

Policy Research Network

The Policy Research Initiative was launched in July 1996 by the Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet of the Government of Canada. The purpose was to examine the public policy pressure points Canadian society is likely to experience over the coming years, identify knowledge gaps and develop a research plan to fill those gaps. The ultimate objective is to build a solid foundation of research that will inform future public policy decisions.

THE CONTEXT

Strengthening policy capacity has become a central issue in the management of Canada's Federal Public Service and a number of initiatives have been undertaken with this goal in mind.

Two such initiatives, the Task Forces on Strengthening the Policy Capacity of the Federal Government and on Managing Horizontal Issues, reached similar conclusions. The policy environment is becoming increasingly complex, requiring greater co-operation and horizontality. And, in recent years, policy development has become more reactive than proactive resulting in a weakened capacity to deal with longer-term strategic and horizontal issues.

The creation of the PRI recognises the need to look beyond the immediate and to work together to prepare today for tomorrow's decisions.

THE PRI PROCESS

Over thirty federal departments and agencies now participate in the PRI.

In Phase I of the project, departments identified issues most likely to create future policy challenges. They also assessed the current state of knowledge about these issues and pinpointed research gaps that will need to be filled to support policy development. In October 1996, the first PRI report was released. The title, "Growth, Human Development, Social Cohesion", reflects the emergence of three key areas of policy challenges.

Four interdepartmental networks each co-chaired by two Assistant Deputy Ministers were established in Phase II. Networks created around Growth, Human Development and Social Cohesion were tasked with developing research workplans that would begin to address knowledge gaps. A fourth network, Global Challenges and Opportunities, was formed to assess the growing linkages between international developments and the domestic agenda and the implications for Canada over the next decade. In addition, a working group with representation from each of the four networks was established to look at adjustment and transition issues as Canada moves to a knowledge-based economy and society.

In June 1997, a Secretariat was created to:

- help integrate the work of the networks;
- find innovative ways to share policy research information;
- build knowledge partnerships with the broader Canadian policy research community; and,
- create linkages with policy researchers in other countries and with international organisations.

EARLY FINDINGS & RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Six major forces of change in Canada over the coming decade are highlighted in the first reports of the PRI. These are:

- globalisation and North American integration;
- technological change and the information revolution;
- environmental pressures;
- demographics: the changing face of Canada;
- the fiscal context; and
- multiple centres of power.

Research in the area of Economic Growth is examining such issues as the role of non-market activities, regional economic development and macro-economic policies, the determinants of productivity growth, and the implications of an ageing population on economic performance.

Human Development research priorities include life path and time allocation patterns of Canadians, characteristics of successful life transitions, factors driving income and earnings inequality and pressures on the health care system.

Social Cohesion, an emerging area of study, has a diverse range of research areas revolving around three themes: societal fault lines; axes of community; and, the implications of changes in social cohesion.

The Global Challenges and Opportunities network has identified international governance and the changing roles and expectations of the federal government as its priority areas for research.

A thematic outline, implementation strategy and research proposals have been developed for the Knowledge Based Economy and Society (KBES) pilot project. The focus is on the evidence regarding the emergence, dynamics and requirements of a knowledge-based economy and society, and on the adjustment and transitions required at all levels from the individual to society as a whole.

REACHING OUT TO THE BROADER COMMUNITY

The first phases of the PRI occurred largely within the federal government at the national level. In the current phase Policy Research, work is focusing on building existing relationships and forging new knowledge partnerships with the regions, other orders of government and non-state players, including researchers in other countries and international organisations. The objective is to strengthen our policy and research capacity by engaging the broader policy research community in the PRI, facilitating information exchange and encouraging the sharing of best practices among those facing similar issues.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the Policy Research Initiative please contact:

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