

The following text is a **presentation made by Gail Dugas of the Canadian Council on Social Development**, at the 13th regular council session of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) and meetings of the Joint Public Advisory Committee, held in Washington, D.C., June 27-28, 2006.

The CEC Council, composed of the top environmental officials from Canada, Mexico and the United States, meets annually to discuss environmental issues of common concern and direct the work program of the Commission.

Check against delivery.



Good afternoon.

My name is Gail Dugas and I am Vice President of Public Affairs at the Canadian Council on Social Development – Canada’s oldest non-profit research organization, and the Canadian partner in the Children in North America Project.

The aim of our Project is to build an accessible knowledge base around issues facing this continent’s children. This is done through a series of indicator reports that track the well-being of children and youth.

I am here today to discuss the importance of the CEC’s Children’s Initiative.

DISAPPOINTMENT

Let me first say, however, that we are dismayed by several notable absences from the meeting this afternoon. The administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Stephen Johnson, the Mexican Secretary for the Environment, José Luis Luege Tamargo, and the Canadian Environment Minister, Rona Ambrose, head up this important Council.

When the Commission was created, the Council’s annual consultation with the public was considered to be a key opportunity for our political leaders to hear a grassroots assessment of environmental impacts on our citizens and communities. We hope this opportunity is not lost in the future.

NEED FOR A CHILDREN’S LENS

There are 120 million children in North America. They make up one-quarter of the population of this continent. Yet they have been noticeably absent from the priorities and planning of any tri-lateral government work.

This lack of a children’s lens is a grave omission.

The CEC CHILDREN’S INITIATIVE

Children respond to and are uniquely affected by environmental exposures.

One in eight Canadian children has been diagnosed with asthma. In Mexico, asthma is the most frequent cause of hospital admissions for children under the age of four.

It is argued that stronger ties on the North American continent promote the full potential of our citizens. All of our citizens.

But children who develop respiratory problems are not able to reach their full potential. Children who develop neurological problems are not able to reach their full potential.

This places an enormous burden on families and communities. It has significant impacts on the future productivity of our individual nations and on our increasingly integrated continent.

The creation of the Commission recognized that some of our challenges require leadership that is collaborative and continental in scope. And the work of CEC's Children's Initiative is one of the few instances of co-operation around children's issues from that continental perspective.

Their products are important. But they are only first steps. It is critical that the CEC continue to examine the environmental impacts on our most vulnerable citizens.

For example, the CEC's first report on children clearly showed the risks to young people from environmental exposures. It did that using 13 standard indicators, but only one of the indicators – asthma in children – was fully reported by all three countries.

That reflects a critical challenge we have encountered in the Children in North America Project: Data gaps.

It's research lingo... but it has serious implications.

Collecting useable, comparable, and trackable data takes time and money. But these monitoring tools are an integral part of any risk assessment, and they are critical to a measured and strategic approach.

Not knowing. Not asking. That's not an excuse.

WHAT'S NEEDED NOW?

As leaders from our three countries respond to continental integration, they must provide *accountable leadership that puts monitoring tools in place.*

The work completed to date by the CEC on children's health has provided relevant and useful information to researchers, policy-makers, and the general public. *Those results need to be widely disseminated and regularly updated.*

We know that the CEC experience reflects our own in terms of finding gaps in data and information across the three countries. *We hope you will take action to address these data gaps and to promote greater tri-national data comparability.*

The Children's Initiative has created an invaluable knowledge network. It should not be lost. And we urge the CEC to use its work to help build capacity in all three countries.

How children live and grow up is not only important to their parents. It is vital to our three nations.

On behalf of the 120 million children on this continent, I thank you for the opportunity to pass on this message. I hope our respective leaders hear it.

And I hope that next year, they are here to receive it in person.

Thank you.



Canadian Council on Social Development
Conseil canadien de développement social

The **Children in North America Project** will highlight the conditions and well-being of children and youth in Canada, México, and the United States. In the first phase of the project, a conceptual and analytic framework was developed for a series of indicator reports using established international and national-level data sources. Throughout 2005/06, reports are planned on different dimensions of child well-being, including economic well-being; health and safety, and personal life and civic engagement. A number of Issue Briefs on selected topics will also be developed.

The first report in this series, entitled *Growing Up in North America: Child Well-Being in Canada, the United States, and México*, was published in May 2006. It introduces readers to the children of North America and some of the influences shaping their lives – notably, the growing economic, social and cultural interactions among the three countries. It is available for download from the CCSD website (www.ccsd.ca).

The CCSD is the Canadian partner in this tri-national project, along with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago from the United States, and Red por los Derechos de la Infancia from México.