

# Dignity and Human Rights: Action Towards Eliminating Poverty in Canada

*Presentation to the HUMA Committee Study  
on the federal government's role in reducing poverty*

June 9, 2009

CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE





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### **Our Vision**

- CPJ is committed to seek human flourishing and the integrity of creation as our faithful response to God's call for love, justice and stewardship.
- We envision a world in which individuals, communities, societal institutions and governments all contribute to and benefit from the common good.

### **Our Mission**

- CPJ's mission is to promote *public justice* in Canada by shaping key public policy debates through research and analysis, publishing and public dialogue. CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society, and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God's call for love, justice and stewardship.

### **Public Justice**

- Public Justice is the *political* dimension of loving one's neighbour, caring for creation and achieving the common good, and is particularly the responsibility of government and citizens.

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## Summary

We believe that freedom from poverty is a human right.

We believe in equality among all people.

We believe that everyone is entitled to social and economic security.

We believe in dignity for all!

We also believe that now is the time to end poverty in Canada.

Despite Canada's considerable affluence and resources, poverty continues to be a significant concern. At least 1 in 10 Canadians currently live in poverty, and this rate has not changed substantially over the past 25 years.

On May 22, 2009, Citizens for Public Justice and Canada Without Poverty, announced the official start of Dignity for All: The Campaign for a Poverty-Free Canada. Through this campaign, we are calling for concrete and sustained action by the federal government to combat the structural causes of poverty in Canada, and we intend to help shape the very substance of this action.

This campaign has three goals:

- We want a federal plan for poverty elimination that complements provincial and territorial plans.
- We want a federal anti-poverty Act that ensures enduring federal commitment and accountability for results.
- We want sufficient federal investment in social security for all Canadians.

Poverty robs people of their dignity. It manifests itself in shame, doubt, and fear. And, it is a daily reality for far too many Canadians.

Love for our neighbour and respect for their dignity calls us to work to eliminate poverty. Human rights commitments are founded on the basis of dignity. Poverty is a condition that violates these rights, as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights conventions.

In 2006, the Human Rights Council (HRC) of the UN was mandated to "undertake a universal periodic review ... of the fulfillment by each State of its human rights obligations and commitments." Canada is delivering its response to the Human Rights Council in Geneva today. Among the 68 recommendations presented for the Government of Canada to consider, was the recommendation that Canada implement a national poverty eradication strategy that incorporates a human rights framework. Unfortunately, this recommendation, along with several others dealing specifically with economic and social rights, was rejected.

Seven Canadian provinces have either implemented or are developing poverty reduction strategies. Existing provincial strategies are already making a difference. They are coordinating government programs and eliminating counter-productive practices, publicly reporting on progress, and agreeing to be held accountable for their actions. Strategies in at least three provinces have been accompanied by an urgent call for federal government support.

Poverty in Canada can be eliminated. Today we need to agree that now is the time to act.

## **Recommendations for the HUMA Committee**

Citizens for Public Justice recommends that the Government of Canada:

1. Adopt the target of eliminating poverty in Canada by 2020, along with the vision of creating a Canada which promises dignity, well-being and social inclusion for all.
2. Reconsider its response to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, and instead adopt and implement a comprehensive, integrated federal plan for poverty elimination that incorporates a human rights framework.
3. Adopt and implement a federal Act to eliminate poverty, promote social inclusion and strengthen social security: This Act will ensure an ongoing federal role and responsibility for social development, while demonstrating a lasting federal commitment for action and for accountability to citizens for results.
4. Adopt measures to ensure sufficient federal revenue to invest in social security: Such measures require that taxation policy considers the level of public services required to meet the needs of all Canadians and that government priorities are based on promoting the common good.
5. Implement a fundamental policy principle whereby all economic development proposals are required to specifically address how they contribute to reducing poverty, and giving those that make a significant contribution higher priority in the processes that decide allocation of public dollars for economic development. And, that every major government decision (policy/action/law/regulation) be evaluated against its impact on poverty.

## Introduction

Citizens for Public Justice is a national organization of members inspired by faith to seek justice in Canadian public policy. We are pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, on the subject of the federal government's role in reducing poverty.

CPJ offers congratulations to the HUMA committee for the work that you are doing, and our prayers and best wishes for the success of your efforts.

## Poverty in Canada

Despite Canada's considerable affluence and resources, poverty continues to be a significant concern. At least 1 in 10 Canadians currently live in poverty, and this rate has not changed substantially over the past 25 years.

Now that we are in a recession, the most vulnerable Canadians are at even greater risk. Already, people working full-time at minimum wage are living in poverty (as measured by the low-income cut-off – LICO). The poor are the first to lose their jobs and find it harder to get new work. 60,000 jobs were lost in Ontario alone this month! Social assistance and Employment Insurance (EI) are inadequate to prevent people from living in poverty. As the Canadian economy continues to slump, it is clear that the difficulties faced by poor Canadians will increase. And more Canadians will slide into poverty.

