

Envisioning Canada Without Poverty

A CPJ backgrounder on poverty reduction strategies

May, 2008

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

- CPJ 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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Executive Summary

There is a movement building across Canada. It is a movement motivated by the vision of a place where everyone can live free from poverty, where every person can live life fully and with dignity. This movement has built momentum at the same time as various governments across the world have begun to seriously work at reducing poverty.

Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador have official action plans to reduce poverty and exclusion. Ontario, Nova Scotia and Manitoba are moving towards their own strategies. Civic communities across Canada have engaged in poverty reduction efforts. The talk of poverty reduction has reached the federal level, where a parliamentary committee has begun to study poverty reduction plans and at least one federal party has explicitly named poverty reduction targets that it would pursue were it to form the government.

Other countries have adopted and implemented successful poverty reduction strategies. The Nordic countries have long stood out for achieving low poverty rates and low rates of inequality in income and wealth. Members of the European Union have also begun to move on this front, with Ireland and the United Kingdom successfully combating poverty and social exclusion.

A poverty reduction strategy could include many different policy initiatives in Canada. At its centre, though, a poverty reduction strategy must recognize the inherent dignity of each person and protect the human rights held by each citizen in this country. Public justice calls us to recognize this, alongside the responsibilities citizens and governments hold in promoting just relations and well-being for all.

The movement for reducing poverty in Canada is growing stronger each day. This background paper examines the historical context of current policy and policy proposals in Canada, while also exploring the underlying values and public justice principles behind this movement for a Canada without poverty.

Introduction

There is a movement building across Canada. It is a movement motivated by the vision of a place where everyone can live free from poverty, where every person can live life fully and with dignity. This movement has built momentum at the same time as various governments across the world have begun to seriously work at reducing poverty. The Nordic countries have long stood out for achieving very low rates of poverty and of inequality in incomes and wealth. Now, other countries in the European Union have developed explicit plans to combat poverty and social exclusion.

In Canada, provincial governments in Quebec and in Newfoundland and Labrador have official action plans to reduce poverty and exclusion. Ontario, Nova Scotia and Manitoba are moving towards their own strategies. Civic communities across Canada have engaged in poverty reduction efforts. The talk of poverty reduction has reached the federal level, where a parliamentary committee has begun to study poverty reduction plans and at least one federal party has explicitly named poverty reduction targets that it would pursue were it to form the government.

This background paper examines the policy context, policy proposals, underlying values and public justice principles behind this movement for a Canada without poverty.

1. Policy analysis

The Prevalence of Poverty

Over the past twenty-five years, poverty rates in Canadaⁱ have remained roughly steady for all sectors of society, with the exception of seniors. Seniors benefited from targeted policies begun in the 1960s to reduce their poverty levels.ⁱⁱ Every other age group has maintained poverty rates that, while varying cyclically along with unemployment, have stayed relatively close to 15%.¹ In 2005, 15.3% of all Canadians – more than 4.9 million people – had before-tax incomesⁱⁱⁱ below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) rate as measured by Statistics Canada.²

The depth of the problem of poverty is reflected in hunger and housing insecurity. In just one month of 2006, 753,458 Canadians needed to use a food bank, and fully one-third of Canadian food banks had difficulty meeting demand.³ Food banks reported that while 53.5% of recipients received their primary income from social assistance, 13.4% of recipients have employment earnings as their primary source of income.

In 2001, there were 1.5 million Canadians in core housing need; that is, they fell below standards set for adequacy, suitability and affordability.⁴ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) defines adequate housing as residences not requiring major repairs, while suitable housing is having enough bedrooms for the size of the household and affordable housing is spending less than 30% of before tax

ⁱ Canada has no official definition of poverty. Many analysts use Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) to classify individuals and families as poor. The LICO indicates the level at which "straitened circumstances" may result because a greater portion of income is spent on basics than for the average family of similar size. The LICO therefore varies according to family size and location. LICO is calculated both before and after-tax; both measures are used as unofficial poverty rates.

ⁱⁱ According to the National Council of Welfare, the poverty rate for seniors dropped from 34.1% in 1980 to 14.5% in 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ 10.8% of Canadians had after-tax incomes below the LICO – more than 3.4 million people.

household income on rent.⁵ Housing affordability problems increased in 2004, as one in seven Canadian households spent 30% or more of their income on housing.⁶

A recent calculation in January 2007 by the Canadian Council on Social Development showed that “almost one-quarter of Canadian households – more than 2,700,000 households – are paying too much of their income to keep a roof over their heads.”⁷ A nationwide affordability crisis is emerging as tenant incomes are falling and rents are rising faster than inflation. Housing insecurity, coupled with income insecurity, has intensified the widespread and rapid growth of homelessness in Canada. In Vancouver, there has been significant growth in the number of homeless people counted region-wide, almost doubling from 1,121 persons in 2002 to 2,174 persons in the 2005 Homeless Count.⁸ Shelters face a major challenge as they are overused and under-supported. The Ottawa 2006 Report Card on Ending Homelessness showed that 9,010 people used the shelter system in 2006 in Ottawa compared to 8,853 a year earlier, an increase of 1.8%.⁹ The report also found that more children in families stayed in shelters, 1,163 compared to 1,035 in 2005, reflecting more families experiencing homelessness.¹⁰ Canada’s 21st century homelessness crisis is a symptom of deepening poverty, reflecting the erosion of housing security and the increasing need for affordable housing.

The past decade was a period of strong economic growth. Canada’s Gross Domestic Product increased by 27% in real terms between 1995 and 2005.¹¹ Employment rates were high during this period and the unemployment rate dropped to levels that had not been seen in thirty years. Yet poverty rates did not decline at the same rate. Indeed, in 2005, child and family poverty rates remained higher than they were in 1989, when the House of Commons declared its unanimous support for eliminating child poverty in Canada.

The hard reality is that Canadians are working more; yet for most Canadians, this has not translated into higher incomes. Rather, the majority of Canadian households are working longer hours simply to maintain the standard of living that households had in the 1970s. On average, Canadian families with children are putting in 200 hours more each year at work. Only the top ten percent of households have seen a real increase in their incomes. The bottom forty percent are working longer but actually earning less than households earned a generation ago.¹²

This reality of economic growth failing to deliver a decent quality of life for so many households has added urgency to calls for focused efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Some progress has been made in reducing low income rates among seniors. And over the past several years, Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador have achieved substantial reductions in child poverty rates. International experience also demonstrates that it is possible to reduce the rate and depth of poverty far below the levels that exist in Canada.

