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CANADA - TORONTO

**Community Voices,  
Perspectives and Priorities:**

**Executive Summary**

MARCH 2005

***Report of***

The Toronto Civic Panel

***Prepared By***

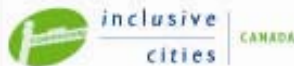
The Community Social Planning Council of Toronto



***A partner of***

Inclusive Cities Canada: A Cross-Canada Civic Initiative

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The creation of inclusive communities where residents, regardless of origin and circumstance, are able to participate as valued and contributing members depends upon a sustainable social infrastructure. In Toronto, reductions of federal and provincial investments in essential resources for the City, and downloading of services, have significantly weakened a once vibrant social infrastructure. Such deterioration has had a devastating impact on vulnerable populations such as recent immigrants and refugees, women alone with children and youth. This is evidenced by rising levels of income disparity, poverty, and homelessness – 550,000 people and one-third of children live in poverty. Poverty rates are highest among racialized families with children. One-fifth of Toronto's tenant households pay more than 50% of their income on rent. In 2003, the waiting list for social housing totalled 71,000, with nearly 33,000 people staying in the City's emergency shelters.

While the City of Toronto continues to struggle with limited fiscal resources, more efforts are needed from the federal government and the province to strengthen urban foundations, support diverse communities and address social vulnerabilities. The New Deal for Cities and Communities has limited its focus to rebuilding important parts of urban physical infrastructure without addressing the requirements for strengthening social infrastructure. From a social inclusion perspective, both social and physical infrastructures are vital to create strong sustainable communities and cities.

*Inclusive Cities Canada* was developed to focus public attention on the importance of social infrastructure for building inclusive cities and to ensure that community voices of diversity are recognized as core Canadian ones. A primary challenge confronting the future of Canada is its ability to ensure that cities are able to effectively sustain communities of diversity for the mutual benefit of all people, particularly children, youth and families from diverse and vulnerable populations.

*Inclusive Cities Canada* is a collaborative initiative of five social planning organizations across Canada and the social infrastructure sub-committee of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). It is a unique partnership of community leaders and elected municipal politicians. The social planning partners include: Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia; Edmonton Social Planning Council; Community Development Halton; Community Social Planning Council of Toronto; and Human Development Council of Saint John, New Brunswick. Multi-year funding support was provided by Social Development Canada, with start-up funds from the Laidlaw Foundation.

The first phase of this initiative involved the creation of Civic Panels to coordinate and conduct local civic audits on social inclusion. Civic Panels are made up of municipal and community leaders and are co-chaired by a municipal politician, either a Mayor or city Councillor, and a community leader. The Civic Panels have been central to this initiative.

Strategic direction for the project was provided by a National Steering Committee, which is comprised of members from the partner cities. The National Steering Committee developed a common framework and methodology for conducting the local research. Building on previous research and community development work, the National Committee identified five significant dimensions of social inclusion for review. Within each dimension, three specific areas of inquiry were highlighted. The dimensions include:

- **Diversity:** An examination of how key urban institutions such as the local government, schools and the police reflect and respond to the full diversity of the population.
- **Human Development:** A focus on the opportunities for everyone to develop their talents, skills and capacities through the availability of early childhood services, good public education, and access to recreation/arts/cultural resources.
- **Civic Engagement:** Strategies to promote the full engagement of people in civic life through renewal of local governance, strengthening community capacities, and promoting inclusive public space.
- **Living Conditions:** A review of disparities in access to basic necessities such as income/employment, housing and community safety across Toronto.
- **Community Services:** The availability of adequate and culturally appropriate community services in areas of health, crisis support and transit.

The research process began with the design and development of a focus group process in each city. Focus groups aimed to bring together knowledgeable participants active in civic and community affairs to serve as key informants and provide an impressionistic assessment of local conditions in a specific inclusion dimension, including key strengths and weaknesses, and propose priority actions for change. Ten focus groups were convened in Toronto, and involved between 7 and 12 participants per session. Persons invited included local service providers and recognized community leaders affiliated with locally based groups and networks from City neighbourhoods. Altogether, 276 people were invited to participate, of which 130 were recent immigrants, refugees and people of colour. Ninety-eight (98) people were able to attend. Participants' perspectives reflected various community backgrounds including personal/professional/volunteer experience in the community with immigrants/refugees, child/youth/family perspective, work with youth, and knowledge and/or understanding of people who are living on low

incomes in Toronto. Highlights from the focus groups were reviewed and analyzed and formative themes identified.

