Public Perceptions of and Attitudes Towards Community Recreation and Parks Services

In Canada, Recreation and Parks Matter

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Prepared for the 2011 National Recreation Summit
Public Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward Community Recreation and Parks Services: In Canada, Recreation and Parks Matter

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Executive Summary

The focus of this National Recreation Summit is “Recreation, Community and Quality of Life.” The summit brings together experts and leaders from across the country and offers a unique opportunity to look back at where the field has come from and identify appropriate strategies to improve community and quality of life in the future. An important voice in the discussion is the general public, the consumers and users of services who have important perceptions, attitudes and opinions about recreation and parks services that should be heard. What professionals say about the delivery of the services they provide is important. The attitudes, beliefs and perceptions the public has about these services are crucial.

The paper that follows reports on several studies conducted over a ten year period between 1997 and 2008 that examine public perceptions and attitudes toward recreation participation and park use in general, and the role played by local governments in providing these services in particular. The studies reveal some surprising findings and highlight the value and benefit of recreation and parks in improving quality of life for individuals and quality of place for communities.

Over the past decade there has been a dramatic shift in public attitudes toward the value of leisure versus work. Local government recreation and parks services received a strong endorsement with over eight out of ten households reporting use of
these services. Almost everyone polled in the studies, direct and indirect users alike, indicated that they or their household members receive benefits from recreation and parks services. They perceive that these services make a significant contribution to improved health (93%), boost social cohesion (89%), ensure children and youth live healthy lifestyles and are a major factor in crime reduction (77%). They also recognize the role recreation and parks play in community and social development.

When asked who they depend on for recreation activities, after family and friends, local governments recreation and parks services were most often mentioned and well over six out of ten respondents indicated they are willing to pay as much or more than they do now in taxes to support improved recreation and parks services. People using local government recreation and parks services are typically happier in their lives, are in better health and report higher quality of life. These and other findings in the study suggest that the public believes recreation and parks are a means to deal with critical environmental, economic and social problems and are essential ingredients in improving the quality of life for individuals and the quality of place for communities.

The findings of these studies also have important public policy implications and highlight opportunities to reposition the field of parks and recreation to be a more significant resource for social and community development.

**Keywords:** Benefits of recreation and parks, Public perceptions of recreation
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Introduction

The focus of this National Recreation Summit is “Recreation, Community and Quality of Life.” The summit brings together experts and leaders from across the country and offers a unique opportunity to look back at where the field has come from and identify appropriate strategies to improve community and quality of life in the future. An important voice in the discussion is the general public, the consumers and users of services who have important perceptions, attitudes and opinions about recreation and parks services that should be heard. What professionals say about the delivery of the services they provide is important. The attitudes, beliefs and perceptions the public has about these services are crucial.

Perceptions and Reality

Over the past three decades, efforts have been made to reposition recreation and parks as an outcome and evidence based field. First the Benefits Catalogue (1997) set out ample evidence of the personal, social, economic and environmental benefits of recreation participation and park use. The recently completed National Benefits Hub (http://benefitshub.ca/) developed by the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association
builds on this information and provides compelling new evidence regarding the value and benefits of recreation and parks.

This paper is about the public perceptions of and attitudes toward recreation and parks. There can be a gap between reality and perceptions but how the public views these services is extremely important. The perceptions held by the public about a particular issue or product is their reality and that is why opinion research is important in determining public support for various services. For example, while all recent evidence points to the fact that the crime rate in Canada fell in 2010 to its lowest level since 1973 ("Crime Rate," 2011), if the public perceives that their neighbourhood is unsafe, they will behave in ways that reflect that belief. Public perception is generally seen as the gap between fact based truths versus perceptions of truths often influenced by our peers, general public opinion, personal experiences and the media. This isn’t to suggest that public opinion is invalid or inaccurate because the public does form its opinions from a wide variety of sources that report factual information.