The context for poverty reduction in Canada

Current Federal Landscape

At present, Canada has no national program aimed at reducing or preventing poverty. In the past, the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), which was created in 1966, provided a mechanism by which the federal government could support provincial efforts aimed at alleviating and preventing poverty. Under the CAP, provincial spending on social programs which fell under the terms of the program was matched dollar for dollar by the federal government. In 1996, the federal government unilaterally ended the Canada Assistance Plan, replacing it with a block fund called the Canada Health and Social Transfer. The elimination of the CAP, as well as the federal government’s withdrawal from building new affordable

housing, created serious tensions between the federal and the provincial and territorial governments, which have since made it difficult to coordinate Canada-wide efforts around social development.

Canada made a specific international commitment to poverty eradication, however, at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995. This included a pledge to give greater focus to public efforts to eradicate absolute poverty. Chapter 2 of the *Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development* spelled out what this commitment entailed:

Formulating or strengthening, preferably by 1996, and implementing national poverty eradication plans to address the structural causes of poverty, encompassing action on the local, national, subregional, regional and international levels. These plans should establish, within each national context, strategies and affordable time-bound goals and targets for the substantial reduction of overall poverty and the eradication of absolute poverty. In the context of national plans, particular attention should be given to employment creation as a means of eradicating poverty, giving appropriate consideration to health and education, assigning a higher priority to basic social services, generating household income, and promoting access to productive assets and economic opportunities.¹³

At the ten year review of the World Summit, the federal government pointed to the National Child Benefit (NCB) as an example of how Canada has sought to implement the agreement.¹⁴ The NCB was launched as part of the National Children's Agenda, which sought to establish a new working relationship in the context of the federal government and provincial and territorial agreements. It was intended to provide a framework with goals, strategy, coordination processes for governmental and non-governmental efforts, and clear measures of outcomes.¹⁵

Under the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS) program, the federal government took over a greater responsibility for income security for low-income families with children. Provincial and territorial governments were enabled to reduce social assistance payments to families with children equal to the increased value of federal investments in the NCBS, but agreed that those savings would be invested in new or expanded programs and services for families with children.

Federal, provincial and territorial governments, as well as national Aboriginal organizations, reported annually on their investments in programs and services for families with children. Some of the NCB reports sought to gauge the impact of the program on its two principle objectives – to reduce the rate and depth of child poverty and to increase workforce attachment of parents in low income households. But the reporting had no clearly defined targets for either of these goals.

The National Children's Agenda fell short of being a poverty reduction strategy, as it focused on determining what was necessary for the well-being of children. It does, however, provide one example of coordinating social development across different levels of government in Canada in the post-CAP era.

Currently, at the federal level, the Liberal Party has formally committed to develop a poverty reduction strategy if it forms the government.¹⁶ The New Democratic Party and the Bloc Quebecois have supported the idea of concerted efforts toward poverty reduction, although the Bloc would not support federal leadership on poverty reduction. The present Conservative government has not committed to poverty reduction. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources and Social Development is holding hearings on poverty reduction strategies.¹⁷

Provincial poverty reduction strategies

Quebec

Several provinces, however, have launched provincial efforts at poverty reduction. In most of these cases, strong citizen-led advocacy has moved provincial governments. In 2002, Quebec passed an Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion. This legislation was the result of three years of community-level mobilization and more than 200,000 signatures of support for a proposed law to eradicate poverty, drafted by citizens. That led to unanimous support in the National Assembly for a bill to combat poverty and social exclusion, which eventually became law. The act was not identical to the draft legislation developed by citizens, but was clearly influenced by their efforts.

The Act explicitly references human rights commitments in its preamble:

WHEREAS according to the principles set out by the Charter of human rights and freedoms, respect for the dignity of human beings and recognition of the rights and freedoms they possess constitute the foundation of justice and peace;

WHEREAS poverty and social exclusion may constitute obstacles to the protection of and respect for human dignity;

WHEREAS the effects of poverty and social exclusion impede the economic and social development of Quebec society as a whole and threaten its cohesion and equilibrium;

WHEREAS the fight against poverty and social exclusion is a national imperative within the spirit of a universal movement which seeks to enhance the social, cultural and economic development of all human beings;

WHEREAS persons living in poverty and social exclusion are the first to act to improve their situation and that of their families, and whereas such improvement is linked to the social, cultural and economic development of the entire community;

WHEREAS it is appropriate to affirm the desire of Quebec society as a whole to act in a coordinated manner and pursue a course of action designed to combat poverty and social exclusion.¹⁸

The bill created a national strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion, called for the creation of an advisory body and of an Observatory to monitor progress.^{iv} The overall aim of the strategy is to make Quebec “one of the industrialized nations having the least number of persons living in poverty” by 2013. The goals of the strategy are:

1. To promote respect for and protection of the dignity of persons living in poverty and combat prejudices in their regard.
2. To improve the economic and social situation of persons and families living in poverty and social exclusion.
3. To reduce the inequalities that may be detrimental to social cohesion.
4. To encourage persons and families living in poverty to participate in community life and social development.
5. To develop and reinforce the sense of solidarity throughout Quebec so that society as a whole may participate in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.¹⁹

^{iv} The Observatory has not been created by the government. In its place, the government established a Centre for Research on Poverty and Social Exclusion.

The legislation also names five axes on which the national strategy is to be based: “preventing poverty and social exclusion, with a focus on developing the potential of individuals; strengthening the social and economic safety net; promoting access to employment and increasing the attractiveness of work; promoting the involvement of society as a whole; and ensuring consistent and coherent intervention at all levels.”²⁰

The legislation requires government consultation on the development of an action plan and specifies that persons in situations of poverty and exclusion be included in the process. The government introduced its action plan in April 2004 – nearly a year later than the legislation called for. The plan, entitled *Reconciling Freedom and Social Justice: A Challenge for the Future*, follows the five axes. The focus is summarized by the Minister of Employment and Social Solidarity, Sam Hamid, in the third annual progress report:

Education, training, employment and solidarity are at the core of sustainable solutions to fight the poverty that we are determined to eliminate. This is why we want to make employment more attractive, combat early school-leaving and social exclusion, prevent poverty and provide people with better support in enhancing their social and vocational self-reliance.²¹

The plan set aside \$2.5 billion over five years for poverty reduction efforts. It aimed to improve access to Quebec’s public pharmacare program, provide funding to build new affordable housing, create rent supplements and adapt housing for people with disabilities, among other housing measures. Measures to prevent poverty have focused on families with children and youth.

