

**TUNING INTO POVERTY THE  
PROVINCIAL WAY**

**2009**



*Ce document est disponible en français.*

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## SUMMARY

- *This report is one of several which the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) has published on poverty. Focusing on provincial strategies for poverty reduction, the report outlines the development of provincial strategies, assesses their strengths and weaknesses, and finally considers the potential role of the federal government.*
- *Quebec was the first provincial jurisdiction to enact a law to combat poverty and social exclusion. Since then, four other provinces have initiated poverty reduction strategies, though not necessarily with new legislation: Newfoundland and Labrador (2005); Nova Scotia (2009); Ontario (2009); and Manitoba (2009).*
- *The strategies that each province has developed to fight poverty have common elements. They all address concerns about employment and job training, income support, and affordable housing. They all propose to publish regular reports on the progress they are making toward the reduction of poverty. There is a primary interest in addressing child and family poverty.*

### *Newfoundland and Labrador*

- *In the 2005 Speech from the Throne, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador committed itself to a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. It promised to assist income support clients, particularly youth, in accessing employment and to integrate women's voices and perspectives, including those of Aboriginal women.*
- *At the same time, the government established a consultation process with stakeholders that led to a report. Poverty was defined not only as a lack of financial resources but also as social exclusion. Three determinants were identified: social trends, labour market conditions, and government policies.*
- *In three budget cycles, from 2006 to 2008, the government invested \$100 million in initiatives aimed to prevent, reduce, and alleviate poverty. In 2006, the expenditures included a wide range of services. In the 2009 budget, an emphasis was placed on a reduction of taxes for low-income households, as well as a reduction in financial disincentives and barriers that make it difficult for low-income people to work.*

## *Nova Scotia*

- *The poverty reduction strategy of the government of Nova Scotia was introduced in April 2009. Earlier, the actions of community groups led to a march against poverty in the fall of 2006 and to the organization of a Community Coalition to End Poverty in Nova Scotia, which, in turn, published a report on ways to frame an anti-poverty strategy.*
- *In November 2007, one month after the coalition report was issued, the government appointed a Poverty Reduction Strategy Working Group (PRWG) to propose recommendations. The PRWG built its set of recommendations on four overarching goals: meaningful collaboration among stakeholders, the alleviation of poverty, the reduction of poverty, and the prevention of poverty.*
- *The government took nine months to digest the report of the PRWG and announced a poverty reduction strategy in April 2009. Its vision was to break the cycle of poverty by 2020, targeting three manageable goals: enable and reward work; improve supports for those in need; and focus on children.*

## *Quebec*

- *Quebec set a precedent in Canada when it enacted a law in 2002 to combat poverty and social exclusion. As in other provinces, the pressure to develop an anti-poverty strategy came from community groups, especially The Collective for a Poverty Free Quebec.*
- *The collective published a citizen's act for the elimination of poverty in April 2000. In the fall of the same year, a petition supporting the proposed act was passed in the national assembly of Quebec. A year later, the government presented its own assessment of the situation, along with a new legislative project.*
- *Quebec's legislation aims to combat poverty and social exclusion by making the province into "one of the industrialized nations having the least number of persons living in poverty" over a ten-year period.*
- *Each year, the government publishes annual reports to indicate the actions that it has taken. In the first report, it described achievements in four areas: finances, employment, housing, and food assistance.*

- *In year four, the minister highlighted a total investment of \$3.3 billion including: an increase in the minimum wage, improvements in the disposable income of single-parent families; a reduction in the number of persons on social assistance; and the development of a strategy to integrate handicapped persons into the labour force.*

### *Ontario*

- *Ontario's poverty reduction strategy was initiated in 2007. Non-governmental organizations provided the initial push. In the summer of 2007, a provincial network issued a discussion paper on a strategy to reduce poverty in the province. The strategy included a reduction in the number of poor of 25% over five years and 50% within ten years.*
- *The Ontario government released a report in 2008 that outlined its own poverty reduction strategy. The overall goal, consistent with the expectations of advocacy groups, was to reduce the number of children in poverty by 25% over five years.*
- *The proposals to reach the target included a significant increase in the Ontario child benefit, a range of new educational and community projects, expanded dental care for low-income people, and additional funds to upgrade affordable housing units.*
- *Shortly after the government released its poverty reduction strategy, it announced the provincial budget for 2009. With the announcement, it proposed to accelerate a phase-in of the Ontario Child Benefit, tax relief for low-income households over three years, and a doubling of support to youth in high-risk neighbourhoods.*

### *Manitoba*

- *An official strategy to reduce poverty in Manitoba was also accelerated in 2009 after ongoing efforts by advocacy groups. While many groups within the province had been previously involved in advocacy about the impact of poverty on people's lives, their efforts came together in 2008 in the formation of Make Poverty History Manitoba (MPHM) and the publication of this group's report.*
- *At the same time as the MPHM report was being discussed around the province, the opposition Liberal party of Manitoba prodded the NDP government in the legislature by introducing a bill that proposed a poverty*

- *The government strategy, called ALL Aboard, was funded with old and new investments under four pillars: safe, affordable housing in supportive communities; education, jobs, and income support; strong healthy families; and accessible, coordinated services.*

#### *Limitations of Provincial Strategies*

- *It is too early to judge the overall impact of the provincial strategies since none of the target dates proposed by the provinces has been reached. On the other hand, it is possible to make some observations based on what they claim to have done or what they are perceived to have achieved by policy advocates.*
- *In the case of Newfoundland and Labrador, the government established four key objectives to be realized by 2010. Nevertheless, the government already claims that the prevalence of poverty in the province decreased significantly from 2004 to 2007.*
- *In Nova Scotia, it remains to be seen whether the newly elected NDP government will follow up on the commitment of the former Conservative government. There was no anti-poverty plank in the NDP election platform before it took office.*
- *In Quebec, a legislative mandate to produce annual reports has had the effect of making the government accountable regarding its poverty reduction strategy. Favourable improvements in the poverty rate as well as significant increases in the incomes of single-parent families and support of children were acknowledged in 2009 by the ministerial advisory committee.*
- *In contrast to the evaluation of the advisory committee, the assessment of “le Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté” has been more severe. When considering the recent budget of the provincial government, the collective was of the opinion that there was nothing new in the way of social support, aid to the homeless, or community development.*
- *In Ontario, it is not possible to assess the impact of the strategy on low-income people since the first budget was only approved in 2009. While there is some optimism on the part of anti-poverty advocates, there are*

