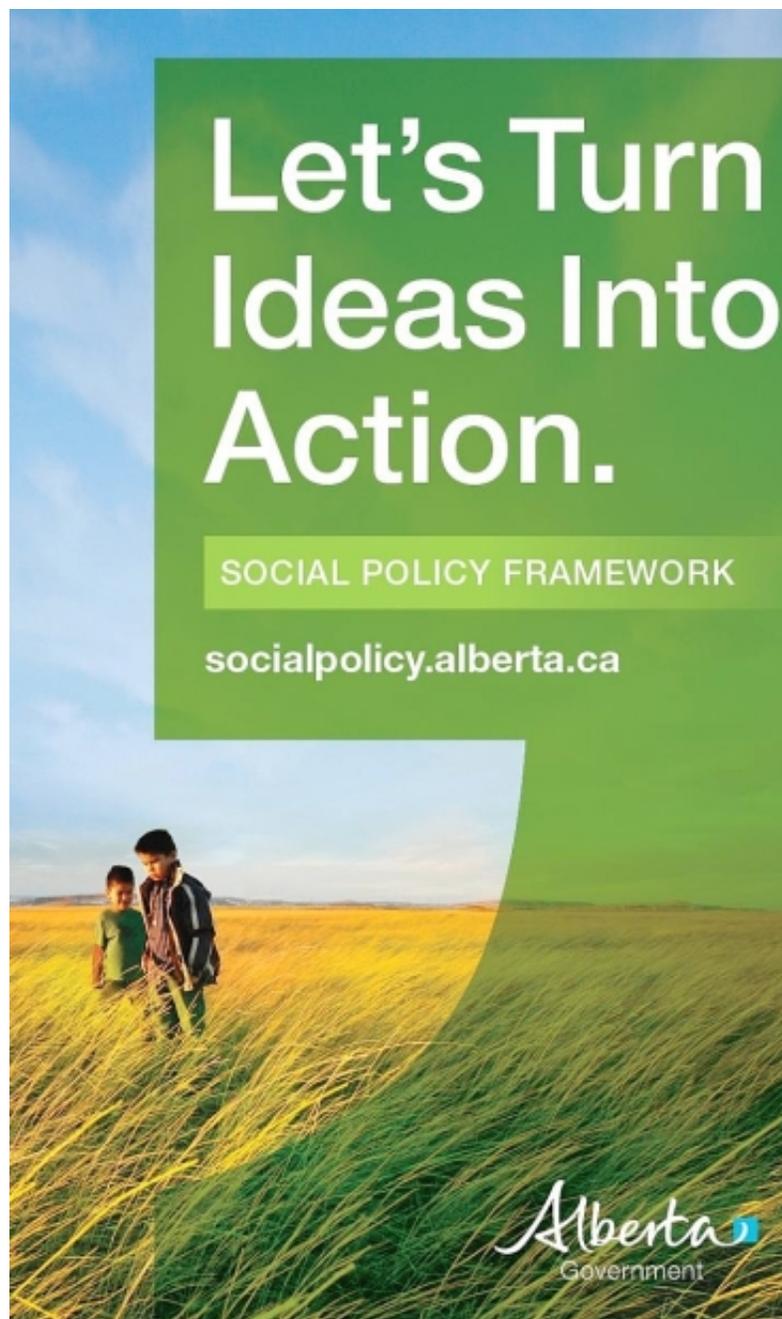


# Social policy framework needed for B.C.

Opinion: Sets out shared goals, lays groundwork for coordinated, strategic approach

BY CAROL MATUSICKY, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN MAY 8, 2013



Let's Turn  
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Action.

SOCIAL POLICY FRAMEWORK

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Alberta  
Government

Alberta's new Social Policy Framework sets out goals for the money to be spent over the next decade and strategies for coordinating the efforts of government, community groups and the private sector.

Everyone knows you need goals and a plan if you hope to accomplish anything significant.

But in British Columbia, we've failed to take the basic steps to decide what kind of society we want and how we're going to reach our goals.

In contrast, Alberta's government approved a new, comprehensive Social Policy Framework this year. Other provinces, like Nova Scotia, Quebec and Newfoundland have launched similar policy initiatives.

A social policy plan makes obvious sense. Alberta's sets out goals — what the province hopes to achieve with the billions that will be spent over the next decade. It includes priorities, targets and strategies for linking the efforts of government, community-based agencies, individuals and the private sector.

It's simply sensible to decide what we hope to achieve — for a business, a non-profit or a family — and how we will get there. Without a plan, there is a great risk of wasted time, effort and money and no real way to measure success.

Nova Scotia's Social Policy Framework Weaving the Threads is a useful example, which outlines how social prosperity, economic prosperity and environmental sustainability are all linked to provide a foundation for all of the province's future social programming.