Recreation and parks service providers across Canada rely heavily on public opinion surveys and perception research. This information is critical in determining whether needs are being satisfied and service quality maintained. Research by Blomquist, Decker and Crompton and Sellers (as cited in Jeffres & Dobos, 1993) reports that there is a direct relationship between perceptions of leisure and quality of life. With this in mind, research about the perceptions of the public toward recreation and parks forms an important part of the evaluation and assessment of services and influences decisions regarding future programs, facilities and services.
The paper that follows reports on several studies conducted over a ten year period between 1997 and 2008 that examine public perceptions and attitudes toward recreation participation and park use in general, and the role played by local governments in providing these services in particular. The studies highlight the value and benefit of recreation and parks in improving quality of life for individuals and quality of place for communities. There are some surprising findings and for the most part, it is a good news story.

**Data Sources**

Information in this paper was drawn from a national US survey on the benefits of local government recreation and parks (Godbey, Graiffe, & James, 1992). This survey was then modified to reflect policy and cultural differences and was replicated in Canada (Harper, Godbey, Neider, & Lamont, 1997). The results of these two studies were analyzed separately and then comparisons were made between responses in the US and Canada.

The Canadian study drew information from a representative sample across Canada and analysis was completed on a provincial and regional basis. There were relatively few significant differences in responses on a province-by-province basis, making the data easier to generalize across the entire population. A decade later, the survey was fielded in Alberta (Harper, Godbey, Greenslade, 2008) and Ontario (Harper, Godbey, Greenslade, 2008) to provide a longitudinal analysis of the changing perceptions and attitudes of Canadians regarding the value and benefits of recreation and parks services. Some of the original questions were modified and new questions
added that examined perceived health status and perceptions about the impact of recreation and parks services on health and well-being, quality of life, child development, crime and vandalism and the environment. The results of these studies provide a unique database that reveals for the first time, the values, attitudes, opinions and perceptions of the Canadian public regarding the value and benefit of recreation participation and park use.

Issues and Scope of Public Perceptions on Recreation & Leisure

Canadians are faced with a number of social, environmental and economic challenges that require unique solutions. Rising health care costs. Disturbing levels of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. A graying population. Skyrocketing poverty – poverty in the wallet, in hope and in spirit. A shaky economy and a shrinking and anxious workforce. Aging infrastructure and neglected recreation facilities. Serious long term threats to the environment. Growing disinterest in volunteering and civic engagement. Gangs, crime and violence on the front pages every day. Solutions to these challenges require a holistic approach involving diverse stakeholders.

Studies reported on herein were undertaken because of an interest in determining the role the public believes recreation and parks can play in mitigating the impact of social, environmental and economic issues on people and communities. Questions were asked about the value of leisure, current use of recreation and parks services, expected roles of various service providers, individual and community benefits, and the role of recreation and parks in addressing societal problems. Specifically, the research addressed:
• What people value most, their work or their leisure

• The extent of use of parks and recreation services and the benefits associated with the presence of local government sponsored services

• The effect that socio-economic and demographic factors, health status, life satisfaction and happiness have on recreation participation, parks use and perceived benefits

• What contribution recreation and parks make to improved health, mitigation of social problems, environmental protection and community development

• The impact public recreation and parks services have on individual, family and community life

• Who the public rely on most for park and recreation services and the role played by public, private and voluntary organizations.
Findings Related to Public Perceptions and Attitudes

Information gathered over the past ten years regarding the perceptions of and attitudes toward community recreation and parks services provides an overwhelming endorsement of the value and benefits of recreation, parks, arts, culture, and tourism as essential ingredients in enhancing the quality of life of citizens and the contribution made to the long-term sustainability of communities. One of the most significant findings relates to a dramatic shift in attitudes toward work and leisure.

Pace of Life and Attitudes Toward Work and Leisure

The pace of life for Canadians continues to increase and time available for recreation and leisure is decreasing. Continuing a trend reported in the 1997 study, over 70% of respondents in the 2008 survey reported that they sometimes or always feel rushed to do the things they need to do. Less than 30% reported they have more time for leisure today compared to five years ago.