*also reservations. The 25 in 5 network stated that the first anti-poverty budget was a step in the right direction but that more needed to be done.*

- *It is also too early to evaluate the impact of the Manitoba strategy. Initial reaction by anti-poverty groups has been critical. The Manitoba strategy does not commit to specific timelines and targets to reduce poverty. Nor is it based on input from community groups or those most affected by poverty, and there is no clear commitment for it to do so in the future.*
- *Some general issues have not been adequately addressed in any of the provincial plans. The first is uncertainty about a definition of poverty and how to measure it. While the provinces propose to develop multiple indicators rather than one, it is not clear when that will happen or whether the provinces will cooperate with each other to produce national standards.*
- *A second issue is that little attention is given to the special needs of poor women other than women with children. In fact, there is limited income and employment support for unattached individuals, particularly those considered able to work. Nor is it clear whether significant investments will be made in labour market measures, including comprehensive educational opportunities and training.*

#### *Potential Role of Federal Government*

- *The federal government has no official plan to combat poverty. However, different organizations have proposed such a role. Canada without Poverty has argued for a rights-based approach with special reference to United Nations' international agreements that speak to economic and social rights.*
- *The National Council of Welfare has proposed four cornerstones to assure lasting solutions: a national anti-poverty strategy with a long-term vision and measurable targets; a plan of action and budget that coordinates within and across governments; a government accountability structure to ensure results and to consult Canadians; and a set of agreed poverty indicators.*
- *A poverty reduction plan has also been outlined by Campaign 2000 and the 25 in 5 Network. They call upon the federal government to adopt a poverty reduction strategy with targets and timelines; dedicated fiscal resources; accountability and public reporting; consultation with those*

*who have lived experience with poverty; and coordination with First Nations and Aboriginal communities.*

- *The Dignity for All Campaign, of which CASW is a partner, was launched in 2009 to eliminate poverty and build a socially cohesive country by 2020.*
- *Furthermore, policy suggestions are not only coming from non-governmental organizations; they are also being promoted by parliamentary committees. One committee, focusing on urban poverty, made proposals to harmonize, deliver, and revamp policies related to poverty reduction. A second committee, focusing on rural poverty, has called for a rethinking of social policy and a guaranteed annual income.*

## INTRODUCTION

It has taken a long time for Canadian governments officially to declare war on poverty. On November 24, 1989, the House of Commons unanimously passed a resolution to seek to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by 2000, but the federal government has never acted in concert to achieve that goal. Until recently, provincial governments have avoided specific comprehensive poverty reduction strategies, tending instead to implement individual initiatives and programs to combat different aspects of poverty or focus on other pressing issues.

Quebec was the first provincial jurisdiction to break this impasse when, in 2002, it enacted a law to combat poverty and social exclusion. Since then, four other provinces have initiated poverty reduction strategies, though not necessarily with new legislation: Newfoundland and Labrador (2005); Nova Scotia (2009); Ontario (2009); and Manitoba (2009). Of these four, only one province (Ontario) has passed legislation on levels of poverty reduction.

The strategies developed by each province vary, but there are common elements. All the strategies address concerns about employment and job training, income support, and affordable housing. All claim that they will publish regular reports (usually annually) on the progress they are making toward the reduction of poverty. All express a primary interest in addressing child and family poverty. None seems to be completely comfortable with the use of the low-income measures of Statistics Canada, even though each acknowledges that these are widely used by different groups. The provinces talk instead of the need for multiple measures or indicators.

The Quebec strategy is the most detailed, outlined in legislation and a plan of action. In addition to the commitments noted above (improved work-related services, income support, and affordable housing), the plan includes commitments to the provision of community credit for business, adequate food, support for youth, support for seniors, public involvement in the process, and ongoing research. Ontario adds the need for adequate dental care, mental health care, and the development of a social policy institute. Newfoundland includes improved access to the social justice system. Manitoba stresses the value of affordable child care.

In this report, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) outlines the development of the five provincial reduction strategies. We also provide a brief assessment by highlighting some strengths and weaknesses. Finally, we consider the potential role of the federal government.

CASW as well as provincial and territorial associations of social work have an extensive history of addressing poverty at all levels of government. One of the ethical principles guiding social workers—working for social justice—cites poverty as a primary social problem.<sup>1</sup> It has been an ongoing concern since the inception of the profession.

## **FIVE PROVINCIAL POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES**

### (i) Newfoundland and Labrador

Before the provincial election of 2003, the Progressive Conservative party, led by Danny Williams, promised to address the issue of poverty.<sup>2</sup> Once elected, the new government immediately took small steps in the 2004 budget to strengthen the social safety net, including expanded community mental health services, drug coverage, early childhood education, a low-income tax credit, a home heating fuel rebate, indexation of seniors' benefits, a higher minimum wage, and increases in the amount social assistance recipients could earn before benefits were clawed back.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2005 Speech from the Throne, the government committed to refine and implement a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy in collaboration with community groups. It recognized the devastating effects of poverty and said it would take steps to alleviate and reduce poverty. Acknowledging that the best remedy for combating poverty is a secure job, it promised to assist income support clients, particularly youth, to access employment and to integrate women's voices and perspectives, including those of Aboriginal women, when formulating public policies. It also proposed to enhance the use of gender-based analysis to advance the status of women in the province; provide management and leadership for a new violence prevention program; introduce special measures to ensure that women share equitably in the social and economic benefits of the province; and address employment barriers for women in non-traditional and resource-based industries.

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<sup>1</sup> Social workers use their training to look beyond the symptoms of poverty and focus on the root causes. They study the issue from a range of theoretical and practice perspectives, including structural, systemic, and vocational approaches.

<sup>2</sup> Canada, Library of Parliament, *Poverty Reduction Strategies in Quebec and in Newfoundland and Labrador*, 2007, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Fran Locke and Penelope Rowe, *Poverty Reduction Policies and Programs in Newfoundland and Labrador*, Canadian Council on Social Development, Social Development Report Series, 2009.

