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Poverty Reduction in Canada

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Welfare State in Transition

- Governments in Canada, as elsewhere, are struggling to address challenges of 21st Century – trying to modernize their systems of social protection while at the same time, aspiring to be a more innovative and competitive force in the new global, knowledge-based economy
- Goal of presentation today is to provide an overview of these efforts, looking specifically at where poverty reduction strategies (PRS) fit in
- And within poverty reduction strategies – where issues related to supports for people with disabilities stand

Welfare State in Transition

- A number of dominant themes in current social policy debates, i.e., facilitating and/or compelling labour force attachment; investing in children; increased income targeting; “in work” benefits
- These new programs represent:
 - a shift in thinking about the purpose and design of the welfare state; and
 - a renewed effort at the level of policy and program to address issues related to persistent poverty and low income

Welfare State in Transition

- Emphasis on poverty reduction fits neatly with changing ideas about the role of the welfare state
- Security and equality are still identified as key social policy goals. What has changed, though, is the definition of how these goals should be achieved: there has been a transition from the idea of security as “protection from change, to security as the capacity to change”

Welfare State in Transition

The devil is in the details:

- On the one hand, emergence of poverty and the development of poverty reduction strategies represents the best opportunity in many years to develop and implement cross-sectoral policies and programs that address the varied needs of people who have been economically marginalized – including people with disabilities;
- On the other hand, the focus on “poverty” programs can and does reinforce an understanding of poverty as individual in nature, that is, a situation of personal failure, a problem in need of a charitable response. It can work to further marginalize economically vulnerable groups – which has been the past experience in Canada

Poverty Reduction – Experience in Canada

- Several jurisdictions have adopted comprehensive approaches to poverty reduction and have had some success in reducing poverty and social exclusion.
- Ireland and the United Kingdom are two examples of countries that have implemented comprehensive anti-poverty strategies which include explicit targets and timelines.
- Only two in Canada jurisdictions – Québec and Newfoundland and Labrador – have comprehensive anti-poverty strategies.
- Three or four other jurisdictions – Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and possibly Prince Edward Island – are exploring the options for developing their own comprehensive anti-poverty strategies.

Poverty Reduction – Experience in Canada

- To date, calls for a poverty reduction strategy have not been taken up formally by the federal government
- Two Senate Committees have assembled critical research findings and testimony from a wide range of stakeholders – making the case for the importance of addressing poverty and the growing income gap
- This spring, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA) launched public hearing into the desirability of developing a poverty reduction strategy for Canada
- Four out of five federal parties have identified reducing poverty as a public priority in 2008 federal election

Poverty Reduction – Experience in Quebec

- The Québec government introduced a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy with its 2002 *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*. The idea of a framework law for the elimination of poverty was initiated by a broad-based citizens' movement called the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec.
- The goal set out in the Act is to make Québec one of the industrialized nations having the fewest number of people living in poverty by 2013
- In 2004, the Québec government published its *Government Action Plan* and in the 2004-2005 budget, the government committed to invest \$2.5 billion over five years (now \$3.3 billion) to increase the incomes of welfare recipients and low-income earners

Poverty Reduction – Experience in Quebec

- Quebec's Action Plan has four central objectives:
 - To improve the lives of people living in poverty;
 - To prevent poverty and social exclusion;
 - To involve society as a whole;
 - To ensure consistent, coherent action.
- A range of new supports / programs were proposed for persons with disabilities, including:
 - Partial indexation of employment-assistance benefits;
 - Improved access to employment programs, including “adapted work centres” and subsidies for employers to modify workplaces, etc.;
 - A commitment to develop a separate system for people with disabilities and support services targeted to individual need (social solidarity program).

Poverty Reduction – Experience in Newfoundland and Labrador

- Following up on a commitment made in 2003 in the *Progressive Conservative Party Plan* and in the 2005 Speech from the Throne, the government pledged to transform Newfoundland and Labrador from a province with the most poverty to a province with the least poverty by 2015.
- *Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*, released in 2006, sets out medium-term goals and objectives, including:
 - improved access 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.

Poverty Reduction – Experience in Newfoundland and Labrador

- The government of the province will invest over \$90 million annually in new funding to prevent, reduce, and alleviate poverty.
- Focus areas identified are: the working poor, school-aged children and at-risk youth, women, Income Support clients, and persons with disabilities.
- Examples of investments in supports for persons with disabilities include:
 - A commitment to improve access to existing services and benefits;
 - Increase access to post-secondary institutions;
 - Improve labour market programs for persons with disabilities;
 - Improve inclusive measures to further support children with special needs to participate in early learning and child care
 - Strengthen early intervention services

Poverty Reduction – Experience at Local Level

- The most sustained drumbeat for poverty reduction has come from advocates and community service providers at the local level
- There are numerous local and regional coalitions working on poverty reduction. Social planning organizations, labour councils, public health workers, community economic development initiatives, literacy organizations, women's groups have joined forces in communities across the country.
- Civil society organizations have played a key role in sustaining the anti-poverty movement for many years. Groups work at the national, provincial and local levels.
- Examples:
 - PEI Working Group for a Livable Income
 - Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition
 - Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté
 - Vibrant Communities groups working in 16 Canadian communities;
 - Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty

Where to From Here?

- Stepping back, looking at programs for low income Canadians, welfare reform efforts from the mid 1990s on have focused largely on reducing social assistance caseloads – generally by encouraging clients of these programs to enter the paid workforce.
- On the one hand, stricter eligibility requirements and lower benefit levels have been introduced in programs intended to support working-age people.
- On the other hand, different provinces have also introduced programs to “make work pay.” These programs offer additional supports to help social assistance clients enter paid employment without losing benefits such as dental care, prescription drugs, and so on, (overcoming the “welfare wall”).
- Resulted in limited progress in reducing levels of poverty and closing income gap. We are still tinkering in most of Canada.

Where to From Here?

- New emphasis on Poverty Reduction Strategies signals a shift. Greater attention is now being paid to the barriers and challenges that different groups of low income people face.
- Quebec has concretely demonstrated the value of adopting a comprehensive approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion. Quebec has used the opportunity to develop a separate platform of benefits and programs for people with disabilities.
- The other lesson from the Quebec experience is that popular mobilization over a sustained period of time can produce results.
- The scope of the Quebec plan is a testament to the ongoing engagement of advocates and community organizations – representing diverse groups and areas of concern such as housing, child care, public health, education and training.

Where to From Here?

- In the rest of the country, hard to get away from the notion that governments are tinkering around the edges of existing programs
- The promise of *In Unison* has never been realized; there is a visceral reluctance to tackle a “real” program of reform for people with disabilities – that would result in greater economic security and enhanced flexibility of supports.
- With the focus on Poverty Reduction Strategies, there is a new opportunity for the disability community in collaboration with other anti-poverty advocates to advance proposals to prevent and reduce the very high levels of poverty among people with disabilities and their families – working at the local and provincial levels.
- It is also an opportunity to find common cause as the economic downturn takes hold – both to hold the line and to look forward to a better future.



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