On the basis of this analysis, the Toronto Civic Panel agreed that circumstances facing diverse and vulnerable populations required further investigation. As a result, thirteen local soundings were organized with community members and service providers familiar with the conditions of the population. A list of potential invitees was generated with the assistance of community agencies and service providers. In total, over 175 people participated. Populations reviewed included: (i) women who have experienced abuse, (ii) ethno-racial women with disabilities, (iii) newcomers, (iv) youth, (v) Aboriginal peoples, (vi) members of the Flemingdon Park community, (vii) people labelled having intellectual disabilities, (viii) gay/lesbian/bisexual transgendered (GLBT) youth and (ix) GLBT seniors, (x) labour market bridging programs for immigrant pharmacists, (xi) homeless women, (xii) ethno-cultural seniors, and (xiii) frontline youth workers. Local sounding sessions generated additional perspectives which served to complement focus group themes. In order to promote maximum participation of focus group and local sounding participants, community findings were reported at feedback forums in three different parts of the City.

The Civic Panel reviewed the community findings and identified a set of social inclusion issues that it deemed significant to Toronto and its communities. The community findings reflect a mixed assessment on states of social inclusion in Toronto. There is a general recognition that positive political and social climates are evident in the desire to advance inclusion in key sectors. For instance, participants speak favourably about the new Mayor as a source of hope for more consultation and engagement. The participatory budget process introduced in 2004 is well received. People sense that a majority of City Councillors now recognize the importance of diversity issues and civic youth engagement, as reflected in municipal support for the Toronto Youth Cabinet. Gay and lesbian communities are receiving a more positive reception throughout the City. Participants also acknowledged that Toronto has some of the best-trained teachers in the world, as well as excellent public facilities, a major civic strength in promoting an inclusive city.

Toronto's strength is its willingness to set municipal policies which address diversity. The weakness rests in the absence of institutional strategies which can translate goals into realities on the ground. Local governance still does not reflect the presence of minorities or contributors from less advantaged backgrounds. Public grants run out when it comes to funding basic core funding for ethno-racial specific community agencies. There are community concerns over the existence of what is perceived as two realities

of policing – one for white mainstream populations and another for racialized minorities. Schools need to be more welcoming and to better reflect diversity of students and families. Textbooks and curriculum have yet to effectively recognize the diverse cultural histories and traditions of children in Toronto schools. Recent immigrant parents struggle to learn about and become involved in their children’s schools. Budget cuts have limited basic access to both public and school spaces, and cancelled numerous community programs, many of which support inclusive initiatives with newcomers. Improvements are required in multilingual capabilities and cultural appropriateness of hospital services.

Focus group participants identified the deterioration in living conditions, including income/employment, housing and community services, as the biggest barrier to social inclusion. People living in poverty, particularly when they require income support from social assistance, are targets of stigma, prejudice and racism. Underemployment of racialized minorities is prevalent, particularly for female immigrants. There are insufficient supplies and availability of affordable housing. Deteriorations in living conditions, including public stigmatization and feelings of shame, are sources of significant stress. This undermines states of personal health and collective well being.

The fundamental challenge which Toronto faces during the coming decade is the need to rebuild and strengthen the urban foundations of the City so that every resident whatever their origin and circumstance can experience the dignity and opportunity of full inclusion. In previous periods, Toronto could count on significant federal and provincial investments to build a strong urban infrastructure. The City benefited from having high quality public services such as: a large supply of social housing; a well funded public education system with special funding for inner cities; relatively affordable and well-maintained public transit; strong networks of libraries and public spaces; and a commitment to improve incomes and life opportunities for people on social assistance. Toronto’s vulnerable workers and families were protected by federal programs such as Unemployment Insurance and the Canada Assistance Plan. In addition, labour markets generally offered opportunities to newcomers for sustaining employment.

During the nineties, the foundations which sustained opportunity and inclusion began to erode. The federal government stopped funding social housing, eligibility for unemployment insurance was severely restricted, and direct federal cost-sharing of income and services for people in poverty ended with the unilateral termination of the Canada Assistance Plan. The provincial government cut social assistance rates by 22%, public school budgets were depleted, the municipal property tax assumed greater shares of social housing and transit costs, the creation of quality childcare places was severely constrained, core funding for community-based agencies was terminated, fees for post secondary studies steeply rose, and punitive

strategies of exclusion such as ‘zero tolerance’ and ‘literacy testing’ were introduced. One of the most visible ramifications in Toronto of government cutbacks has been the change in the face of poverty; it now comprises young parents with children, young families from racialized groups, and young immigrant and Aboriginal families.