At the same time, the government established a consultation process with stakeholders that led to a report entitled *Reducing Poverty in Newfoundland and Labrador*.<sup>4</sup> In the report, poverty was defined not only as a lack of financial resources but also as social exclusion. The report acknowledged that economic growth alone would not lead to a reduction in poverty and that more was needed. Three determinants of poverty were highlighted: social trends, labour market conditions, and government policies.<sup>5</sup> These, in turn, were used to identify options to reduce the number of people living in poverty, alleviate its negative effects, and prevent it. Options included: increasing income support rates; changing the tax system; strengthening attachment to the labour market; providing prescription drug coverage for low-income households; increasing the minimum wage; supporting community economic development; and improving educational/training supports.

The consultation process was also used to develop an action plan and provide input into the 2006 budget. The plan identified nine guiding principles: taking a long-term approach; focusing on prevention; building partnerships; finding the right policy mix; measuring progress; taking an integrated approach; addressing urban and rural differences; taking gender into consideration; and considering Aboriginal issues. The government affirmed a commitment to “transform Newfoundland and Labrador from a province with the most poverty to a province with the least.”<sup>6</sup> Based on these principles and cooperation with the federal government, the provincial government identified key objectives that it would try to achieve over the next four years (2006-2010): improved access to, and coordination of, services for low-income people; a stronger social safety net; improved earned incomes; increased emphasis on childhood development; and a better educated population.

In three budget cycles, from 2006 to 2008, the government invested \$100 million in initiatives aimed to prevent, reduce, and alleviate poverty.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to

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<sup>4</sup> *Reducing Poverty in Newfoundland and Labrador: Working Toward a Solution- Background Report and Workbook*, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> The determinants of poverty are closely related to the social determinants of health. According to Dennis Raphael, the “social determinants of health are the economic and social conditions that shape the health of individuals, communities, and jurisdictions as a whole. Social determinants of health also determine the extent to which a person possesses the physical, social, and personal resources to identify and achieve personal aspirations, satisfy needs, and cope with the environment. Social determinants of health are about the quantity and quality of a variety of resources that a society makes available to its members.” Raphael, D. Ed. *Social Determinants of Health: Canadian Perspectives*, Canadian Scholars' Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> *Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*, 2006, p.vi.

<sup>7</sup> Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment, 2008 *Consultations*, <http://www.hrle.gov.nl.ca/hrle/poverty/consultations/default.htm>

distinguish how much of the money is for ongoing programs and how much is new, but, either way, the sums serve as a reminder of the multi-faceted nature of the poverty reduction strategy. In 2006, for example, funding included expenditures on prescription drugs, income support for those starting new jobs, employment development, skills development, instructional grants for school boards, guidelines for healthy eating, rental rebates for tenants of social housing, expansion of adult basic education, indexation of income support rates, increased access to the disabled children allowance, and improvements in legal aid and women's centres.<sup>8</sup>

In the 2009 budget, by contrast, an emphasis was placed on a reduction of taxes for low-income households, a reduction in financial disincentives and barriers that make it difficult for low-income people to work, improved access to early child development, the establishment of a supportive living community partnership to overcome homelessness, and affordable housing.<sup>9</sup>

The latest phase of public consultation on the strategy began in 2008. To date, no report has been released on the outcome of the process. However, groups like the Religious Social Action Coalition continue to press governments, provincial and federal, to reduce the gap between the wealthy and the poor.

#### (ii) Nova Scotia

The poverty reduction strategy of the government of Nova Scotia was introduced in April 2009, so little of it can be compared to those of Newfoundland and Labrador or Quebec, where various targeted initiatives have been undertaken. Moreover, the recent change of government in Nova Scotia from Conservative to New Democrat is likely to lead to a reconsideration of the proposed strategy. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, with the announcement of the Newfoundland strategy in 2006, community groups within Nova Scotia "saw an opportunity to bring attention to the continuing economic struggles of low-income people within their province."<sup>10</sup> Actions of the community groups led to a march against poverty in the fall of 2006 and eventually to the organization of a Community Coalition to End Poverty in Nova Scotia, which, in turn, published a report on ways to frame an anti-poverty strategy in the fall of 2007.

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<sup>8</sup> Newfoundland and Labrador, *Budget Highlights, Reducing Poverty and Increasing Self Reliance*, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Newfoundland and Labrador, *Budget Highlights, Reducing Poverty*, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Christine Saulnier, *Poverty Reduction Policies and Programs in Nova Scotia*, Canadian Council on Social Development, Social Development Report Series, 2009, p.25.

According to the report, a campaign should be based on common core values including human compassion, social and economic equality, social solidarity, respect for human and civil rights, and sustainable growth.<sup>11</sup> Based on these values, six goals (with subsidiary objectives) were identified. The first was universal access and better funding of programs and services, involving an integrated approach to poverty and a meaningful relationship between government and communities. The second was the development of policies and programs that enable individuals and families to meet basic needs and empower them to participate in society.

The third goal was to ensure that people had a livable income, decent working conditions, and employment benefits including a fair minimum wage, strengthened labour standards, improved employment insurance, and a progressive tax system. The fourth was to end child poverty and establish a comprehensive child development strategy. The fifth was a better educated population through the availability of life-long learning opportunities and comprehensive training programs. The sixth imposed an obligation on government to communicate the causes and consequences of poverty.

In November, 2007, one month after the coalition report was issued; the government began its own consultation process, appointing a Poverty Reduction Strategy Working Group (PRWG) to propose recommendations for the government to consider. The working group met bi-weekly between January and June 2008; it reported to two ministers - community services and labour. When the report was released, the PRWG built its set of recommendations on four overarching goals (similar to those proposed during the initial Newfoundland and Labrador consultation process): meaningful collaboration among stakeholders; the alleviation of poverty; the reduction of poverty; and the prevention of poverty.<sup>12</sup>

The report then made multiple recommendations that cover much of the same ground as the coalition report. As a consequence, the working group added a proviso that the provincial government must advocate for a national anti-poverty strategy involving all levels of governments. At a provincial level, it stressed the need to move away from a “last resort” model of social assistance to a model of proactive and progressive support. Overall, it highlighted the importance of having a strategy with targeted goals and measures; an accountability framework requiring regular monitoring and reporting of outcome goals; multi-sector involvement and collaboration; and policies that deal with long-term as well as short-term goals.

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<sup>11</sup> Community Coalition to End Poverty in Nova Scotia, *Framework for a Poverty Reduction Strategy in Nova Scotia*, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Nova Scotia, Poverty Reduction Working Group, *Report of the Poverty Reduction Working Group*, 2008.

