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Symposium on Children of the Recession

I recently had the opportunity to moderate a national symposium on *Children of the Recession*, which is also the subject of a UNICEF report. The day was organized by UNICEF Canada in partnership with the University of Ottawa.

This discussion about the Great Recession took place within a broader significant context. It is now 25 years since the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* became international law, yet many of its commitments remain unrealized. 2014 also marked a quarter-century since the unanimous all-party Resolution in the House of Commons to move toward the eradication of child poverty in Canada.

The purpose of the symposium was to enable discussion of the most serious economic crisis that the world has faced since the Great Depression of the 1930s. There have been countless commentaries and reports exploring the recent Great Recession's economic impact.

Children of the Recession, by contrast, turned our attention to the most vulnerable members of the population – typically neglected in most public policy conversations and certainly overlooked both during and after this tough economic period.

> The goal of this report is to highlight the fact that the current and future lives of children have been – and are being – neglected in the global response to the Great Recession. Should this neglect persist, the crisis for children will continue to be felt well after the economic recovery. The long-term social health of our societies is at risk. If generations have defining moments, this is certainly one of them [UNICEF 2014: 6].

The symposium set out to explore the impact of the Great Recession upon children and their families. It sought to consider the effectiveness of Canada's policy responses and possible measures for the future.

The day began with an overview of the key findings of the *Children of the Recession* report, which presents a global picture of the major industrialized nations. The application to

Canada was discussed from the perspective of how we fared, what we did and what we should do in coming years.

The agenda was divided into three panels, each of which addressed one of the following fundamental questions. What was the *impact* of the Great Recession upon children? What *policies* were introduced to counter these effects? What *measures should Canada adopt* to protect children in future economic crises?

Panellists were selected on the basis of a diverse mix of backgrounds in order to consider the social, financial, physical and mental health, legal and child welfare implications of this tough economic period. The mix of experience and expertise generated wide-ranging and challenging discussions.

The first panel noted that the *impact* of the Great Recession upon children and families in the developed world has been hard and long-lasting – albeit far more difficult in some nations than in others.

> In the past five years, rising numbers of children and their families have experienced difficulty in satisfying their most basic material and educational needs. Unemployment rates not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s have left many families unable to provide the care, protection and opportunities to which children are entitled. Most importantly, the Great Recession is about to trap a generation of educated and capable youth in a limbo of unmet expectations and lasting vulnerability [UNICEF 2014: 5].

The evidence also pointed to the fact that young people were disproportionately affected by the economic trough of the past few years. But while youth need special interventions in order to gain skills and work-related contacts, a sole focus upon that group is not the most appropriate policy response. Broader labour market interventions are required. The UNICEF report maintains that there must be sufficient jobs to provide adequate employment for the population, and these must be of high quality and pay a living wage.

> The global financial crisis of 2007-08 spilled over into the real economy reducing demand for labour and increasing unemployment. Young people were hit hard, with record numbers of 15- to 24-year-olds out of work and many of them not in education, employment or training (NEET). More than five years since the outbreak of the financial crisis, the economic recovery remains weak and uneven. Even those who finish university and find employment during the crisis may end up on a lower earnings trajectory, as graduating in a bad economy has large and persistent negative effects on wages [Chzhen and Richardson 2014: 8].

The second panel turned its attention to policy responses. The *Children of the Recession* report points out the power of appropriate policy measures and how they can reduce child poverty, in particular, and make a profound difference in the quality of life, more generally. They can buffer against the impact of economic downturns and can bolster social and psychological well-being during stressful and uncertain times. The report notes that:

> … a strong and multifaceted relationship exists between the impact of the Great Recession on national economies and a decline in children's well-being since 2008. Children are suffering most, and will bear the consequences longest, in countries where the recession has hit hardest. For each country, the extent and character of the crisis's impact on children has been shaped by the depth of the recession, pre-existing economic conditions, the strength of the social safety net and, most importantly, policy responses. Amid this unprecedented social crisis, many countries have managed to limit – or even reduce – child poverty. It was by no means inevitable, then, that children would be the most enduring victims of the recession [UNICEF 2014: 2].

The third panel considered the report's strong message for the future. When economic times are relatively good, governments should strengthen existing programs and institutions that contribute to child and family well-being. Governments need to make the investments that build resilience to reduce the impact of economic uncertainty in future.

> No government was prepared for the extent or depth of the recession and none reacted in the same way. Many countries with higher levels of child vulnerability would have been wise to strengthen their safety nets during the pre-recession period of dynamic economic growth, which was marked by rising disparity and a growing concentration of wealth. Governments that bolstered existing public institutions and programs helped to buffer countless children from the crisis – a strategy that others may consider adopting [UNICEF 2014: 3].

The symposium made clear that Canada needs to think in terms of a strategy that involves an integrated and linked set of policy measures and actions. Over the years, Caledon has put forward many important proposals. They include educational and training investments for young people within the broader context of labour market policies that ensure job security and living wages.

Canada also needs to make investments that foster early childhood development and child care. It is crucial to invest in supports, such as affordable housing, that would ease immeasurably the stress that millions of families experience as a result of low wages and unstable employment.

Fundamental improvements are required with respect to transfers and progressive income taxes. Public funds being wasted on tax breaks for higher-income households could be better spent on bolstering income support to low- and modest-income families. Caledon has argued that boosting the Canada Child Tax Benefit is the most efficient and effective way to achieve this objective.

Finally, the federal government must provide adequate support for Aboriginal children – particularly for those living in First Nations communities on reserve. The disproportionately high presence of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system is a national shame that will have a long-lasting negative impact on the Canadian economy and society.

While many of these recommendations are directed toward the federal government Ottawa is not the only actor in protecting and promoting child well-being. The provinces and territories, private sector, voluntary organizations, First Nations communities and families living in poverty all have roles to play. Above all, the voices of children must be heard in any national conversation.

Children of the Recession leaves us with a compelling challenge:

> Fifty years from now, we will look back at this period as a critical juncture in the history of many affluent countries. The Great Recession may be remembered for the generation of vulnerable children it left behind. But it may also be remembered as a transcendent historical moment, when recovering nations laid the foundations for more inclusive societies based on equality and opportunity for all. How else will we repay the debt we owe to the children of the recession? [UNICEF 2014: 42].

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References

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