With fewer resources and high levels of racial diversity among new immigrants and refugees, Toronto is uniquely challenged to develop conditions of equity in the opportunities and experiences of newcomers. When economic disparities intensify along racialized patterns, then conditions of economic equity deteriorate. If core public institutions such as the police and schools fail to eradicate persistent practices readily perceived as racially directed, then conditions of social equity deteriorate. If access to basic urban resources such as higher education and transit are increasingly privatized through higher fees, then conditions of common equity deteriorate. If processes of civic engagement and local governance continue to be dominated by established networks of influence in the City, then conditions of urban equity deteriorate.

With significant federal and provincial support less assured, the primary source of political initiative to meet the challenges facing the City will likely have to come from residents and local authorities. If residents value and desire a fully inclusive Toronto, then this will have to be demonstrated in local practices – how we define and promote civic citizenship in a city of diversity. Are residents of Toronto willing to contribute the public revenues necessary to pay for common public goods? Can key urban institutions such as schools and the police become models of full inclusion? Will local government in Toronto become strong advocates for federal and provincial investments in housing, income support, early learning and childcare, and transit?

The recommendations developed by the Civic Panel were guided by social inclusion issues which emerged from the research findings. For the purpose of clarity, the thirty-one recommendations have been clustered into six priority areas. Each priority area responds to a fundamental set of challenges that were raised in the community findings.

## **Priority Area One - Make Civic Democracy Work**

### Recommendations

- Make democratic renewal in local governance a priority in the work of the Joint Ontario - City of Toronto Task Force with a mandate to recommend changes to the 1997 City of Toronto Act so that Toronto can acquire statutory powers appropriate to its significance and responsibilities.
- The City of Toronto should pursue equity-focused civic education strategies for newcomers and existing residents to include workshops in libraries, settlement houses, community centres and ethno-cultural agencies, and develop multilingual and multimedia education materials for household and general distribution as part of these initiatives.
- The Community Councils of Toronto should convene annual civic assemblies of residents at the electoral district level that take advantage of common boundaries for federal, provincial and municipal elected representatives to review issues of local significance
- Extend the civic vote to all residents regardless of national citizenship status.
- The Toronto District School Board should assess the scope and cultural appropriateness of civic education curriculum from elementary through to secondary school education.
- The Community Councils of Toronto should develop strategies for the creation of civic youth panels drawn from secondary schools, community centres and colleges that can review municipal governance issues of interest to youth and that can select area wide youth cabinets, which would report regularly to Community Councils of the City.
- The City of Toronto should request from the federal government that the New Deal for Cities and Communities include funding to support youth-initiated and youth-managed community projects.
- Lower the voting age to 16 years of age for municipal elections.
- In efforts to promote leadership equity strategies, provincial and municipal governments should require that civic institutions [hospitals, schools, universities] under their authority in Toronto develop benchmarks and timetables for the diversification of senior management and professional positions to reflect the diversities of the city. The United Way should be encouraged to require similar initiatives from member agencies.

## **Priority Area Two - Create Welcoming Schools for All**

### Recommendations

- Restore school-parent advisors in communities across the city to engage all parents in their children's education, restore educational assistants in the classroom, and ensure that a full range of ESL programs are available in schools for children, adults, and seniors.



- In order to develop schools as community hubs, the City of Toronto explore assuming administrative and financial responsibility for the extended use of schools by all community members and thereby increase the availability of public spaces in city neighbourhoods.
- Ensure a 'seamless day' for young children by making public funds available to combine quality childcare and family resource programs in the school with junior and senior kindergarten programs.
- Introduce student feedback processes in secondary schools to assess and make recommendations regarding the extent to which different cultures and student experiences are reflected in the curriculum, classroom, and school.
- Eliminate Grade 10 literacy tests, review ways in which schools could better value the diverse talents and intelligences that students bring to school, and respect the development of learning paths whether they lead to labour market training programs or postsecondary studies.
- We support initiatives in the community to revise the Safe Schools Act. This should include the creation of alternatives to zero tolerance approaches, the development of policies and programs which enhance peer support initiatives, and the introduction of anti-violence education and violence prevention strategies beginning in elementary schools.
- More investments are required to develop new practices in classrooms that support mentoring, work with children with disabilities, and proactive inclusion models for children having difficulties and in the process of dropping out.
- School boards should implement Identification and Placement Review Committee [IPRC] regulations, which state that the neighbourhood school is the placement of first choice for children labelled having an intellectual disability.