The government took nine months to digest the report of the PRWG and announced a poverty reduction strategy in April, 2009 – just two months before an election call. The response was more measured than the report of the working group or the coalition and more limited in scope than that of Newfoundland and Labrador. However, in a subsequent document, the government stated that its vision was to break the cycle of poverty by 2020.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it cautioned that the task would not be easy, that governments around the world were facing multiple challenges as well as declining revenues, and that change would not come overnight.

In the short term, therefore, it proposed to target three manageable goals: enable and reward work; improve supports for those in need; and focus on children. In practice, this meant that most of the short-term funding would be allocated to affordable housing, a pharmacare benefit for low-income children, and childcare spaces. In addition, the government promised to review the employment support and income assistance program. The report was replete with generalizations regarding most other matters.

Shortly after the report was released, a provincial election was called and the Conservative government was defeated. A new government will have to put its own stamp on the provincial strategy.

### (iii) Quebec

Quebec set a precedent in Canada when it enacted a law in 2002 to combat poverty and social exclusion. As in other provinces, however, the pressure to develop an anti-poverty strategy came from community groups, especially The Collective for a Poverty Free Quebec.<sup>14</sup> The idea that Quebec should develop legislation to eliminate poverty had been endorsed by over 166,000 individuals and 1,200 organizations as early as 1997.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, an extensive consultation process was subsequently initiated by non-governmental organizations during the period from 1999 to 2000. Based on feedback from the

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<sup>13</sup> Nova Scotia, *Preventing Poverty: Promoting Prosperity: Nova Scotia's Poverty Reduction Strategy*, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Chantal Collin, *Poverty Reduction Strategies in Quebec and in Newfoundland and Labrador*, Library of Parliament, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Preliminary comments in the *Proposal for an Act on the Elimination of Poverty*, 2009, <http://www.pauvrete.qc.ca/>. Alain Noël links early developments to the Bread and Roses march from Montreal to Quebec in 1995. See Alain Noël, *A Law Against Poverty: Quebec's New Approach to Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion*, Background Paper, Family Network, Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2002.

consultation, the collective drafted a citizen's act for the elimination of poverty, which was subject, for a third time, to extensive province-wide consultation before being finalized.

In the citizen's legislative proposal, three priorities provided direction for the program. The first was the elimination of poverty. The second priority was that improvements in the incomes of the poorest fifth of the population would take precedence over increases of the richest fifth. The third was that persons living in poverty and their representative organizations were to be associated with the implementation and evaluation of relevant program initiatives. In addition, specific time frames were proposed for the realization of objectives after three stages of development (one year, five years, and ten years). The act stipulated that the process should be overseen by a council, composed in majority of representatives from organizations fighting poverty. Research, development of indicators, and consultations would be initiated and monitored by the council through the intermediary of an observatory or bureau established for that purpose. To give status to the initiative, overall responsibility was to be assigned to the office of the premier.

The citizen's act to eliminate poverty was made public in April, 2000. In the fall of that year, a petition supporting the proposed act was tabled in the national assembly of Quebec. The same day the petition was received, the national assembly adopted a motion to request the government to develop a strategy to combat poverty.<sup>16</sup> Initially, the government of the day did not respond, but a change of premier helped pave the way. Lucien Bouchard, premier at the time the national assembly motion was approved, was reluctant to act on poverty. He publicly expressed his doubts that a government anywhere in the world could adopt a law like the one proposed by the Collective. However, Bouchard resigned in January 2001 and was replaced by Bernard Landry, who sought to reaffirm his government's commitment to social democracy. He identified the fight against poverty as a priority, and his government launched its own consultation in 2001. A year later, the government presented its own assessment of the situation, along with a new legislative project, Bill 112. It was approved by the national assembly in December, 2002.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See William Ninacs, with the collaboration of Anne Marie Béliveau and Francine Gareau, *The Collective for a Poverty Free Quebec: A Case Study*, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> The summary of developments outlined in the paragraph is taken from Alain Noël, *A Law Against Poverty: Quebec's New Approach to Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion*, Background Paper, Family Network, Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2002.

Quebec's enabling legislation aims to combat poverty and social exclusion by making the province into “one of the industrialized nations having the least number of persons living in poverty” over a ten year period (2003-2013).<sup>18</sup> Echoing similar laws in Europe, the legislation includes: a national strategy to combat social exclusion; a fund to support social initiatives; an observatory to monitor the reduction of poverty; and an advisory committee on the prevention of poverty and social exclusion.

The law details a number of goals such as: improving the economic and social situation of the poor; reducing inequalities; encouraging the participation of those who live in poverty; and reinforcing a sense of solidarity. In order to meet that strategy, five action areas are identified: promotion of access to education and support of skill development; improvements to incomes, work opportunities, individual assets, and social housing; better access to work and employment; greater opportunities for involvement through local development and socially responsible enterprises; and an institutional framework for evaluation and accountability. The act requires the government to develop a specific plan and publish annual reports.

An investment of dedicated funds over a five-year period was announced in the 2004 budget as well as a commitment to meet the requirements enshrined in the act.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after, the government released an action plan to indicate how it would combat poverty. As required by the act, it set targets for improving the income of employment assistant recipients and full-time workers, offered families a partial exemption for child support, and enhanced measures for child assistance and social housing.<sup>20</sup> To fulfill the mandate to involve society as a whole, the government allocated funds for community projects to fight poverty and social exclusion. After the plan was announced, it also established a research centre to provide independent information on poverty and an advisory committee to advise the lead ministry (employment and solidarity) on the implementation and evaluation of the strategy.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quebec, *An Act To Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*, Updated to May 14, 2009. Enabling legislation defines general principles and leaves government to decide how they are applied.

<sup>19</sup> Chantal Collin, *Poverty Reduction Strategies in Quebec and in Newfoundland and Labrador*, Library of Parliament, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Quebec, Ministry of Employment, Social Solidarity and the Family, *Reconciling Freedom and Social Justice: A Challenge for the Future*, 2004, pp. 9 -11.

<sup>21</sup> Chantal Collin, *Poverty Reduction Strategies in Quebec and in Newfoundland and Labrador*, Library of Parliament, 2007, pp. 5-6.

