

**POSITION STATEMENT**

**ON**

**A WORKING STRATEGY TO END  
POVERTY IN CANADA**

**BY**

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## **A Working Strategy to End Poverty in Canada**

### **Who are the poor?**

The poor are people of all ages from the infant to the very old, men and women. They are among us, a part of us and yet we ignore them, pretend we do not see them or blame them for their condition of poverty.

### **How do we define poverty?**

An easy way to pretend we do not have poverty is to define the socio-economic conditions of poverty in such a way as to almost eliminate its existence. Some economists have argued that there is an absolute dollar amount that can define those who are poor, that poverty is not a condition that is relative to the rest of society. If we were to make this argument then the poorest people in the world are to be the same with the same income and living conditions no matter where they live, in Africa, Asia, South America, Canada or Europe. This is clearly an absurd approach and one that has been rejected by the vast majority of those concerned with the issue of poverty.

Poverty is measured in every society based upon its own values of the society it wants and the people that are excluded from the social and economic life expected to be there for all. A child in Canada does not have to be in the identical social and physical situation as a child in Darfur to be deemed to be poor. Most Canadians recognize that we have many people who are poor but because we have failed to agree upon a definition as a nation we do not agree on what the count is of (or even how to count) those living in poverty. Canada and the provinces have failed to develop a national strategy to end poverty but at least a number of the provinces have begun to recognize that they must develop their own strategy for their own population regardless of what the federal government does – or doesn't do.

Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) has been used by policy activists, analysts and the public as a reasonable and reliable measure to show those who are substantially worse off than the rest of Canadians. An individual or family that spends at least over 50 percent of its income on food, clothing and shelter is deemed to be substantially worse off than the majority of Canadians. They would fall below the LICO and thus be suffering from serious poverty.

## A Working Strategy

### 1. Step One

**We must agree on a national official measure that will identify those who are living in serious or substantial poverty.**

If we cannot agree on a definition we cannot set real targets to reduce poverty nor understand what resources we need to eliminate it over a period of time. If the European Union can do this and other countries such as Ireland can do this, so can Canada. We have wasted years debating how to measure poverty. We cannot wait for this any longer. If the national government will not agree then the provinces, territories, municipalities and aboriginal communities must do it on their own and shame Ottawa into joining them.

### 2. Step Two

**We must have our governments, national, provincial, territorial, municipal and aboriginal, set targets for the reduction of acute or substantial poverty. These targets must have timelines and percentage of reductions in them against which the actions and strategies of the governments can be measured.**

We need to have clear indicators that can be used to measure our progress to meeting those target goals and timetables.

### 3. Step Three

**We must have clear plans of action that are national, provincial, territorial, municipal and aboriginal, with budgets and human resources allocated. The plans must ensure collaboration across all levels of government. The national, provincial, territorial, municipal and aboriginal actors whose policies, practices and programs affect poverty in society must be brought into the plans for action (the private, public and nonprofit sectors are included). Yearly budgets must be set with clear allocations set to meet each of the target programs.**

The plans must look at and take into account all the factors that are critical in determining poverty - gender, disability, illness, age, racism, immigrant status etc.

The action plans must target, as a basic minimum:

1. Raising social assistance/income support program levels to at least the Low Income cut-off Level of Statistics Canada. (Ultimately a Guaranteed Annual Income)
2. Raise the minimum wage to at least \$10 an hour with cost of living increases built in to the plan.
3. Ensure the availability of affordable housing in all communities to meet the needs of low to moderate income people and families.
4. Subsidized housing must be available and supports must not be set to penalize the individual as they re-enter the labour force by raising the cost of their housing with each increase in income.
5. Provide access to education and training (including re-training) for all adults and subsidize transportation and other costs associated with employment.
6. Provide access to health and dental support programs so that the transition into the work force does not penalize people as they move into the paid labour force.
7. Create a national child care program with subsidies for low income families.

#### **4. Step Four**

**Clear accountability mechanisms must be in place with yearly public reporting on progress made in meeting the targets and timelines.**

An independent agency similar in powers to the Auditor General nationally and the Provincial and Territorial Auditors must be empowered to report to the public on government achievements.

This *Working Strategy to End Poverty in Canada* is just a start but it is a beginning that can be acted upon provided there is a will to act. Other countries have set targets for poverty reduction. There is no reason for Canada and all the provinces and territories and other levels of government not to do the same.