### **Priority Area Three - Develop a Collaborative Model of Policing**

#### Recommendation

- The Mayor and the Police Services Board should explore the development of a collaborative model of policing, in contrast to the current 'command' model. This recommendation reflects an emerging view that public safety is a shared responsibility with communities. A collaborative model of policing would help communities acquire the capacities and resources to work with law enforcement officials, improve conditions of community safety, and enhance perceptions of collective security among all residents.

## **Priority Area Four - Strengthen Community Capacities for Inclusion**

### Recommendations

- The City of Toronto should explore new funding models with the provincial and federal governments which recognize that community based neighbourhood and ethno-specific agencies are essential civic resources in all parts of the city and require stable core funding in order to meet their responsibilities for local leadership development, volunteer recruitment, and social support.
- The Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario must come to an agreement on their respective roles in funding a full range of settlement services to support immigrants and refugees in Toronto.
- The Government of Ontario should increase the presence of community health centres in the city to assure all residents of access to primary care services and mental health resources, and to actively involve local communities in population health initiatives that address social, economic and environmental factors that determine peoples' states of well being.
- The Local Health Integration Networks for Toronto should conduct a social audits of multilingual capabilities and cultural sensitivities of hospitals and crisis services within the GTA and make recommendations as appropriate
- The City of Toronto Public Health Department should work with local Community Access Centres to develop service targets for home care and home support requirements in Toronto and present a funding plan to the Government of Ontario for a timely implementation of the targets.

## **Priority Area Five - Reduce Growing Disparities in Health and Well Being**

### Recommendations

- The Mayor, City Council, and public health officials should clearly affirm by declaration and initiative that the deterioration in access to living wages, secure and affordable housing, food security, and sustaining incomes are serious threats to the health and well being of growing numbers of adults and children in Toronto.
- The proposed Mayor's Summit on good jobs address issues of underemployment, unemployment, and employment equity and develop strategies to address the following areas - the creation of jobs with living wages, full time hours, and employer benefits; mandatory access to labour market opportunities for people with physical and intellectual disabilities; the requirement of Canadian experience for labour market entry; and the non-recognition of foreign credentials.
- The City of Toronto Community and Neighbourhood Services Department and the City of Toronto Public Health Department should jointly identify social assistance and income support levels required to sustain the basic health of parents, children, and single adults unable to participate in the labour market, and request that the Government of Ontario meet these basic health standards in all provincial income security programs.

- The City of Toronto should review its official plan and zoning by-laws to determine whether these include a strong commitment for the creation of mixed income neighbourhoods. This would include advocating for tenant-protected housing, co-ops, supportive housing, fully accessible accommodation for persons with physical disabilities, and homelessness prevention strategies.
- The Mayor's Roundtable on Children and Youth should prepare a submission to senior levels of government on the need for sustained investments in financially accessible, culturally appropriate, and equitably distributed recreation programs across Toronto.

## **Priority Area Six - Extend Access to Transit and Inclusive Mobility**

### Recommendations

- The Mayor and City Council should insist that federal and provincial resources for cities should include sufficient funding to freeze transit fares and develop community transit services for mobility restricted families, adults, and youth.
- The Toronto Transit Commission should enhance diversity and sensitivity training for TTC personnel.
- The City of Toronto should pursue principles of universal design in the management of sidewalks, traffic signals, dedicated road lanes, green spaces and community gardens to promote inclusive mobility and activity for aging populations, persons with disabilities and parents with younger children, and to support extended mobility across the city for cyclists, runners, and active pedestrians.

Civic Panels in the four other partner cities have produced reports based on a civic audit process similar to that conducted in Toronto. A cross-national report, highlighting similarities and differences between cities, will be produced and presented at a national roundtable in Ottawa in June 2005. The focus of the roundtable will be on the importance of engaging the federal government in building and sustaining a strong social infrastructure.

In the fall of 2005, the *Inclusive Cities* project will invite other municipalities and communities to become part of the cross-Canada initiative in building inclusive cities. This will include convening regional symposia to lay the foundation for increasing constituency/alliance building. Civic partnerships and public engagement are vital towards reconstructing the social infrastructure, sustaining civic capacity, and preserving social cohesion. These are the foundations of strong, supportive and inclusive communities.