Each year since the release of the action plan, the government has published annual reports to indicate the actions that it has taken. The first report described achievements in four areas: finances, employment, housing, and food assistance.<sup>22</sup> In the second report, the focus was on the establishment of the advisory committee and the research centre as well as further developments related to financial, employment, and housing assistance. In addition, the report identified various health and social services that were supporting low-income people.<sup>23</sup> The third year report outlined the initiatives developed since 2003. In year four (2008), the minister highlighted a total investment of \$3.3 billion since the initiation of the plan, an increase in the minimum wage, improvements in the disposable income of single-parent families, a reduction in the number of persons on social assistance, and the development of a strategy to integrate handicapped persons into the labour force.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, he acknowledged that much remained to be done to reach the objectives proposed in the original legislation and plan.

(iv) Ontario

Ontario's poverty reduction strategy took flight in the past two years. Prior to 2007, there was a reluctance to deal with poverty, partly because a previous Conservative government had reduced and restricted social expenditures in the province, and partly because the Liberal government that replaced it was restrained, during its first term in office, by its own fiscal rhetoric. In the fall of 2007, the establishment of a cross-ministerial cabinet committee on poverty reduction was an indication that the Liberal government, in its second term of office, was willing to tackle the issue. That commitment was quickly followed by ministerial consultations in 2008.

As in other provinces, however, non-governmental organizations provided the initial push. Anti-poverty groups in Ontario had long advocated a reduction in poverty. Among the more active have been Campaign 2000, the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, and ISARC, an ecumenical justice initiative. While Campaign 2000 is a cross-Canada coalition of over 120 organizations committed to end child poverty, it also has an Ontario provincial network of 50 partners. In the summer of 2007, the provincial network issued a discussion paper

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<sup>22</sup> Quebec, Ministry of Employment and Solidarity in collaboration with other ministries, *Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty, Year One Report*, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Quebec, Ministry of Employment and Solidarity in collaboration with other ministries, *2004-2009 Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty, Year Two Report*, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Québec, Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solitarité sociale en collaboration avec d'autres ministères, *Plan d'action gouvernemental en matière de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale, Bilan de la quatrième année*, 2008.

on a strategy to reduce poverty in the province.<sup>25</sup> The strategy included a reduction of 25% in five years and 50% within ten years. Part of the proposed strategy depended on federal support, part on the province. In combination, it presupposed initiatives in five areas: good jobs at living wages; a strong safety net; access to early learning and child care; affordable housing; and accessible education and training. In addition, the strategy called for ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

At the same time as the ministerial consultation-by-invitation was taking place, a network of 25 in 5 partners was sponsoring public meetings to make certain that as many groups and individuals as possible were heard.<sup>26</sup> The network was initially started by a mix of provincial and Toronto-based organizations around a call for poverty reduction in Ontario by 25% in 5 years – hence the title. In its founding declaration, it profiled three priorities: a living standard above poverty for any adult who works full-time throughout the year; livable incomes – including for those unable to work; and strong, supportive communities to help people connect.<sup>27</sup> The network consultations served, in effect, to counter-balance the ministerial consultation. The former led to community presentations and subsequently the publication of a blueprint for poverty reduction based on political, economic, and fiscal imperatives.<sup>28</sup>

Fed, in part, by this counter-movement, the Ontario government, in December 2008, released a report that outlined its own poverty reduction strategy.<sup>29</sup> The rationale for the strategy was based on a conviction that it was the morally right thing to do and smart for the economy. The overall goal, consistent with the expectations of advocacy groups, was to reduce the number of children in poverty by 25% over 5 years.<sup>30</sup> The proposed poverty indicator was Statistics Canada's low-income measure (LIM), which is calculated on the basis of 50% of median income.

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<sup>25</sup> Campaign 2000, *A Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario*, Ontario Campaign 2000 Discussion Paper, 2007. A similar paper, focusing on a national strategy and entitled *Summoned to Stewardship*, was published by Campaign 2000 about the same time.

<sup>26</sup> Glynis Maxwell, *Poverty Reduction Policies and Programs in Ontario*, Canadian Council on Social Development, Social Development Report Series, 2009, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> 25 in 5 Founding Declaration, <http://25in5.ca/publications/25-in-5-founding-declaration/>.

<sup>28</sup> Sheila Block, *A Blueprint for Economic Stimulus and Poverty Reduction in Ontario*, A Report from the 25 in 5 network for poverty reduction, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Ontario, *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Ontario is a leader in setting a specific numeric target.

For Ontario to succeed, however, the report stipulated that it would require the cooperation of the federal government. The proposals to reach the target included a significant increase in the Ontario child benefit, a range of new educational and community projects, expanded dental care for low-income people, and additional funds to upgrade affordable housing units. The plan also included the implementation of full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds.

Shortly after the government released its poverty reduction strategy, it announced the provincial budget for 2009.<sup>31</sup> With the announcement, it proposed to accelerate the strategy's implementation by a rapid phase-in of the Ontario Child Benefit, tax relief for low-income households over three years, and a doubling of support to youth in high-risk neighbourhoods. In addition, the government proposed to increase social assistance by 2% in the fall of 2009, undertake a review of the system with the goal of removing barriers to employment, and increase, on an ongoing basis, the minimum wage. The Ontario government also reaffirmed the need for the federal government to be involved.

As the budget was being approved, an act respecting a long-term strategy to reduce poverty in Ontario was being debated in the legislature. In May 2009, it was eventually approved with support from all parties. The main purpose of the act is to establish the mechanisms for a long-term strategy, and in it the government once again committed to regular consultation, as well as measuring the success of the strategy by setting five-year targets and annual reporting. Every new or modified strategy will include a reduction target, initiatives designed to improve economic and social conditions, and specific indicators to measure success.