The government fully indexed social assistance rates to inflation for persons unable to work. But rates for persons able to work were only partially indexed, something which anti-poverty groups have claimed contravenes the legislation. Section 15 of the legislation specifies that the government is to “eliminate the reductions of benefits” and “introduce the minimum benefit principle, a threshold below which benefits cannot be reduced by reason of the application of administrative penalties, setoff or a combination of both.”²²

In addition to the consultative committee created under Quebec’s anti-poverty legislation, several citizen groups maintain pressure on the government to live up to its commitments under the law. These include the Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté and FRAPRU, a housing and homelessness organization.²³

Newfoundland and Labrador

In 2006, Newfoundland and Labrador launched a provincial poverty reduction strategy, the result of an election pledge by the Progressive Conservative government. It built upon previous community and government collaboration around social development. In its 2005 Speech from the Throne, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador announced its intent to transform Newfoundland and Labrador from the province with the most poverty to the province with the least poverty within ten years.

In June 2006, after several months of community consultations, focus groups and public input, the government released *Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*.²⁴ The action plan is being implemented by an interministerial committee, led by the Minister for Human Resources, Labour and Employment. It focuses on groups that are disproportionately impacted by poverty: families led by single mothers, single people, people aged 55-64, persons with disabilities and Aboriginal

peoples. The government's goals include: improved access to and coordination of services for those with low incomes; a stronger social safety net; improved earned incomes; increased emphasis on early childhood development; and a better educated population. The plan also lays out a schedule of ongoing consultations and monitoring and evaluation, measured by success in achieving medium term objectives.

The government stated that it would begin by using the after-tax LICO as baseline data for monitoring progress of its poverty reduction strategy, while it also worked at developing supplemental indicators. Among those potential indicators, the action plan speaks of a modified version of the Market Basket Measure, tailored to the realities of Newfoundland and Labrador. It also discusses shorter term indicators, including "the percentage of Income Support clients with employment earnings, the percentage of the population in receipt of Income Support, the percentage of people under 30 in receipt of Income Support, the number of subsidized licensed child care spaces, the high school graduate rate, and the post-secondary participation rate."²⁵

Ontario and Nova Scotia

In 2007, the governments of Ontario and of Nova Scotia each pledged to create provincial poverty reduction strategies. In both these provinces, broad and persistent advocacy from community groups lay behind these pledges.

Municipal Efforts

At the municipal level, several cities have launched municipal task forces for poverty reduction, including Kingston and Hamilton, Ontario. Others, like Calgary, Alberta, have adopted multi-year plans to end homelessness. Through the Vibrant Communities Project at the Tamarack Institute, fifteen community-based efforts to develop comprehensive, community-level, poverty reduction strategies have been underway for several years.²⁶ "The challenge for communities interested in substantially reducing poverty," explains Vibrant Communities, "is to identify and use community-based strategies that can maximize the opportunities for low income families to create their own unique mix of sustainable incomes."²⁷ Vibrant Communities uses a framework that looks at four major pathways by which persons and families can achieve sustainable incomes^v:

Market-based pathways that involve progressive workplace practices, education and training opportunities, and opportunities for self-employment income;

Income support pathways that link residents with serious barriers to full employment to government programs that top up their modest incomes through existing programs;

Income from Financial Assets pathways that provide opportunities for people to create, expand and manage financial assets that strengthen their financial security and establish a complementary income stream;

Saved Income pathways that assist low income residents to reduce the costs of major household expenditures (e.g. housing, medical benefits, transportation, education) and allowing them to stretch their limited budget.²⁸

^v Tamarack describes a sustained income as having enough "to pay for the basic necessities of life, to invest in the future, and to save for a rainy day."

Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the European Union

The European Union (EU) launched the Lisbon Strategy in March 2003, seeking to integrate economic, social and environmental policies for sustainable development throughout the EU. Part of the strategy focused directly on poverty and social exclusion, as governments recognized at the 2000 Lisbon Summit that poverty was unacceptably high in the EU. In response, they adopted the goal of significant progress towards eradicating poverty by 2010. "Employment and Social Affairs Ministers endorsed the Commission's plan for Member States to co-ordinate their social protection policies within a single coherent framework. *Under the plan, national action plans will set targets for reducing the number of people significantly at risk of poverty and social exclusion, with measures to help the most vulnerable as one of the priorities.*"²⁹

EU countries have created National Action Plans to combat poverty and social exclusion, which are reported on and updated every two years. In its common outline for reporting on the 2003-2005 National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion, the EU emphasizes the importance of targets:

Setting targets is important for a number of reasons. In particular targets can be:

- a significant political statement of purpose and ambition in terms of eradicating poverty and social exclusion which can lead to increased policy effort,
- a goal against which to measure progress and thus a means of creating a dynamic process characterized by openness and accountability,
- a tool for promoting awareness of the process and thus for encouraging and mobilizing all actors in support of it,
- a focal point around which to concentrate the efforts of policy makers and practitioners.³⁰

The common outline distinguishes between two types of targets, performance or outcome targets and policy effort targets. Outcome targets, the report explains, focus on things like "achieving specified reductions in overall poverty levels or in child poverty, or increasing the number of people in employment by a specified amount, or halving the number of welfare recipients, or halving the number of early school drop outs, or decreasing the number of unhealthy years of life by a specified percentage and so on."³¹ Policy effort targets cover such things as "increasing the number of homeless assisted, ensuring that all immigrants can participate in an integration programme, ensuring that all socially excluded people are assisted by social services within one year, et cetera."³² The common outline notes that outcome targets are strongly preferred, while also recognizing the place of policy effort targets in national action plans.

The EU's common outline for national action plans also identifies characteristics of useful targets, based on experience:

- **ambitious but achievable:** targets should imply significant progress but should also be realistic,
- **relevant:** achieving the target should contribute significantly to meeting a key objective,
- **intelligible:** targets should be understandable and should make sense to the average person,
- **quantified and measurable:** a target should be specific and the data should be available to measure whether it is being achieved,
- **time specific:** the period of time over which it is intended that the target should be achieved should be specified.³³

The EU is a federation of independent states, so coordinating action on poverty and social exclusion requires a process of collaboration. The EU has developed what they call an Open Method of Coordination to do this. First developed in the late 1990s to guide action on the European Employment Strategy, the Open Method of Coordination has been applied to broad economic and social strategies as well as to efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion. The process can be described as follows:

As a process, the OMC starts with the formulation of guidelines, followed by agreement on a list of indicators. National plans are then developed using the agreed list of indicators and benchmarks. They are used to compare national results and identify best or good practices. The final step is the monitoring, peer-review, and evaluation stage of the process. This should provide learning opportunities that feed back into the development of national policy and the reformulation of guidelines.³⁴

A strength of the Open Method is that it defines common goals and creates benchmarks and indicators to evaluate progress across different jurisdictions while allowing members states the freedom to develop their own national action plans. The process also allows for policy learning to update and make changes based on experience. A weakness appears to be that the learning has remained at a bureaucratic level without creating opportunities for domestic groups to fully engage in the policy development and evaluation processes.³⁵

Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) are national examples that have drawn particular attention in Canada. The Irish example, for instance, influenced the development of Newfoundland and Labrador's poverty reduction strategy. And the UK's efforts, with the goal of eliminating child poverty within twenty years, have resonated with groups like Campaign 2000, the cross-Canada coalition focused on eliminating child and family poverty in Canada.