This process starts by acknowledging problems with the status quo: Policies that tend to address whatever issue seems most urgent at the moment; uncoordinated actions as different government departments and other players operate in "silos"; short-term thinking, while big issues, like child poverty, continue to go unaddressed.

A policy framework can change that by setting out shared goals and laying the groundwork for a coordinated, strategic approach involving all stakeholders.

That's vital. Consider one example. Everyone wants children to do well in school. But by Grade 4, 30 per cent of B.C. students aren't reading at the expected level and 32 per cent are falling short in math.

The typical response, based on the silo approach, would call on the Education Ministry to come up with a solution.

But we know that 30 per cent of children start kindergarten "not ready to learn." Perhaps the best way to help children learn is to support at-risk families with infants and toddlers, address family poverty or increase access to quality childcare.

Or, most likely, a combination of all the above. That can only happen with a coordinated policy framework.

Social policy planning is — or should be — closely linked with economic planning, recognizing that social policy both responds to and helps bring prosperity. If, for example, Kitimat and Prince Rupert experience rapid economic growth, there will be large social impacts. It's smart to anticipate and plan for a response.

Proper social policy planning also targets the big issues that don't lend themselves to a short-term approach based on one budget or the election cycle.

The Alberta plan, for example, makes the growing gap between the rich and poor a priority. "Rising income disparity diminishes social cohesion and challenges the idea that all Albertans have an equal opportunity to be successful," the framework says.

Addressing that requires a broad, long-term approach, involving tax policy, income assistance rates, economic growth, education and community services.

There is a natural fear that this becomes yet another long process with no guarantee of action.

The Alberta framework began as a 2012 election commitment. Work started in June. The process included broad consultation. There was a website, with resources and opportunities for interactive participation. Small grants were available to community groups for local workshops and consultation. Some 31,000 people and organizations participated.

And in less than nine months, the framework was complete and implementation began.

A long-term integrated framework with specific actions, targets and outcomes will not be a panacea, but at least citizens can look at the plan and judge government's effectiveness in working with partners to achieve its goals.

While Alberta's process might not have been perfect, it did engage the public in defining the kind of society citizens wanted, the strategies and actions needed to make that a reality and the ways in which success can be measured. It is certainly better than vague campaign commitments.

Voters should press all B.C. parties to promise a similar process to set out a clear, specific social policy framework over the next 24 months.

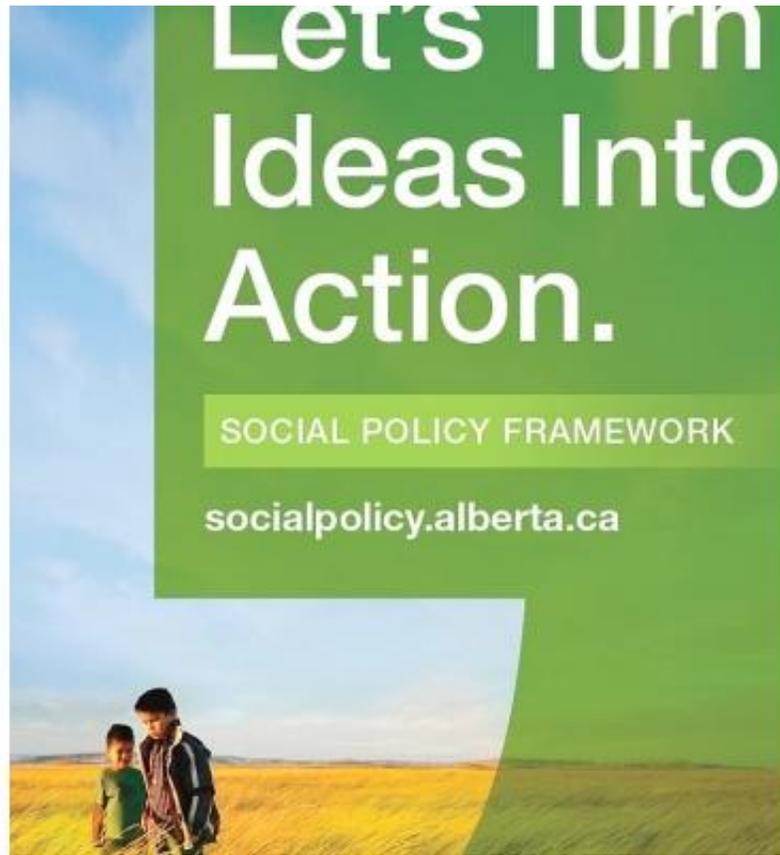
*Dr. Carol Matusicky is the chair of the Board Voice Society of B.C. and is writing on behalf of the Roundtable of Provincial Social Service Organizations.*

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