Between 1997 and 2008 (Table 1.) there was a dramatic shift in public attitudes toward work and leisure. In 1997, the importance of work and leisure was spread almost equally between those who believed work was more important than leisure (34%), those who believed leisure was more important than work (31%), and those who believed they were equally important (34%). In the 2008 studies conducted in Alberta and Ontario there was a dramatic shift in these attitudes. In Ontario for example, views of work and leisure became more polarized with 55% valuing leisure over work while 31% indicated that work was more important than leisure.
Table 1. The Importance of Work vs Leisure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is more important?</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both equally important</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There also appears to be a correlation between the attitudes people have toward leisure and work and their health, happiness and satisfaction with life. People who valued leisure over work were significantly more likely to report that they were happy, had higher life satisfaction and were in good or excellent health. These findings have several implications:

- Leisure service providers will need to find creative and flexible ways to provide opportunities for people who have limited block time to work recreation into their schedules.
- The shift in the value of leisure vs work has implications for the level of public support for local government recreation and parks.
- There may be a direct relationship between the perceived value of leisure and happiness, health and life satisfaction.

Providers and Users of Recreation and Parks Services

While the focus of this report is on public perceptions of and attitudes toward
recreation and parks, a description of the key providers and principal users or non-users of recreation and parks services provides a context with which to view public attitudes and perceptions.

The National Recreation Statement (1987) articulates the role that various levels of government play in the provision of recreation and parks services and acknowledges the role that individuals and voluntary community groups play in the process. The Statement suggests that “opportunities for participation should be initially developed and managed by individuals or groups independent of government” but where additional resources are needed, the Municipality is the prime agency due to its proximity to users and ability to respond in a flexible and efficient manner.

There is a perception that the role local governments play in providing recreation and parks services has diminished over the past decade. Contrary to this perception, the 2008 studies found that while on average 82% of users rely on friends and family for their basic recreation 82% rely on local government recreation and parks services. This was followed by a reliance on commercial recreation, community and service clubs and then private clubs. This finding suggests that people are self reliant when it comes to recreation participation but still rely heavily on local governments for participation opportunities.
In addition, the public reports extensive use of local government recreation and parks services. In both the 1997 and 2008 studies, four out of five respondents indicated that they or their household make use of parks and/or local government sponsored recreation programs. This statistic represents a strong endorsement of local governments as an important provider of recreation and parks services. However, the rationale for local government recreation and parks services is based on the principal of access and equity. In general, the results of the 1997 and 2008 studies indicate that not everyone benefits equally from available local government recreation and parks programs and services. Persons with a disability and those with lower household incomes are less likely to use local government recreation services and parks or report a benefit from these services and are more likely to be in poorer health and rate their overall life satisfaction lower than frequent users of the services.
Perceived Benefits of Local Government Recreation and Parks Services

Results from the 1997 and 2008 studies on the use and benefits of local government recreation and parks services send a powerful message about the public’s perceptions of and views about the personal and community benefits these services provide. In Ontario for example (2008), 98% of respondents believe that recreation and parks are essential services that benefit the whole community (Table 3). These results mirror the findings of the 1997 study and the Alberta study in 2008.

Table 3. Perceived Benefits of Recreation and Parks

The personal social, economic and environmental benefits of parks and recreation have been well documented in Canada and abroad. This research confirms that parks provide important direct benefits for users and indirect benefits for the community as a whole. Parks provide a sense of place in the community, allowing for escape, contemplation, discovery, access to nature, interpretive education and recreation. They also provide shelter, wildlife habitat, relief from urban form, improve air quality, and serve as buffers between residential and industrial areas. Parks enhance the aesthetic quality of the community, increase property values and improve the image
and livability of communities. These values are reflected in the benefits the public associates with parks (Table 4).