#### (v) Manitoba

An official strategy to reduce poverty in Manitoba accelerated in 2009 after ongoing efforts by advocacy groups and the introduction by the opposition Liberal party of a bill into the provincial legislature. In terms of poverty alleviation, though, some analysts acknowledge that much has already been done in the province, even though more remains.<sup>32</sup> In the provincial budget of 2007, the Manitoba government noted that the province had the largest reduction in

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<sup>31</sup> Ontario, Ministry of Finance, *Ontario Budget, 2009*. The full report is available on the ministry website: <http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/english/budget/ontariobudgets/2009/>

<sup>32</sup> Tom Carter and Chesys Polevychok, *Poverty Reduction Policies and Programs in Manitoba*, Canadian Council on Social Development, Social Development Report Series, 2009, p. 25.

poverty for single-parent families in Canada between 1999 and 2004.<sup>33</sup> During the same period, the child poverty rate was also reduced by one third. In the budget, the government made further promises to build on a multi-sectoral approach to poverty by increasing the number of child care spaces and the rates for foster parenting, introducing a new young Aboriginal entrepreneurial initiative, expanding training programs, initiating a four-year reward work program, and expanding Neighborhoods Alive to rebuild communities from the ground up.

In spite of such initiatives, the government did not commit itself to a strategy with fixed targets and timelines. Therefore, community groups in Manitoba increased their pressure on the government to develop a plan to reduce poverty and social exclusion. While many groups within the province had been previously involved in advocacy about the impact of poverty on people's lives, their efforts came together in 2008 in the formation of Make Poverty History Manitoba. In September of that year, MPHM launched a discussion paper called *The Time of Patience is Over*, based on a series of consultations held by several member organizations of the coalition over a four-year period.<sup>34</sup>

The main message of the paper was that existing anti-poverty policies were insufficient and had to be replaced. It called on the province to undertake comprehensive action to reduce poverty with an integrated and coordinated approach to programs; gender and diversity analysis; targets, timelines, and benchmarks; and a multi-sectoral, cross-departmental approach.<sup>35</sup> In addition, it proposed a set of policies related to housing, income security, employment, education, recreation, transportation, and disability supports.

At the same time as the MPHM report was being discussed around the province, the opposition Liberal party of Manitoba prodded the NDP government in the legislature by introducing a bill entitled *The Social Inclusion and Anti-poverty Act*.<sup>36</sup> The bill proposed a poverty reduction strategy with specific targets (initially the reduction of poverty by 50% from 2009 to 2013) and annual reporting mechanisms. In addition, it included an orientation based on prevention, strengthening the social safety net, increasing the attractiveness of work, promoting the involvement of society as a whole, and ensuring consistent,

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<sup>33</sup> Manitoba, Ministry of Finance, *The Building Budget, Manitoba Budget 2007*, Budget Paper E, Reducing Poverty in Manitoba. <http://www.manitoba.ca/finance/budget07/index.html>

<sup>34</sup> Women's Health Clinic, *Annual Report 2009*.

<sup>35</sup> Make Poverty History Manitoba, *The Time for Patience is Over: Toward a Poverty Reduction Plan for Manitoba*, Discussion Paper, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Manitoba, Thirty-ninth legislature, Third Session, *Bill 204*.

coherent intervention. While the bill was not approved, it served to push the government to announce its own strategy less than a year later.

The government strategy, called ALL Aboard, was funded with old and new investments under four pillars: safe, affordable housing in supportive communities; education, jobs, and income support; strong healthy families; and accessible, coordinated services.<sup>37</sup> To kick start the initiative, the government simultaneously launched a homeless strategy with a focus on mental health. It stressed the importance of universal services like health care and education as an important foundation for social inclusion. It also mentioned that the ALL Aboard strategy, to be successful, depended on partnership with the federal government and collaboration with municipal governments, businesses, non-profit organizations, and others within the province. It proposed that progress be measured by a variety of indicators including the number of affordable housing units, a market-basket measure for financial need, child care spaces, and participation in prenatal benefits.<sup>38</sup> However, it included no fixed targets or timelines.

### **LIMITATIONS IN PROVINCIAL POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES**

It is too early to judge the overall impact of the provincial strategies, since none of the target dates proposed by the provinces has been reached. On the other hand, it is possible to make some observations based on what they claim to have achieved themselves or what they are perceived to have achieved by policy advocates.

In the case of Newfoundland and Labrador, for example, the government established four key objectives to be realized by 2010. Presumably a report will be issued at that time. Nevertheless, the government already notes that the prevalence of poverty in the province (as measured by Statistics Canada low-income cut-offs) decreased significantly from 2004 to 2007 (latest data). In 2004, when the current premier, Danny Williams, was running for office, the rate was 11%, comparable to that of the rest of Canada. By 2007, it had dropped to 7% while the rate for Canada as a whole was 9%. Whether the change was caused by the poverty reduction strategy or by overall improvement in the provincial economy is difficult to say. Also, it is not known whether the prevalence rate has improved or deteriorated during the last two years as a result of the economic recession.

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<sup>37</sup> Manitoba, *Province Marks 10 Years of Fighting Poverty with New Strategy Called ALL Aboard*, News Release, May 21, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Manitoba, *ALL Aboard: Manitoba's Poverty Reduction Strategy*, 2009.

In Nova Scotia, it remains to be seen whether the newly elected NDP government will follow up on the commitment of the former Conservative government. There was no anti-poverty plank in NDP election platform before it took office.<sup>39</sup> In fact, it was the Liberal party that pushed the Conservatives to draft a poverty reduction plan. However, the result, as we have seen, was a document with few details, no timelines, and no real plan for measurement of progress. With a NDP majority government in power for the next four years, advocacy groups expect improvements in the lives of the poor. They point out that “the abolition of poverty and the elimination of exploitation” are listed as “achievable goals” in the NDP constitution.<sup>40</sup> Time will tell whether the party upholds the constitutional commitment.

In Quebec, a legislative mandate to produce annual reports has had the effect of making the government accountable regarding its poverty reduction strategy. To some extent, the various initiatives have also been associated with an actual reduction in poverty. From 2004 to 2007, the overall rate fell marginally from 11.5% to 10.7%.<sup>41</sup> Favourable improvements in the poverty rate, as well as significant increases in the incomes of single-parent families and support of children, were acknowledged in 2009 by the ministerial advisory committee.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the committee also made recommendations to overcome persistent poverty in the province, particularly among adults. They included the establishment of a baseline measure to assure access to essential goods and services, integrated financial support through the tax system, the inclusion of child care fees in the baseline measure, long-term employability indicators, and improved employment standards for part-time workers.