Ireland

Ireland was one of the first countries to implement a national action plan to combat poverty, introducing its first plan in 1997. While the EU benchmark indicator for poverty reduction is 60% of median income, Ireland's focus has been on improving the incomes of those experiencing the deepest poverty. It created an indicator of extreme deprivation, what it calls "consistent poverty." This is a measure of households whose incomes fall below the EU's 60% of median income threshold and who also cannot afford certain goods and/or services deemed essential to live in modern Ireland. While Ireland has achieved notable success in meeting its goals to reduce consistent poverty, the government acknowledges that it has had less success in reducing the number of households below the European poverty threshold.

United Kingdom

In the UK, the Blair government's commitment to end child poverty, particularly its interim targets of cutting the rate of child poverty by 25% within five years and by 50% within ten years, has had a powerful influence on Canadian anti-poverty efforts. The UK has used the EU poverty threshold as its lead indicator for poverty reduction. The fact that the UK came close to meeting its first goal generated great interest. Campaign 2000 was among the first organizations to call for Canadian government commitments to the same kind of targets that the Blair government set. An Ontario coalition pushing for strong poverty reduction commitments in that province has placed those targets right in its name, "25 in 5: The Network for Poverty Reduction."

Frameworks for a poverty reduction strategy

An International Human Rights Perspective

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) begins with the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”³⁶ This recognition of the human dignity of each person is the foundation for the civil, political, social and cultural rights enumerated in the UDHR and elaborated on in other international human rights instruments. It is reflected in Article 22 of the UDHR, which states: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.”³⁷

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) goes into greater depth regarding the social, economic and cultural rights deemed essential to respect the dignity of each person. These rights are:

- The right to self-determination.
- The right to work, to freely choose one’s work, to work in safe conditions and to be paid enough to enjoy a decent standard of living.
- The right to protection and assistance to families, including paid maternity leave and adequate social security benefits.
- The right to a decent standard of living including adequate food, clothing and housing.
- The right to be free from hunger.
- The right to social insurance.
- The right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health.
- The right to an education, including free primary, and the “progressive introduction of free education” at the secondary and post-secondary levels.³⁸
- The right to take part in cultural life.³⁹

In Canada, human rights tend to enter into social policy in one of two ways: individuals and groups go before the courts to force government compliance with human rights agreements, or groups turn to international human rights bodies to draw attention to Canada’s failure to meet its human rights commitments. Unfortunately, neither of these routes has proven very effective in achieving fuller implementation of socio-economic human rights – particularly those relating to an adequate standard of living.

The record of court decisions is mixed. Canada has not transformed international agreements such as the ICESCR into law.⁴⁰ So court challenges rely on Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which provides protection under the law without discrimination on the basis of personal characteristics. So far, no court has recognized poverty as a condition that would fall under Section 15 of the Charter. However, the related concept of exclusion has been considered by courts and provides a potential link with poverty as grounds for applying to the courts for more full recognition of basic economic, social and cultural rights.

The other approach has been based on periodic reviews of Canada’s compliance with its human rights commitments. These often lead to strong criticism from international monitors for Canada’s lack of compliance, but result in little action from governments.

As noted above, Canada has not transformed many of its international human rights commitments into law.^{vi} The Government has maintained that compliance with these commitments can be achieved through policies and programs. But as Pearl Eliadis observes, compliance through the policy approach is not systematic:

Canada generally takes the position that the failure to transform international obligations into domestic law is not important, because legislation is not always required to fulfill an international commitment. The argument is that Canada's many social programs and policies can and do fill the gap. Indeed, the Canadian government frequently takes this position when it appears before international committees that oversee State compliance with international covenants. In order for this argument to hold water, Canada would have to take the position that international standards are binding in practice at the policy level. But adherence to international standards in our policy instruments is not, in fact, federal government policy. In its guidelines to the federal public service, the Privy Council Office directs policy makers to ensure "conformity" with international obligations in the lawmaking process, but as regards the burgeoning "tool kit" of other instruments (say, guidelines, partnerships, programs, voluntary standards, etc.), policy makers are simply encouraged to consider the "effects" of international obligations.⁴¹

Eliadis notes that one route for Canada to more fully comply with its obligations regarding economic, social and cultural rights would be to explicitly integrate those commitments into social and economic policymaking. She also observes that "the Canada Social Transfer offers a practical opportunity to address poverty and social exclusion through co-operative federalism."⁴²

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights released a discussion paper in 2004 on a human rights perspective on poverty reduction strategies, *Human Rights and Poverty Reduction: A conceptual framework*.⁴³ The approach they outline links the normative basis of human rights as respect for human dignity with the capabilities approach to human development as a bridge between human rights and poverty reduction.

The paper indicates that the notion of progressive realization found in international human rights instruments is helpful in framing efforts to reduce poverty because it introduces a time dimension into poverty reduction strategies. It also allows for setting priorities to concentrate efforts over time.⁴⁴ However, several conditions must be applied to this recognition of a time dimension, so that it does not become an excuse for inaction:

- First, governments must make **a serious commitment** to the goal of poverty reduction. The paper notes that significant progress can often be made even without new resources, as "it may be possible to make rapid progress by improving the efficiency of resource use – for example, by scaling down expenditure on unproductive activities and by reducing spending on activities whose benefit goes disproportionately to the rich."⁴⁵
- Second, there needs to be **a time-bound action plan**. "The plan must spell out when and how the State hopes to arrive at the realization of rights."⁴⁶

^{vi} By contrast, Pearl Eliadis offers the examples of Belgium and France where these international obligations have been written into legislation. Quebec's anti-poverty legislation offers a Canadian example where provincial legislation incorporates international human rights principles into law.

- Third, the plan must include a series of **intermediate targets**. Recognizing that the full realization of rights may take longer than the term of a government, these intermediate targets are the benchmark by which the government can be held accountable.
- Fourth, the state will have to identify **indicators** in order to create targets. “Realistic time-bound targets will have to be set in relation to each indicator so as to serve as benchmarks.”⁴⁷

Poverty indicators

The aim of indicators, as noted in *Human Rights and Poverty Reduction*, is to track progress in meeting policy targets. In the case of poverty reduction strategies, indicators should reflect basic social, economic and cultural rights, such as the right to an adequate standard of living, to work that provides an adequate standard of living, to housing, to be free from hunger, etc. “A social indicator is basically a statistic which tells us something about an aspect of wellbeing within an area or group. Moreover, if it is tracked or monitored over time **it should give us an accurate idea whether or not things are improving, static or declining** with respect to the aspect of wellbeing that it measures.”⁴⁸

The European Union’s distinction between outcome targets (e.g. the number of children in poverty) and policy effort targets (e.g. the number of homeless people assisted) is relevant for a discussion of indicators. Appropriate indicators are needed to track progress on reaching outcome targets and to assess policy effort targets.