**Table 4. Public Perception of the Benefits of Parks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>To Community</th>
<th>To Household</th>
<th>To Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place for kids to go</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise, fitness, conditioning</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation and peace</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open space</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to nature</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability, always there</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature conservation</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialize/be with people</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The public also recognizes the benefits (Table 5) associated with recreation participation. Recreation, through physical, social and artistic expression, provides opportunities for individuals to improve their health and wellness, socialize and interact with others, learn new skills, have fun and find balance in their lives. In particular, improved quality of life and stress reduction are two outcomes that researchers identify with recreation participation and park use. Sports and recreation events, festivals and visual and performing arts provide opportunities for self-expression, social interaction and are a source of enhanced civic pride. They are seen to contribute to happiness, resiliency and community capacity building.
Table 5. Public Perceptions of the Benefits of Recreation Participation

Non-Users Recognize the Benefits As Well

Users and non-users alike report significant benefits from the presence of recreation and parks services. Consistently, the surveys noted in this report indicate that over 70% of non-users believe that recreation and parks services are beneficial even though they don’t directly use these services. This finding is significant because it confirms that recreation use and perceived benefits are not necessarily linked, and provides a strong indication that the public views recreation and parks as a public good.
Table 6. Perceived Benefits of Recreation and Parks by Non-Users

What if There Were No Public Recreation and Parks Services?

Almost everyone agrees (97%) that the loss of local government recreation and parks services would have a significant negative impact (Table 7) on the community. Loss of services would destroy sense of place, reduce quality of life, impact emotional well-being, reduce community cohesiveness and limit opportunities for physical activity, entertainment and fun. While people of means could replace some of these services through private recreation service providers, they too recognize the impact such a loss would have on the community.
Table 7. Impact of Service Loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Impact if there were no public parks, recreation programs or facilities</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No place for kids to go</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer options for fun/entertainment</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer options for exercise/fitness</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce quality of life</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase crime/tough in community</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact on community spirit</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring place to live</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less access to nature/outdoors</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contribution Recreation Makes to Community and Social Development

Follow-up use and benefits studies conducted in Ontario and Alberta in 2008 departed from the 1997 study in one significant way. Several new questions were added to gauge public perceptions related to the contribution recreation and parks services make to improved health, mitigation of social problems, early childhood development, environmental protection and community development.

The significance of these questions is that they seek to determine public opinion related directly to the focus of the “benefits movement” and the premise for repositioning the field as an essential local government service. There were no significant differences between the findings in Alberta and Ontario suggesting that public perceptions of these issues are consistent regardless of place of residence.

Health, Well-Being and Quality of Life

One area of inquiry in the survey asked participants about their happiness, health status and degree of life satisfaction. Those reporting a high degree of happiness, life
satisfaction and good health are significantly more likely to use parks, participate in recreation activities and identify the benefits associated with these services.

In addition to this finding, nine out of ten respondents agreed that recreation and parks plays an important role in bringing communities together (Table 8) and enhancing the quality of life (Table 9).

The public also recognizes the important relationship between recreation and health. Nine out of ten respondents (Table 10) believe that recreation participation contributes to health and well-being and eight out of ten believe that recreation participation will make people less reliant on the health care system (Table 11). This is an important finding for recreation and health care providers. With health care waiting lists growing and health care costs rising, any pro-active strategy that deals with health related issues should be welcome.

**Contribution Recreation Makes to the Welfare of Children and Youth**

Canadians also recognize the contribution that recreation and parks make in the growth and development of children and youth. Over 90% agree that play facilities are
critical to our children’s development and welfare and that recreation and parks are important in ensuring that children and youth are active and live healthy lifestyles.