In contrast to the evaluation of the advisory committee, the assessment of “le Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté” has been more severe. When considering the recent budget of the provincial government, the collective was of the opinion that there was nothing new in the way of social support, aid to the homeless, or community development. It concluded that there was little to

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<sup>39</sup> *A Better Deal*, 2009, <http://www.ns.ndp.ca/platforms.asp>

<sup>40</sup> Pauline Raven, “NDP Win Should Aid Poor, Women,” *The Chronicle Herald*, July 23, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Statistics Canada, *Income in Canada*, Table 11-1 and 11-6, Catalogue 75-202-X, 2009. The Quebec government has contested the Statistics Canada measures of low income. They are based on Canada-wide price indices and tend to overestimate poverty in the province. For a discussion of the differences, see [http://www.mess.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/pauvrete/index\\_en.asp](http://www.mess.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/pauvrete/index_en.asp)

<sup>42</sup> Avis du comité consultative de lutte contre la pauvreté et l’exclusion sociale, *Individual and Family Income Improvement Targets, on Optimal Means for Achieving Them and on Baseline Financial Support*, 2009.

improve the situation of the poorest in society.<sup>43</sup> For that reason, among others, it supported the recommendations of the consultative committee with respect to the importance of developing a baseline measure of financial support so that everyone could have access to a minimum income without discrimination.<sup>44</sup> In addition, it recommended that the minimum wage be raised to a level that would assure that someone working full-time (i.e. 40 hours a week) would be lifted out of poverty. By way of conclusion, the collective called upon the Quebec government to respect its obligations under the law to become “one of the industrialized nations having the least number of persons living in poverty” by 2013. It is far from that goal at present.

In Ontario, it is not possible to assess the impact of the strategy on low-income people since the first budget was only approved in 2009. While there is some optimism on the part of anti-poverty advocates, there are also reservations. The 25 in 5 network stated that the first anti-poverty budget was a step in the right direction, but that more needed to be done. In its blueprint for economic stimulus and poverty reduction, it identified critical areas for action including the reform of the welfare system, new affordable housing and benefits, a significant increase in child care spaces, a new equity and anti-racism directorate, focused learning opportunities, community services partnerships, and sustainable employment.<sup>45</sup> According to network spokespersons, “the budget delivered on the Ontario Child Benefit, made progress on affordable housing but fell short on social assistance, missed the mark entirely on early learning and child care and went halfway on labor standards.”<sup>46</sup> Another critic of the recently approved legislation is concerned that the new act lacks teeth since it has no specific targets and stipulates no budgetary or program requirements.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté, *Mettre la charrue avant les bœufs*, Communiqué de presse, le 19 mars 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté, *Le ministre Hamad doit agir immédiatement*, Communiqué de presse, le 21 avril 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Sheila Block, *A Blueprint for Economic Stimulus and Poverty Reduction in Ontario*, A Report from the 25 in 5 network for poverty reduction, 2009, pp. 24-26.

<sup>46</sup> 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction, *Ontario Makes Progress on Poverty Reduction, but Job Still Unfinished*, press release, March 25, 2009, <http://25in5.ca/>

<sup>47</sup> These criticisms were made before the act was passed with intent to influence the outcome but they still hold. See Angela Browne, *Legislating Poverty Reduction in Ontario*, Suite 101.com, [http://canadian-provincial-affairs.suite101.com/article.cfm/legislating\\_poverty\\_reduction\\_in\\_ontario](http://canadian-provincial-affairs.suite101.com/article.cfm/legislating_poverty_reduction_in_ontario)

It is also too early to evaluate the impact of the Manitoba strategy. Initial reaction by anti-poverty groups has been critical.<sup>48</sup> They note that the Manitoba strategy does not commit to specific timelines and targets to reduce poverty. Nor is it based on input from community groups or those most affected by poverty, and there is no clear commitment for it to do so in the future. Make Poverty History Manitoba is calling upon the provincial government to produce a more effective plan. The Manitoba office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives states that the strategy has no clear destination.<sup>49</sup> CCPA supports a comprehensive strategy within a legislated framework that would hold the current and future governments to a significant reduction in poverty.<sup>50</sup> To date, the Manitoba NDP government has been unwilling to make that commitment.

In general, then, what are some of the issues that have been inadequately addressed in the provincial plans? The first, as we see it, is uncertainty about a definition of poverty and how to measure it. While each of the provinces proposes to develop multiple indicators (e.g., income, employment, education, health), rather than one (good news), it is not clear when that will happen or whether the provinces will cooperate with each other to produce national standards (bad news).

A second issue is that little attention is given to the special needs of poor women other than women with children. A high percentage of unattached women fall below Statistic Canada's low-income cutoffs, yet employment and income supports for these women are left largely unaddressed. Furthermore, while Ontario highlights the special needs of immigrants, persons with disabilities, and the homeless, neither Ontario nor the other provinces spells out in any detail how their needs will be addressed.

In fact, given the priority for dealing with children and families, there is limited income and employment support for most unattached individuals, particularly those considered able to work. There is a general focus on employment without any provision for tackling the conditions affecting the unattached working poor. Nor is it clear whether there will be significant investments in labour market measures including comprehensive educational opportunities and training.

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<sup>48</sup> Mariel Angus, "Manitoba Announces Poverty Reduction Strategy," *Citizens for Public Justice*, June 2, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Shauna MacKinnon, *Manitoba's Poverty Reduction Plan: All Aboard – Destination Unknown*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Fast Facts, June 22, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *The View from Here: Manitobans Call for a Poverty Reduction Plan*, 2009.

Finally, it is important to add that while the provincial plans are a good start, provincial capacity to finance many of the programs is dependent on federal support. Without federal support (which is not outlined or guaranteed), many of the proposed initiatives are likely to be short-changed.

## POTENTIAL ROLE OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

While provincial governments acknowledge that they need federal funding to fight poverty, the federal government has, to date, announced no official plan.<sup>51</sup> The European Union, by contrast, has a framework that encompasses a broad range of initiatives. In that context, national leadership has already been taken by countries as politically diverse as England, Ireland, and Sweden.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, poverty in Europe is not normally isolated as a problem on its own. Instead, it is connected to broader strategies associated with the promotion of social inclusion, equality, accessibility, and social protection.