## Dignity for All: The Campaign for Poverty-Free Canada

On May 22, 2009, Citizens for Public Justice and campaign co-founder Canada Without Poverty, announced the official start of Dignity for All: The Campaign for a Poverty-Free Canada.

Dignity for All is built on a number of shared beliefs. We believe that freedom from poverty is a human right. We believe in equality among all people. We believe that everyone is entitled to social and economic security. We believe in dignity for all! We also believe, that **now** is the time to end poverty in Canada.

Nous demandons une action concrète et à long terme de la part du gouvernement fédéral pour combattre les causes structurelles de la pauvreté au Canada.

Dignité pour toutes et tous à trois objectifs:

- Nous voulons un plan fédéral pour l'élimination de la pauvreté complémentaire aux plans provinciaux et territoriaux.
- Nous voulons une loi fédérale contre la pauvreté qui assure un engagement durable du gouvernement fédérale qui garanti son implication et son imputabilité.
- Nous voulons un investissement fédéral suffisant dans la sécurité sociale pour tous les canadiens.

Dignity for All is a collective initiative. To date – in the space of just two weeks – we have received the support of over 55 organizations, as well as almost 500 individual Canadians. Our support base is growing. We understand that as elected politicians you need public support for your efforts. Dignity for All will provide this public groundswell for moving poverty elimination up the political agenda.

We wish to acknowledge that among the campaign's supporters are MPs Tony Martin and Michael Savage, and Senator Hugh Segal. We encourage all members of the HUMA committee and your Parliamentary colleagues to sign on today in support of Dignity for All, at [www.dignityforall.ca](http://www.dignityforall.ca)

## Dignity

Dignity is a core concept for what it means to be human.

For the youngest members of society, living with dignity is having the freedom to enjoy childhood. It is not having to worry about adult arguments over money or whether you'll have winter boots that fit and keep you warm.

For an adult, living with dignity is being able to provide for yourself and your family. It is having the confidence to face the challenges of life, it is knowing that you won't be refused service. Dignity is being able to sleep at night in warmth and comfort, unencumbered by concerns of basic survival.

For everyone, young and old, living with dignity is being part of a community, taking pride in your accomplishments, and being valued for who you are.

Poverty robs people of their dignity. It forces unconscionable decisions between buying the groceries or paying the rent. It manifests itself in shame, doubt, and fear. And, it is a daily reality for far too many Canadians. Many others currently find themselves on the brink, not sure if they will have jobs through to the end of the month, or if they'll have the means to retire.

*So what are we to do?* Love for our neighbour and respect for their dignity calls us to work to eliminate poverty. In doing so, we are faithful to God's vision of Jubilee as laid out in the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament.

The Jubilee principles, which called for periodic redistribution of the means of production and the opportunity for everyone to participate in the economy on an equal footing, are still relevant today. They suggest that it is not enough to provide charity to those living in poverty. Instead, we must create public practices and policies that ensure people have the means to exercise a sustainable livelihood that provides a liveable income. They require that we make sure everyone has access to an adequate income and the resources necessary for well-being even when we cannot secure all we need through paid work. They also indicate that we must exercise care in the use of natural resources and the impact of our actions on the environment, that we must respect the world of which we are a part.

Public justice is the *political* dimension of loving one's neighbour, caring for creation and achieving the common good, and is particularly the responsibility of government and citizens. Public justice means that one of the roles of government is to create policies, programs and structures that reduce poverty and that equitably distribute resources in society so that all people and all parts of society can flourish and fulfill their callings, contributing to the common good.

As a Christian organization, CPJ takes seriously the biblical imperative to create the conditions where no one in the land is in need. For a country as rich as Canada, there is no excuse for growing disparity, for the continued need for food banks or for emergency homeless shelters. We share as a matter of public justice a responsibility to look out for the needs of our neighbours.

## **Human Rights**

Human rights commitments are founded on the basis of dignity. Poverty is a condition that violates these rights, as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights conventions. Poverty impedes people's access to the basic resources necessary for well-being, including adequate and sufficient food and clothing, as well as safe and appropriate housing. Poverty is also an important social determinant of health.

In 2006, the Human Rights Council (HRC) of the UN was mandated to "undertake a universal periodic review ... of the fulfillment by each State of its human rights obligations and commitments." As many of you know, Canada has been under review this year and is, in fact, delivering its response to the Human Rights Council in Geneva today.

Among the 68 recommendations presented for the Government of Canada to consider, was the recommendation that Canada implement a national poverty eradication strategy that incorporates a human rights framework.

Unfortunately, this recommendation (#17), along with several others dealing specifically with economic and social rights, was rejected.