Recreation: An Antidote to Crime

While on average, serious crime rates in Canadian have been falling, the public perceives that gangs, violence and vandalism are a serious problem. The challenge for service providers is to engage children at an early age in pro-active strategies, designed to prevent problems from arising. The causes of criminal activity are complex and require multiple strategies to have an impact. The public generally agrees that recreation is a useful tool in reducing crime (Table 12) and vandalism (Table 13).
Environmental Stewardship

Local governments in Canada have been engaged in providing parks, open space and facilities for over a century and have a major investment in providing places for recreation, maintaining the quality of the environment and creating liveable communities. The public recognizes the importance of parks and facilities and nine out of ten believe that this investment creates environmentally friendly communities (Table 14) and makes a critical contribution to the quality of the environment (Table 15). At the same time, aging infrastructure is a significant issue for all Canadian communities small and large. As the costs of maintaining parks and facilities grows, many communities are deferring recreation infrastructure renewal.
Perceived Value and Willingness To Pay For Improved Services

In fact, studies done in 1997 and again in 2008 found that four out of five Canadians indicated that the amount they currently pay in taxes for recreation services is worth the investment. While there is little appetite amongst elected officials for increases in municipal property taxes, over 65% of respondents indicated that they would be willing to pay more if new or improved facilities were made available.
Public Policy Implications

In general terms, public policy refers to the actions governments take as a response to problems and issues within their jurisdiction and that are spelled out in regulatory measures, laws, by-laws and policies. In Canada, the Constitution divides the responsibilities of the government into federal and provincial jurisdictions. Local governments are “creatures” of the provincial government that controls the powers for which municipalities will be responsible.

The National Recreation Statement (1987) confirmed the constitutional responsibility of the provinces and territories for recreation. It also recognized that these levels of government do not have exclusivity in the delivery of recreation programs and services, acknowledging that many programs are provided through voluntary initiative, non-profit agencies and the private sector. The statement did, however, indicate that the municipality is the primary public supplier of direct recreation services and urged each province/territory to “outline the role it intends to assign to its municipalities.” With respect to the development of public recreation policy across Canada, the autonomy of each province/territory means that there is little consistency in approach to service delivery. Each province designates the role that municipalities within its jurisdiction will play, determines the priorities it will support and the resources it will make available. In turn, locally relevant issues, priorities, circumstances and resources influence local government policy.

The delegation of authority and responsibility for public recreation services to municipalities suggests that any change in the status quo must be achieved at the local level through locally relevant solutions that respond to the unique set of local priorities.
and circumstances. The diverse organization of the recreation services delivery system at the local level makes it difficult to develop a report card or outcome assessment of how well the overall system is doing in achieving the broad goals of community and social development and to compare results across systems to determine what works best.

The results of public perception research, however, can be a powerful tool in shaping local government policy in response to the findings and leveraging provincial resources to support local initiatives. For example, the public strongly believes (2008) that recreation and parks are important tools to improve health and reduce crime. To have an impact in these areas, local governments develop and fund programs locally but the real savings in health care costs and in the costs associated with incarceration are realized by the federal and provincial governments. This information is critical in advocating for the transfer of resources from senior levels of government to support these important initiatives. Closer ties between provincial recreation and parks associations and urban and rural municipal associations would be useful in advocating for increased recognition and support.

The problems and issues faced by local governments in the delivery of recreation and parks services are many and varied. Principal among these is the structure of the delivery system that relies almost exclusively on property taxes to fund services and meet the obligation of equity, accessibility and affordability. Local governments have not been immune from “off-loading” services. In recent years, local government shifted from a direct delivery model to an enabler model as a means to deal with economic pressures. The result has been a transfer of responsibility to volunteers to maintain
programs, facilities and services leading to the perception that local governments are less important providers of recreation and parks services. The Alberta and Ontario studies (2008) contradict this view and provide strong evidence that the public relies heavily on local governments for these services and in fact, are willing to pay as much or more in taxes to maintain and improve services. The transfer of responsibility and reliance on volunteers to provide increasingly sophisticated recreation and parks related services at a time when voluntary initiative is in decline isn’t sustainable and requires a public policy response to preserve access to essential community services.