In spite of the reluctance or resistance of the current Conservative government in Ottawa, there is no shortage of suggestions about the role the federal government should play. Since 1971, Canada without Poverty (formerly the National Anti-poverty Organization or NAPO) has been promoting national solutions to poverty. In recent years, Canada without Poverty has been arguing for a rights-based approach with special reference to United Nations' international agreements that speak to economic and social rights.<sup>53</sup>

In 2009, Canada without Poverty teamed up with other national organizations, including the Canadian Association of Social Workers, to launch a Dignity for All Campaign to eliminate poverty and build a socially cohesive country by 2020.<sup>54</sup> The Campaign calls for: a federal plan for poverty elimination that complements provincial and territorial plans; a federal anti-poverty Act that ensures enduring

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<sup>51</sup> Pressure on the federal government to become actively involved in combating poverty arises in considerable measure because of the primary actions of the provincial governments. In that respect, Quebec is a relevant model. It, like the federal government, is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the poor and organizations representing their interests are engaged in the process; ongoing research on poverty is perceived to be part of the solution; and government is obliged to provide regular evaluation of different interventions through annual reports and consultation with stakeholders.

<sup>52</sup> Chantal Collin, *Poverty Reduction in Canada – The Federal Role*, Library of Parliament, 2007; National Council of Welfare, *Solving Poverty: Four Cornerstones of a Workable Strategy for Canada*, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Canada without Poverty, <http://www.cwp-csp.ca/>.

<sup>54</sup> *Dignity for All: The Campaign for a Poverty-free Canada*, Press Release, May 22, 2009.

federal commitment and accountability for results; and sufficient federal investment in social security for all Canadians.

Another national organization that has been tracking poverty for a long time is the National Council of Welfare (founded in 1969). The Council recently surveyed the anti-poverty strategies of other countries and some of the provinces in Canada. It concluded that there was no long-term national vision or plan, no one accountable for carrying out a plan, no assigned resources, and no accepted measure to assess results. It proposed four cornerstones to assure lasting solutions: a national anti-poverty strategy with a long-term vision and measurable targets; a plan of action and budget that coordinates within and across governments; a government accountability structure to ensure results and consult Canadians; and a set of agreed poverty indicators.<sup>55</sup>

The Caledon Institute, which labels itself as a progressive, practicable voice for social policy, has also made proposals for a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. In 2007, it applauded the leader of the Liberal Party at the time for recognizing poverty as a serious national problem requiring national leadership. In 2008, it outlined ten core major policy areas: affordable housing; early childhood development; high school completion; customized, demand-driven training; improved minimum wages; improved employment insurance; adequate income and supports for persons with disabilities; support for social economy and asset building; strong social infrastructure; and integrated place-based initiatives.<sup>56</sup> In 2009, it made a formal presentation to a committee of parliament in which specific recommendations were made around seniors' benefits, child benefits, assistance for the working poor, employment insurance, disability income, early learning, social housing, and social infrastructure.<sup>57</sup>

A poverty reduction plan has also been outlined by Campaign 2000 and the 25 in 5 Network.<sup>58</sup> They call upon the federal government to adopt a poverty reduction strategy with targets and timelines, dedicated fiscal resources, accountability and public reporting, consultation with those who have lived experience with poverty, and coordination with First Nations and Aboriginal communities.<sup>59</sup> Specifically,

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<sup>55</sup> National Council of Welfare, *Solving Poverty: Four Cornerstones of a Workable Strategy for Canada*, 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Sherri Torjman, *Poverty Policy*, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Ken Battle and Sherri Torjman, *The Federal Role in Poverty Reduction*, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> *A Poverty Reduction Plan for Canada*, June 1, 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives casts the poverty debate around the larger issue of inequality. Looking at recent national and international inequality trends reveals

the network is fighting for good jobs and employment supports, income security, affordable housing, employment equity, early childhood education and care, supports for newcomers, and supports for people with disabilities.

Furthermore, policy suggestions are not only coming from non-governmental organizations; they are also being promoted by parliamentary committees. One committee, focusing on urban poverty, noted that Canadian governments are not sufficiently well equipped to harmonize, deliver, and revamp policies related to poverty reduction. Therefore, in addition to highlighting a series of potential program options to address poverty, it stressed the need to develop appropriate intra-governmental and inter-governmental arrangements.<sup>60</sup> Some of the former, for example, included the appointment of a federal cabinet minister, a poverty commissioner, or a secretary of state to take the lead. With respect to the latter, the options included an expanded council of the federation, a federal/provincial/territorial coordinating body, tri-level arrangements involving cities, and a regional-federal council.

A second committee, focusing on rural poverty, called for a rethinking of social policy in which the federal government would take the lead. The recommendations centre on the building of a national poverty reduction strategy around a guaranteed annual income. Specifically, the committee recommended that the federal government commission a green paper to study the costs and benefits of introducing a guaranteed annual income.<sup>61</sup> The green paper proposal is intended to serve as a starting point for a national discussion about reforming the country's income support system so that it is more generous, less punitive, and less stigmatizing as well as more consistently applied across the provinces and territories.

To date, however, the federal government has responded to the proposed poverty proposals with silence, partly because the issue is not a high priority, and partly because of perceived jurisdictional responsibilities. In the federal election in the fall of 2008, the prime minister made it clear that he had no intention of taking bold steps in national social policy that would interfere with the jurisdiction of the

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that the economic system has not worked for the majority or the poor. Presumably, solutions also have to affect the majority, not only the poor.

<sup>60</sup> Parliament of Canada, Senate, First Report of the Subcommittee on Cities of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, *Poverty, Housing and Homelessness: Issues and Options*, 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Parliament of Canada, Senate, Final Report of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Beyond Freefall: Halting Rural Poverty*, 2008.

provinces.<sup>62</sup> He cited the child care issue as an example of his government's approach to areas of provincial responsibility. For that reason, his government scrapped a previously agreed federal program of joint funding of child care spaces and replaced it with a universal child care allowance.

If his government wants to maintain constitutional integrity, however, there is still plenty of scope for federal action. Programs like seniors' benefits, children's benefits, employment insurance, and even some disability benefits fall within federal purview.<sup>63</sup> Other activities like health and social services, post-secondary education, job creation, and taxation have, for a long time, been a shared responsibility. The resistance to taking a leadership role in developing a national poverty reduction strategy seems to be driven more by ideology than established practice.

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<sup>62</sup> Les Whittington, "Harper says he respects provinces' jurisdiction," *The Toronto Star*, September 25, 2008.

<sup>63</sup> The federal government recently recommended changes to the Canada Pension Plan. It is currently reviewing employment insurance and private pensions.