This regrettable response not only fails Canadian citizens, it also undermines the work of this committee and others in your efforts to determine the appropriate role of the federal government in combating poverty in Canada.

## **The Call to Action**

Seven Canadian provinces have either implemented (Quebec, Nfld & Labrador, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Manitoba) or are developing (New Brunswick and PEI) poverty reduction strategies.

The significant advances at the provincial level have been accompanied by an urgent call repeated in at least three provinces. Shawn Skinner, former Minister of Human Resources, Labour and Employment in Newfoundland and Labrador, and Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario, have both said that provincial strategies will only be successful if the federal government supports them. Most recently, Manitoba's strategy, released May 21, explicitly states that "the federal government must be a willing partner."

Perhaps more compelling than the call for federal engagement is the fact that existing provincial strategies are already making a difference. They are coordinating government programs and eliminating counter-productive practices, publicly reporting on progress, and agreeing to be held accountable for their actions.

What is more, by 2007, those living on social assistance in Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador had already seen some improvements. According to the National Council of Welfare, "in the case of the lone parent with a pre-school age child living in Quebec, welfare income for 2007 reached 100 per cent of the Market Basket Measure (MBM), a poverty line measure that takes into account the cost of meeting basic needs in different parts of Canada. In the case of the lone parent with a pre-schooler in Newfoundland and Labrador, welfare income slightly surpassed the MBM, at 103 per cent" These figures are noteworthy when set against the findings in provinces without poverty reduction strategies,

where the same demographic has a welfare income in the range of 65% (Alberta) to 90% (Saskatchewan) of MBM.

As you have heard, Canadians share the view that the federal government has a critical role to play in addressing poverty and that now is the time to act.

## **Recommendations on the Federal Role in Addressing Poverty in Canada**

Based on our 45 year history promoting public justice in Canada, Citizens for Public Justice would like to recommend that the Government of Canada:

- 1. Adopt the target of eliminating poverty in Canada by 2020, along with the vision of creating a Canada which promises dignity, well-being and social inclusion for all.**
- 2. Reconsider its response to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, and instead adopt and implement a comprehensive, integrated federal plan for poverty elimination that incorporates a human rights framework.**

Linked to and in support of current and future provincial and territorial poverty action plans, a federal plan for poverty elimination will provide a pan-Canadian blueprint for reducing and eventually eliminating poverty.

The plan will be built on the “four cornerstones of an effective poverty-reduction strategy” as outlined by the National Council of Welfare. Namely:

- *A long-term **vision and measurable targets and timelines.***
- *A **plan of action and budget** that coordinates initiatives within and across governments and other partners.*
- ***Accountability structures** for ensuring results and for consulting Canadians.*
- *A set of agreed-upon **poverty indicators** that will be used to plan, monitor change and assess progress.*

The plan will contain measures concerning a range of areas, including but not limited to:

- Assurance that all Canadians workers receive a living wage. No person living in Canada should be expected to work a normal work week of 35 to 40 hours and still live in poverty. As a first step to a living wage, the federal government should demonstrate its leadership by ensuring that all of its employees as well as employees of all contracted services, agencies or businesses also meet the same standard. Similarly, in its area of jurisdiction, it should legislate a national living wage.
- Social security for all Canadians, even when they cannot secure all they need through paid work;
- Immediate improvements to Employment Insurance including:
  - standard access rules across the country, set at 360 hours of insurable employment;
  - doubling the available length of benefits, from a maximum of 50 weeks to a maximum of 100 weeks;
  - removing the two week waiting period;
  - raising the rate of coverage from 55% to 60% of insurable earnings; and,



- extending participation to the self-employed.
  - A genuine national childcare and early learning plan that is affordable and accessible to all Canadians; and
  - Targeted supports for Aboriginal Canadians, newcomers and refugees, and other vulnerable populations.
- 3. Adopt and implement a federal Act to eliminate poverty, promote social inclusion and strengthen social security: This Act will ensure an ongoing federal role and responsibility for social development, while demonstrating a lasting federal commitment for action and for accountability to citizens for results.**

Poverty elimination legislation will include the creation of a Minister or Ombudsperson responsible for the poverty portfolio. This person will be accountable for the coordination and coherence among all government departments involved in addressing poverty.

- 4. Adopt measures to ensure sufficient federal revenue to invest in social security: Such measures require that taxation policy considers the level of public services required to meet the needs of all Canadians and that government priorities are based on promoting the common good.**
5. In support of the measures previously outlined, that the federal government **implement a fundamental policy principle whereby all economic development proposals are required to specifically address how they contribute to reducing poverty, and giving those that make a significant contribution higher priority in the processes that decide allocation of public dollars for economic development. And, that every major government decision be evaluated against its impact on poverty.**

## **Conclusion**

Poverty in Canada can be eliminated. Today we need to agree that now is the time to act.

Thank you for your time and consideration.