 million children under the age of 18 in our country. 3,603,480 were male, while 3,425,830 were female. Of these, 537,290 were Indigenous, while 1,922,095 were racialized minorities.

Throughout the reporting period, Canada has worked diligently to fulfill its obligations under the Convention, and to make progress in implementing the Concluding Observations published by the Committee following its 2012 appearance. Canada has taken concrete actions to reduce the levels of child poverty, address youth homelessness, increase levels of inclusion and access to services, and address climate change. For example, in 2016 the Government of Canada introduced the Canada Child Benefit, an income-based support for families with children, which assists those that need it most. Data from the 2020 Canadian Income Survey suggests that the Canada Child Benefit has had a significant positive impact on children, as the national child poverty rate decreased from 16.3% in 2015 to 9.4% in 2019, and then again in 2020 to 4.7% after the introduction of COVID-19 relief programs. The Government of Canada has also created a new federal Cabinet position of Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, which ensures a coordinated response on many children's issues.

In general, children in Canada enjoy high levels of education and universal healthcare, backstopped by multiple supports that help families raise children. At the same time, we acknowledge that there are still ongoing challenges that affect children, and certain groups of children in particular. We note that the pandemic has amplified many of these challenges, which include a reduction in the level of access to social, medical, and other support services for children, especially for children who already faced challenges before the pandemic, including Indigenous children and children with disabilities. We need to ensure that all children have equitable access to services and that children do not experience discrimination based on their Indigenous identity, race, disability, ethnic origin, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, or any other status.

While dealing with the new challenges brought on by the pandemic, Canada also continues to grapple with the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and systemic injustices towards Indigenous Peoples. The historical mistreatment and abuse of Indigenous children in the residential school system is a tragedy that continues to have profound and damaging impacts on Indigenous Peoples today. Indigenous children continue to experience higher levels of poverty and over-representation in child welfare and youth criminal justice systems and have challenges accessing timely and culturally sensitive health and social services. We have heard from Indigenous Representatives and civil society that, on child-specific reconciliation efforts, Canada needs to do more to ensure consistent implementation of Jordan's Principle, a request-based, child-first, substantive equality principle that provides funding for eligible health, social and educational products, services and supports for First Nations children. Jordan's family is determined that we work on this.

Governments in Canada are committed to continuing to strengthen relationships with Indigenous leaders and communities to advance reconciliation and improve the lives of Indigenous children through better access to services, education and resources. The Government of Canada is committed to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples through a renewed, nation-to-nation, government-to-government, and Inuit-Crown relationship based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership as the foundation for transformative change. During the reporting cycle, Canada has seen positive outcomes from this collaboration, including the co-development of An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families, which came into force on January 1, 2020. Furthermore, since 2015, First Nations, with support from the Government of Canada, have lifted 131 long-term drinking water advisories.

In response to the calls to action from families, communities, and organizations, and consistent with the Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2012 recommendation to investigate cases of missing Indigenous girls, Canada launched the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which released its final report in June 2019. Two years later, in June 2021, the Government of Canada, alongside Indigenous partners, organizations, families, survivors, and provinces and territories, launched the 2021 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ People National Action Plan. Governments in Canada will continue to work towards a Canada free of violence against Indigenous women and girls and continue to actively investigate unresolved cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Governments in Canada have also been working with First Nations, Inuit and Métis to exercise responsibility for child and family services and made strides in developing programming on Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care.

These efforts complement the development of a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care system, which entails collaboration between the federal government and the provinces and territories to ensure that high quality, affordable childcare is fully inclusive and can be accessed by all children and their families. Governments in Canada have worked to lift children out of poverty and to address homelessness through various federal, provincial and territorial action plans. For example, under Canada's National Housing Strategy launched in 2017, at least 25% of investments serve the unique housing needs of women and their children.

Furthermore, Governments in Canada invested in children's wellbeing through COVID-19 initiatives to address, for instance, nutrition, family supports, and education. For example, the Quebec government launched the 2022-2026 Interdepartmental Mental Health Action Plan which aims to promote optimal mental health and facilitate access to quality care and services, including for youth. Moreover, in 2021, the Alberta Government announced funding for school authorities to offer targeted programming to enhance literacy and numeracy skills for students in grades 1 through 3 whose learning was disrupted by the pandemic. These are only two examples among others of initiatives put in place by provinces and territories to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

ENGAGEMENT WITH RIGHTS HOLDERS AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVES

Canada values the ideas and opinions of children and youth, as they help shape our policies and programs that affect them. At the federal level, the Government of Canada has created dedicated ministerial youth advisory councils, such as the Prime Minister's Youth Council. The Prime Minister's Youth Council provides non-partisan advice and recommendations to the Prime Minister, other Parliamentarians, public servants, and non-governmental organizations, while discussing issues of importance to young people. In 2021, a Youth Advisory Group was also convened to interpret data and author sections of Canada's first State of Youth Report. The advisory groups and councils have advised the Government of Canada on a wide array of policies, including policies on safe spaces for LGBTQ2 communities, and on initiatives to address anti-black racism.

In the context of Canada's constructive dialogue with this Committee, Canada is collaborating with civil society organizations to conduct engagement sessions with children and youth. In sessions held prior to this dialogue, children and youth shared their concerns regarding access to mental health services for children and highlighted that these needs became more pressing throughout the pandemic. Canada shares these concerns and, to this end, the federal and provincial governments have signed bilateral agreements with provinces and territories to expand access to community-based mental health and addiction services, across the country, which includes programming for 2SLGBTQQIA+ Indigenous, and racialized youth. We have committed to continuing discussions on these and other issues with children and youth after this appearance.

Federal, provincial and territorial senior officials also met with Indigenous representatives, civil society organisations, child and youth advocates and human rights commissions to speak to their priorities to advance child rights prior to this constructive dialogue and a follow up session is being planned to discuss the Committee's concluding observations.

In addition to engaging directly with children and youth, Canada is strategizing to find innovative ways to collect data from children and youth, in order to better understand how to serve their needs through policy and programming.

INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Children's rights continue to be a priority within Canada's foreign policy and international assistance efforts, for which we continue to engage globally, including through multilateral forums. For example, we are proud to co-lead the biennial UN General Assembly resolution on ending child, early and forced marriage, as well as the biennial Human Rights Council resolution on eliminating violence against women and girls.

Canada also supports those on the frontlines of the fight for children's rights around the world, including civil society, child rights defenders, and international organizations. Canada's engagement is guided by the Feminist Foreign Policy and Feminist International Assistance Policy, which place human rights at their core, and supports the 2030 Agenda.

Canada plays a leadership role on advancing these issues, including through the G7 Charlevoix Education Initiative for women and girls in fragile, crisis, and conflict contexts; the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment of Child Soldiers; the WePROTECT Global Alliance on ending child sexual exploitation online; and through including child labour provisions in our trade agreements.

CONCLUSION

Ms. Chair and Members of the Committee,

Canada is proud of its record on children's rights and of the progress it has made since our last appearance in 2012. However, we acknowledge that there is room to improve. Canada is committed to doing all that it can to make sure that all children in Canada can fully enjoy their rights on an equal basis.

As our world changes, Canada is committed to a continuing assessment of how we can improve and take steps to address the challenges facing our children. Following the receipt of the Committee's Concluding Observations, officials from Canada's federal, provincial, and territorial governments will meet with children and youth, civil society organizations, and Indigenous representatives to discuss ways to work collaboratively and efficiently in advancing key priorities for children's rights in Canada.

We thank you once again for allowing us to conduct this appearance virtually. We look forward to a constructive dialogue and the resulting Concluding Observations from the Committee.

Thank you.