



Open Letter from the National Council of Welfare on Solving Poverty in Canada Heading into 2010

In 2010, the NCW will enter its 5th decade as an advisory body on poverty, at a time when historical shifts are unfolding in the poverty and policy landscape. Several provinces have established Poverty Reduction Strategies and others are heading in that direction. If this momentum continues to build and garners sustained support and investment throughout the country¹, Canada will be better equipped to recover from the recession and create durable economic and social success.

Right now, when economic times are tough and recovery is fragile, is exactly the time to invest in needed solutions to prevent, reduce and ultimately eliminate poverty.

The NCW's decades of research into poverty trends and the costs of poverty and inequality show that wiser investments can translate into effective economic stimulus and better quality of life. New reports from many organizations are coming out every week stressing the need for Canada to act and highlighting the wealth of knowledge, ideas and inspiring practices that exists across the country. We can solve poverty.

In its 2007 report ***Solving Poverty: Four Cornerstones of a Workable National Strategy for Canada***, the NCW identified the foundations of effective strategies. The cornerstones involve: 1) vision, targets and timelines; 2) a coordinated plan of action and budget; 3) accountability to Canadians for consulting them and ensuring results; and 4) a set of indicators used to plan, monitor change and assess progress. This approach is both rigorous and flexible. For example, on the issue of setting targets—some people think it is important that targets be readily achievable while others think that aiming high is the way to generate energy and innovation. The key is to set targets, take action and the results will tell. We'll get better as we go.

Quebec, six years into its strategy, is proving that its investments are producing very good results. The Quebec strategy is backed by legislation, which plays a part in its longevity, but its results are what truly count. Newfoundland and Labrador is also showing good progress. For recently established strategies, it is too early for results to tell a story, but the NCW sees positive signs, including Ontario's decision to legislate, and the efforts made in several jurisdictions to consult widely and include low-income voices.

New Brunswick is at a pivotal point now, having released a report which many consider reflects an innovative and successful public engagement process designed to bring everyone to the table. The *Choir of Voices* report shows the complexity of the task the province faces and its title evokes the harmony of common notes that were heard. The NCW has been tracking and trying to learn from each jurisdiction that develops and implements a poverty reduction strategy. Our attention will be on New Brunswick in November as its strategy is unveiled.

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Accountability and consultation are particularly vital when dealing with complex, long-term issues like poverty and inequality that require vision and sustained action. These issues are not going to be fixed in between elections. Given the nature of Canada's federation, political change is a constant. Nova Scotia had a change of government shortly after the introduction of a poverty reduction strategy, Manitoba has a change in leadership as its strategy continues to develop this fall and New Brunswick will have elections within a year. Federal policies have a big impact on provincial strategies and federal election speculation is always in the news.

If, however, a poverty reduction strategy is built on the cornerstones, especially on meaningful engagement with a range of stakeholders and on best efforts to find common ground, elections, cabinet shuffles and other changes in government should not be unnecessarily disruptive, but rather provide an opportunity to build on accomplishments.

Each poverty reduction strategy is somewhat unique, none is perfect, all face challenges and the NCW applauds the efforts of citizens and governments for making them happen and continuously making them better. We want to encourage wider pan-Canadian cooperation across governments and sectors to get better results for everyone, no matter where you live in Canada.

¹ Note the NCW's response to the two questions asked by the Finance Committee in its fall 2009 consultations on the 2010 federal budget, which is on our website at www.ncwcnbes.net. It contains some specific examples of needed federal investments