A report on poverty reduction indicators for the Republic of Ireland suggests the following list of criteria for identifying poverty reduction indicators. It states that an indicator should:

1. Have something to do with poverty (not just health, etc):
 - Is more prevalent amongst those on low incomes.
 - Is not entirely an issue of free choice.
2. Relate to something that one wants to monitor:
 - Is a matter of concern.
 - Is important in its own right.
 - Ideally, is indicative of wider conditions.
3. Be quantifiable on a regular and repeatable basis:
 - Is capable of precise definition.
 - Relevant, reliable and authoritative data is available (or at least obtainable).
 - Can be broken down by income group or equivalent (cf. criterion 1 above).
 - Data will be available on the same basis in the future.
4. Other:
 - Understandable, such that it cannot be misinterpreted easily.
 - Robust to changes in government administrative rules.⁴⁹

There is also the question of how to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of poverty in setting targets, timelines and indicators. Income indicators typically become the sole focus of attention. But the lack of access to affordable housing or to social services such as child care, dental care and pharmaceutical drug coverage also limit the capabilities of people in realizing acceptable levels of well-being. The list of basic economic, social and cultural rights named in the major international human rights instruments can point toward the set of targets and associated indicators that are needed:

- The right to basic economic security suggests targets for reducing the number of people with low incomes.

- The right to work that provides economic security suggests targets for reducing the number of people working in low-paid jobs.
- The right to housing suggests targets for reducing people who experience homelessness and the number of households in core housing need.
- The right to food suggests targets related to reducing the number of people experiencing hunger and households that are food insecure (e.g. needing to rely on food banks and other emergency food programs).
- The right to the highest attainable levels of physical and mental health suggest outcome indicators relating to physical and mental health as well as policy effort indicators relating to people's capability to access dental and health services and prescription drugs.
- The right to education suggests outcome and policy effort targets around participation in schooling at different levels (such as post-secondary), graduation rates, literacy and numeracy.
- Participation in cultural life suggests targets relating to people's effective choice in participating in cultural life, e.g. children's participation in arts and sporting programs and people's ability to attend community cultural activities.⁵⁰

There are many social and economic statistics regularly produced in Canada that could serve as poverty reduction indicators. Statistics Canada produces a number of low income indicators, including the LICOs and the Low Income Measure (LIM), both before and after tax. The LICOs are based on average household expenditures on food, clothing and shelter to derive low income thresholds for households of different size in communities of different size. The LIMs provide a low income threshold that is one-half of median income for households of different size. In addition to these measures, Human Resources and Social Development Canada produces and periodically releases low income data based on the Market Basket Measure, which produces low income thresholds based on the cost of a basket of goods and services. One advantage of this measure is that it can reflect the cost of living in specific cities throughout Canada.

These low income indicators can be used to track the depth of poverty for those living below the threshold. The LICOs have been used to track the persistence of poverty – the number of years that households spend in poverty. They have also been used to map the concentration of low income within communities.

A number of indicators of inequality already exist, including the ratio of income between the richest and poorest households, the ratio of median household income to income of poor households, and the Gini coefficient.

Canada Mortgage and Housing produces data on core housing need, defined as households spending more than thirty percent of household income on housing and living in housing that is in need of major repair or is inadequate for the size of the household. This is both an indicator of economic hardship and of risk of homelessness.

Data exist to track the percentage of low wage jobs – those paying less than two-thirds of median wages. UNICEF has identified a close correlation between the percentage of low wage jobs and the rate of child and family poverty.

These are just a sample of indicators that could be used to set targets for a national poverty reduction strategy. A serious commitment to poverty reduction would incorporate such indicators in the monitoring, evaluation and updating of action plans to reduce poverty. An example of how this can work is found in the UK's Low Pay Commission, created when the UK introduced a national minimum wage in 1999.⁵¹ The commission tracks the impact of the minimum wage on employment, economic activity and poverty reduction and proposes the rate at which the minimum wage should be increased.

Possibilities for Canada

Within the Canadian context of federal-provincial-territorial overlap in areas of socio-economic policy, it has proven difficult to implement new social policies, let alone safeguard programs that have already been put in place. The dismantling of the Canada Assistance Plan and the federal government's withdrawal from the field of social housing construction, both part of efforts in the 1990s to eliminate fiscal deficits, are two examples of the difficulty of safeguarding programs.

The principle of progressive realization points to a way for Canada to realize human rights while giving Canada's provinces and territories flexibility to move on the specific policy areas deemed to be priorities for their citizens and residents. Following the EU's Open Method of Coordination in social development, where member states agree on broad objectives and pursue national strategies to achieve those goals, Canadian governments could pursue a similar track. The National Children's Agenda provides an example from Canadian experience where such an approach has been used, although it lacked clear policy targets.

For example, the federal government could move forward to make the federal minimum wage a living wage, strengthen basic income security, and improve the accessibility and adequacy of employment insurance. The federal, provincial and territorial governments could revision the Canada Social Transfer as a tool for achieving the more full realization of economic, social and cultural rights in areas of social development. A federal government commitment to increase base transfers through the Canada Social Transfer would need to be matched by provincial and territorial commitments to make new investments in any one of an agreed set of social development priorities.

With regards to the social development element, increases to the Canada Social Transfer and/or the Canada Health Transfer above the scheduled increases could be tied to a commitment by provinces and territories to actions such as creating more affordable early learning and child care spaces, creating a platform for universal dental and/or prescription drug coverage, reducing post-secondary tuition costs, and making available more affordable housing. Following Campaign 2000's recommendation for provincial and territorial investments in key policy areas, provinces and territories would likewise add their own new resources to the resources flowing through the federal government.

Accountability for how the money will be used is important. But this needs to go beyond merely tracking how money is spent. Strategies to combat poverty and social inclusion must incorporate targets, timelines and indicators of success in reaching outcome objectives. For example, a province choosing to invest in early learning and child care would need to name its objectives – perhaps ensuring a certain number of licensed spaces for children less than 12 years of age, reducing the cost to parents of licensed, quality child care, and/or increasing the wages and training of early childhood educators. Or, funds could be used to reach targets around eliminating homelessness and reducing the number of households in core housing need. Other provinces might invest in public dental and drug insurance programs with targets around assuring all residents have access to an insurance program for those services. This way, governments and citizens would be able to track success in reaching those objectives

– achieving a progressive realization of human rights in the domains identified as priorities by their province or territory. And they would be able to see what additional actions and investments need to be taken.