Aging municipal recreation and parks infrastructure is another area that requires a public policy response. The $17 billion dollar Federal Government Building Canada Fund and programs within it such as the Gas Tax Fund provide direct infrastructure funding to local governments. However, with the exception of active transportation projects, the criteria for funding does not allow for these funds to be used for recreation and parks infrastructure. The Gas Tax Fund for example, requires that local governments complete an integrated community sustainability plan that incorporates the economic, environmental, social and cultural dimensions of sustainability. The gas tax grant criteria however, do not allow funds to be used for cultural and social infrastructural renewal. The public believes (2008) that recreation and parks facilities make a contribution to the quality of the environment, are important in reducing crime, are critical to the development and welfare of children and youth and improve the quality of community life. The Federal Government should be encouraged to modify the eligibility requirements of Federal Gas Tax grants to achieve these social, cultural and environmental outcomes that are integral to the long-term sustainability of communities.
Strategic Directions and Promising Initiatives

In a presentation to Parks and Recreation Ontario (2009) on strategies to reposition our field, John Crompton made the observation that “recreation and parks provision is perceived to be a relatively discretionary, non-essential government service. It is nice to have if it can be afforded.” If this is the prevailing view in Canada then there is still a lot of work ahead. Perception research conducted in Alberta and Ontario (2008) confirmed that the public actually gets it. They clearly understand the value and benefits associated with recreation participation and parks, and agree that they represent essential tools in environmental sustainability and economic, social and community development. There may be a disconnect between the public’s support for recreation and parks and the perceptions of local elected officials that has created a lag in government policy initiatives. Another challenge faced by the field is that bureaucratic institutions are slow to change and difficult to move. The fact that municipalities have a variety of roles and mandates delegated from their provinces and various delivery systems to achieve their mandates makes the task complex and cumbersome. With a growing infrastructure deficit across Canada and diminishing resources at the local level to deal with these issues, choices must be made. Simply put, local governments must make choices between competing interests and recreation and parks advocates need to continue to reposition their services by making compelling arguments about the upstream benefits of investing in recreation as a preventative strategy that will pay dividends in the long-term.

Crompton (2009) suggests a number of useful strategies to successfully reposition our field. Among them are suggestions to develop consistent focused
messages, engage stakeholders as advocates, and develop strategic alliances, change stakeholders’ beliefs about outcomes, assemble scientific and testimonial evidence and change the value perception about our work to illustrate it is an investment not a cost burden.

Over the past two decades the field has been active in undertaking many of the steps necessary to reposition itself but to date the approach has been somewhat fragmented and inconsistent. The development of the Benefits Catalogue (1996) and the Benefits Hub (2010) provide ample scientific evidence of the value and benefits of recreation and parks. Studies on The Use and Benefits of Local Government Recreation and Parks Services (1997, 2008) provide testimonial evidence of the public’s perception and endorsement of the benefits of recreation and parks. In addition, the shift from stand alone recreation and parks departments to alignments with community services in many municipal jurisdictions and strategic alliances between health, justice and social services in the voluntary recreation sector have all been useful strategies in elevating the status of the field.

Creative new initiatives such as ACE Communities in Alberta, the Canadian Parks and Recreation Everybody Gets to Play program, integrated community sustainability planning initiatives in municipalities across Canada, the Canadian Sport for Life program and True Sport are just some examples of efforts that reflect our values, draw attention to the essential nature of recreation and parks services and respond to the need for quality services, expanded access and affordability, and capitalize on strategic partnerships and alliances.
What is needed now is a means to translate the good will these programs create and public recognition of the value and benefits of recreation and parks services into public policy that will elevate their status as an essential service, provide appropriate resources and guarantee their long-term sustainability. To achieve these goals requires collective will and a national strategy aimed at developing targeted and consistent messaging that support local government and provincial voluntary associations in their efforts to effect change.
References


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