Canadian Proposals

Poverty reduction strategies, complete with specific outlines for action, have been put forward by several Canadian organizations as ways to successfully alleviate poverty in Canada.

National Council of Welfare

In 2007, the National Council of Welfare, an advisory body to the federal Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, released *Solving Poverty: Four Cornerstones of a Workable National Strategy for Canada*.⁵² The report acknowledges Canada's commitments to reduce poverty, but notes that poverty is not as high on Canada's agenda as it is in other countries. Based on a review of international, provincial and other anti-poverty initiatives, the report identifies four cornerstones of a workable national strategy:

1. A national anti-poverty strategy with a long-term vision and measurable targets and timelines.
2. A plan of action and budget that coordinates initiatives within and across governments and other partners.
3. A government accountability structure for ensuring results and for consulting Canadians in the design, implementation and evaluation of the actions that will affect them.
4. A set of agreed upon poverty indicators that will be used to plan, monitor change and assess progress.⁵³

Campaign 2000

Campaign 2000, the national network of more than 100 organizations (including CPJ) working for an end to child poverty in Canada, released a policy paper on poverty reduction in 2007. *Summoned to Stewardship: Make Poverty Reduction a Collective Legacy* draws on cross-Canada consultations to present a framework for poverty reduction in Canada.⁵⁴ Highlighting the importance of political will, the report calls on governments to set firm commitments to reduce poverty by 25% within five years and by 50% within ten years. The document identifies four principles for a national action plan:

- 1. The principle of sustaining employment** – an assurance that any parent or adult working full-time, full-year for 30 hours or more per week (1500 hours per year) can have a living standard out of poverty. This also includes providing a full child benefit of \$5,100^{vii} a year for each child in low income families and work tax credits of \$2,400 a year.
- 2. The principle of a basic income system for persons with disabilities** – People with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than other Canadians. Campaign 2000 supports setting disability benefits equal to the social security system for seniors.
- 3. The principle of transitional support with decency and dignity** – The historic tendency to divide people in poverty into “deserving” and “undeserving” is still with us. A poverty reduction strategy must establish just differentials between those with employment incomes and families with children whose parents are unavailable for employment due to temporary or extended difficulties.
- 4. The principle of available and affordable essential resources** in four areas to protect family budgets and promote pathways to equal opportunities for all children. It is important to restore access to Employment Insurance (EI) eligibility and protection; provide continued access to

^{vii} 2007 dollars.

prescription drug and dental benefits; prevent the high costs of housing from draining the food budgets of low income families; and ensure universal access to high quality learning and care for all children during the early years.⁵⁵

Summoned to Stewardship identifies actions that need to be taken by the federal government and provincial governments. At the federal level, Campaign 2000 calls for increased child benefits, increased employment tax credits, a \$10 an hour federal minimum wage, investments in early learning and child care, social housing and a more accessible employment insurance system. Provincial elements of the strategy likewise include raising the minimum wage to \$10 an hour with indexation, indexing social assistance rates to inflation plus raising them by 3% a year to close the gap between income assistance and the low income cutoffs, and investing provincial revenues in affordable housing, early learning and child care, and provincial drug and dental benefits.

Campaign 2000 commissioned research to simulate the impact of several policy initiatives included in its poverty reduction framework. That research found that three measures – a \$10 an hour minimum wage, a child benefit of \$5,100 and a work tax credit of up to \$2,400 – would achieve a 35-40% reduction in child poverty rates. That projected level of reduction reflects the 40% decline in child poverty in Quebec, which introduced its own family benefit program and work income tax credits. *Summoned to Stewardship* observes, however, that it will be more challenging to meet the ten year target of a 50% reduction:

The struggle for poverty reduction to 2017 and beyond will require the adoption of good job strategies, better access of workers to collective representation and protection, more socially cohesive distributions of incomes, and restored fiscal capacities for public investment in essential common goods.⁵⁶

Le collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté

Le Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté is a province-wide network which came together to push for a law to eradicate poverty in Quebec and coordinated many of the citizen initiatives that led to the law's adoption. Since the Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion came into effect, the Collectif has continued to mobilize community groups, deepen its policy analysis, propose policy changes, monitor government initiatives and advocate for full implementation of the law.

The Collectif's socio-economic policy analysis is based on the premise that when your income from private sources is not enough to meet basic needs or rise above poverty, you should be a net recipient of public income. When your income from private sources is more than enough to rise above poverty, you become a net contributor to public revenue.⁵⁷ They use this framework to analyze recent fiscal policy decisions at the federal and provincial level. Welfare incomes are too low to meet basic needs, leaving people in a deficit position. Public policies allow welfare recipients to earn some income, but the threshold at which a dollar of earned income leads to a reduction in welfare income remains below the basic needs level of income. The minimum wage is not high enough to exit poverty. Yet, the income level where people begin to make net contributions to public revenue occurs at very low levels. At the other end, the tax cuts of the late-90s and early 2000s reduced the level of contribution to public revenues for households with high incomes.

This framework allows the Collectif to present a coherent program of actions needed to eliminate poverty. First, cuts to basic welfare rates must be ended. Second, basic welfare rates must be raised high enough to cover basic needs. Third, the minimum wage needs to be increased to the point where an

individual working full-time earns enough to live free of poverty. Fourth, net tax contributions should begin at the point where income from private sources is enough to exit poverty. Fifth, income supports need to be added for wage earners whose income from employment is not enough to reach the poverty line. Sixth, the tax system needs to be made more progressive so that those with greater private resources make a greater contribution to public revenue.

In late 2007, the Collectif launched a campaign called Common Mission: Building a Poverty-Free Quebec. The campaign stresses a common desire for a poverty-free society and seeks to achieve action by the National Assembly on poverty in recognition that poverty is a human rights issue. The Common Mission rests on three principles: “everyone must have access to quality public services for all, full time work at the minimum salary must raise one from poverty, and social programs must guarantee an income ensuring people’s dignity and health.”⁵⁸

Ontario Groups

Ontario Campaign 2000 released a poverty reduction strategy discussion paper before the 2007 provincial election with analysis and recommendations that reflected *Summoned to Stewardship*. The 2007 report card on child poverty in Ontario, released in April 2008, went beyond these policy recommendations to also suggest possible indicators related to employment, housing, child care, and adequacy of social assistance rates, in addition to an indicator on low income.⁵⁹

The Social Planning Network of Ontario has organized a series of community consultations based on a poverty reduction framework developed by Marvyn Novick and Peter Clutterbuck. The framework proposes three core policy areas: sustaining employment, livable incomes, and strong and supportive communities. These three core areas have also been taken up by the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction as a starting point for communities to prepare for provincial poverty reduction consultations.⁶⁰

Like the Collectif in Quebec, the 25 in 5 Network in Ontario has embraced the vision of a poverty-free society. In 2007, it drafted a set of principles for consultation that it has proposed the government of Ontario use for its poverty reduction consultations:

- Be solutions oriented and focus on what the province can do to reduce poverty;
- Provide multiple avenues for input including community workshops, focus groups with low income people, web vehicles, phone, fax and mail in options;
- Make inclusion a priority so that women, racialized community members, Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, newcomers and other groups most likely to experience poverty are at the centre;
- Reflect geographic diversity with meetings held in regions across the province, including rural, urban and First Nations venues;
- Partner with local communities because local organizations working with low income people can facilitate inclusive meetings;
- Make listening a priority with representative MPPs from the Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction, local MPPs, and ministerial staff present at the community meetings;
- Treat consultations as the beginning (not the end) with a public report on what the government has heard, and ongoing consultation on the strategy as it is implemented.⁶¹

In the spring of 2008, the 25 in 5 Network launched its *Founding Declaration* on poverty reduction. The document calls for a provincial poverty reduction strategy that addresses core priorities: “sustaining

employment that assures a living standard above poverty for any adult working full time full year, livable incomes that assure dignity and opportunities for all Ontarians whether in the labour market or unable to work, and strong and supportive communities with affordable housing, early learning and child care, public education, community programs and transit that are accessible to all.”⁶²

Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Strategy Coalition

In 2007, Community Action on Homelessness, the Community Advocates Network, Dalhousie Legal Aid Services, and Stepping Stone held a two-day session for anti-poverty and social justice advocates and people living in poverty, aimed at creating consensus for framing a poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotia.⁶³ The framework document identified six goals, each with a set of objectives. The goals were:

1. Universal access, and better funding and co-ordination of policies, programs and services.
2. Social policies and programs that enable families and individuals to meet their basic needs, and empower them to participate fully in the social and economic benefits of society.
3. Entitle all residents to a livable income, decent working conditions, and employment benefits.
4. End child poverty and establish a comprehensive, accessible, coordinated early childhood development strategy.
5. A better-educated population.
6. Communicate the causes and consequences of poverty.⁶⁴

2. Core principles and values

CPJ’s public justice framework states that all people are created by God to live in dignity as God’s image bearers. As such, they have rights and responsibilities within a social context where justice and compassion are the foundation for peace and joy in social relationships.⁶⁵ The role of government is to promote just relations and foster conditions that enhance the common good by adopting fair laws, legally recognizing rights and responsibilities, identifying and resolving injustices, and ensuring access to services and infrastructure that benefit all. This means that public policy must make human well-being its priority.

In Canada today, public policies and programs are both influenced by and help shape Canadians’ attitudes about helping people in need. For example, the design and delivery of social assistance programs are marked by distinctions between deserving and undeserving poor. There is a strong sense that able bodied people should do paid work to support themselves and their families. Most Canadians respond positively to the idea that a full-time job should be enough to lift a person and their family out of poverty. But there is also widespread support for income-tested income security programs for seniors (Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement) and children (Canada Child Tax Benefit and related provincial income supports).

Some government programs, such as Health Insurance and Hospital Insurance, are recognized as rights or entitlements based on citizenship or residence in Canada. However, Canada has not expanded those programs to include dental care or pharmacare.

Canadians tend to respond more positively to the notion of fairness than the notion of rights. Framing things in a way that leads people to think “that seems only fair,” or conversely, “that does not seem fair” seems to be an effective way to mobilize public opinion. Yet, this can work in different ways. Stories about people cheating the welfare system (even if unfounded) proved very successful in garnering public support for deep cutbacks to social assistance programs. On the other hand, the argument that

someone working full-time should not have to live in poverty has been a very effective way to build support for higher provincial minimum wages.

The notion of rights, though, can be used as a successful catalyst for change. In Quebec, the successful effort to get a law to combat poverty and social exclusion has been strongly and explicitly presented within a human rights framework.

3. CPJ's past work on poverty issues

CPJ has a long history of proposing policies to reduce poverty. Central to CPJ's analysis has been a critique of a two-track approach to economic, social and environmental policy in Canada. The first track is the pursuit of economic growth. The second track is policies to repair the social and ecological damage in the wake of economic growth. The move toward national action plans to combat poverty and social exclusion, particularly as found in the European Union, indicates greater recognition of the need to better integrate social, economic and environmental policies.

CPJ's analysis has unraveled the false promise of economic growth as the ultimate source of well-being. *Changing Course* offered the standard of "love of neighbour" as the basis for constructing an alternative approach to socio-economic policy development.⁶⁶ Respect for the dignity of the human person is another one of the grounding points in CPJ's work for public justice. "All people, created to live in dignity as God's image-bearers, are called to be stewards of creation and practice justice and compassion in their relationships."⁶⁷

In a 1986 pre-budget proposal, CPJ's Social Development Fund called on the federal government to assume the full cost of bringing "the working poor to poverty levels, and that the federal government and the provinces share the cost of bringing those on social assistance to poverty levels."⁶⁸ A centerpiece of the proposal was the creation of a guaranteed annual income along with a network of social programs and services, including a variety of child care options and funding for low-cost housing. The proposal laid out a plan to raise revenue for the Social Development Fund by reducing tax exemptions for corporations, introducing a surtax on upper-income Canadians, freezing the defence budget and reducing government waste.

In 1987 CPJ published *Changing Course*, a study guide for Canadian social analysis, which situated the proposed Social Development Fund into an analysis that examined the surface realities of poverty in Canada.⁶⁹ *Changing Course* looked at how public policy worked at a two-track level, giving priority to economic over social and environmental concerns, and traced the policy foundations to a belief in economic growth as the source of well-being. The study guide showed that the Social Development Fund demonstrated the call to stewardship and love of one's neighbor as an alternative basis for shaping public policy.

CPJ's submission to the 2002 federal pre-budget consultations built upon the analysis in *Changing Course* and in *Building a National Community*, a submission to the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development.⁷⁰ In its 2002 brief to the Standing Committee on Finance, *Quality over Quantity*, CPJ presented data on the persistence in poverty and inequality even during years of economic growth and proposed alternatives that would raise the standard of living of Canadians.⁷¹ CPJ recognized that "we must choose policies that invest in the common conditions for developing human capabilities, and we must do this rather than relying on residual social spending, in the form of social assistance payments, aimed at containing or ameliorating the conditions of deprivation."⁷² CPJ proposed

that the government increase the Canada Child Tax Benefit, invest in Early Childhood Development, build new affordable housing, and invest in post-secondary education to freeze and then lower tuition costs. CPJ also suggested reexamining tax expenditures largely benefiting the wealthy, as well as tax cuts to capital gains and personal income taxes, as ways to garner the revenue needed to fund these investments.

In its submission to the 2006 Standing Committee on Finance pre-budget hearings, *Time for a National Poverty Reduction Strategy*, CPJ called for a national poverty reduction strategy.⁷³ CPJ recognized that all sectors of society need to come together to substantially reduce poverty and inequality. CPJ proposed that the federal government take a lead role in fighting poverty and commit to a national poverty reduction strategy in Budget 2007. The brief argued that Canada's poverty reduction strategy should include "timelines and targets, specific measures of progress, social forecasts and social audits and an integrated strategy, across departments of the federal government and across levels of government."⁷⁴ It advocated focused strategies to address the causes of poverty among vulnerable groups, including aboriginal peoples, recent immigrants, people with disabilities, women, young families with children and lone parent families. The submission reiterated calls to increase child benefits and to invest in early learning and child care, affordable housing, post-secondary education, and social development, as well as raise the federal minimum wage and increase the accessibility and adequacy of employment insurance.

4. Public Justice and Poverty Reduction

CPJ's public justice framework states that all people are created by God to live in dignity as God's image bearers. As such, they have rights and responsibilities within a social context where justice and compassion are the foundation for peace and joy in social relationships.⁷⁵ The role of government is to promote just relations and to foster conditions that enhance the common good by adopting fair laws, legally recognizing rights and responsibilities, identifying and resolving injustices and ensuring access to services and infrastructure that benefit all. The right of every person to live with dignity, to participate in society, and to meet their basic needs, is undermined by poverty. Public justice thus requires that efforts be directed towards eliminating poverty from our society.

Biblical call for poverty reduction

Jesus' statement that the "poor you will always have with you" is sometimes taken to suggest that there is nothing societies, much less governments, can do to reduce poverty. Yet, Jesus began his public ministry proclaiming the words from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4: 18-19). And Jesus proclaims that those words were fulfilled by his coming.

In this light, it is worth recalling that Jesus' statement that the poor shall always be with us echoes a passage from the book of Deuteronomy concerning laws of the Sabbatical Year. Before the passage states that there *will* always be people in need, it states that there *should* be no one in need: "However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today" (Deut. 15: 4-5).

And what are those commands? To cancel debts. To free servants. To restore the land to its original owners at the time of every seventh Sabbath year (every fifty years). And when servants are set free, they are to be provided with the means to a livelihood in an agrarian society – seed and livestock. "And

when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress.” (Deut 15:13-14)

The Sabbath and Jubilee laws go beyond the requirement of being charitable to an individual in need – although they clearly incorporate that demand. They also lay out rules governing social and economic relations, rules about justice that are meant to ensure that no one be in need.

Human rights and poverty reduction

In our day, the biblical vision of justice and dignity for all is captured in documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Just as God’s covenant with the people of ancient Israel framed rules of social life meant to safeguard and advance recognition of the inherent dignity of each person, modern human rights instruments embody a contemporary expression of that same goal.

A core biblical belief is that the human person — every person — has inherent dignity and worth because we are all created in the image and likeness of God. At the heart of the international human rights instruments lies the “recognition of the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” as the “foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”⁷⁶

It is not enough to say we recognize the dignity of the human person. We must strive to create the conditions that will allow each person to live in dignity. International human rights instruments express this in terms of basic human rights.

A human rights framework for poverty reduction offers a value base that has several positive aspects. First, international human rights instruments are clearly and explicitly rooted in recognizing the inherent dignity of every person. This offers a clear connection with CPJ’s core belief in the dignity of every person, created in the image and likeness of God. Second, the human rights framework includes the notion of the progressive realization of human rights. In the case of poverty reduction, this notion of progressive realization is the cornerstone for creating action plans to progressively reduce poverty and ensure everyone can enjoy the economic, social and cultural rights necessary to live a life in dignity. Third, flowing out of the concept of progressive realization, the human rights framework provides a robust notion of accountability that goes beyond governments accounting for how every dollar is spent, to examine how well public policies are working towards progressive improvements in specific domains related to poverty reduction.

International human rights instruments also offer a response to the charge that is often brought against the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, namely that there also be a charter of responsibilities. The ICESCR, for example, includes specific reference to the responsibilities not only of governments, but also of individuals, when it states in the preamble that “the individual, having duties to other individuals and to the community to which he belongs, is under a responsibility to strive for the promotion and observance of the rights recognized in the present Covenant.”⁷⁷

Too often, the notion of individual responsibility takes the form of suggesting that individuals are responsible to look after themselves and, particularly if they are poor or are part of an historically disadvantaged group, denies any expectation of public commitment to transform conditions of exclusion. But who really is responsible for solving poverty?

Circles of Society

There are at least three broad perspectives on who is responsible for addressing poverty. One perspective emphasizes individual responsibility: it is up to individuals to lift themselves up by their bootstraps. Another perspective emphasizes local communities, seeing communities, non-government groups, employers and unions as best at responding to people in need. A third perspective emphasizes the responsibility of government to make sure people have income security. It is easy to get lost in debate over which of these perspectives is most accurate. A more productive approach recognizes the need for effort at all three levels – individuals, communities, and government – and looks at how best to integrate efforts in all three domains.

At the government level, Canada's recent experience demonstrates that public justice is not served by giving priority to economic growth over social and environmental sustainability. While there has been widespread recognition that the main indicator of economic development – Gross Domestic Product – fails to truly reflect the state of economic, social and ecological well-being, an alternative has not emerged to supplant that indicator. One way that explicit efforts at poverty reduction could change that situation is by integrating other indicators in the policy process.

5. Questions for moving forward

1. What do we mean by poverty?
2. What would a national poverty reduction strategy look like in Canada?
3. What role(s) should/could the federal government play?
4. What role(s) should/could provincial and territorial governments play?
5. What role(s) should/could municipal governments play?
6. What role(s) should employers, labour unions, faith groups and civic groups play?
7. How should people living in situations of poverty be involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of poverty reduction plans?
8. Should Canada adopt a law to combat poverty and social exclusion, as Quebec has done, or rely on federal/provincial/territorial commitments to poverty reduction action plans?
9. How can Canadians hold their governments accountable for poverty reduction?
10. What targets, timelines and indicators should be chosen?

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