

Research for communities

The view from here Manitobans call for a poverty reduction plan

On May 26, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, in collaboration with Make Poverty History Manitoba and many other organizations, will release *The view from here: Manitobans call for a poverty reduction plan*. The report is based on the ideas that emerged from consultations and interviews with hundreds of individuals across Manitoba.

Fifty organizations endorsed the plan and many more continue to sign on.

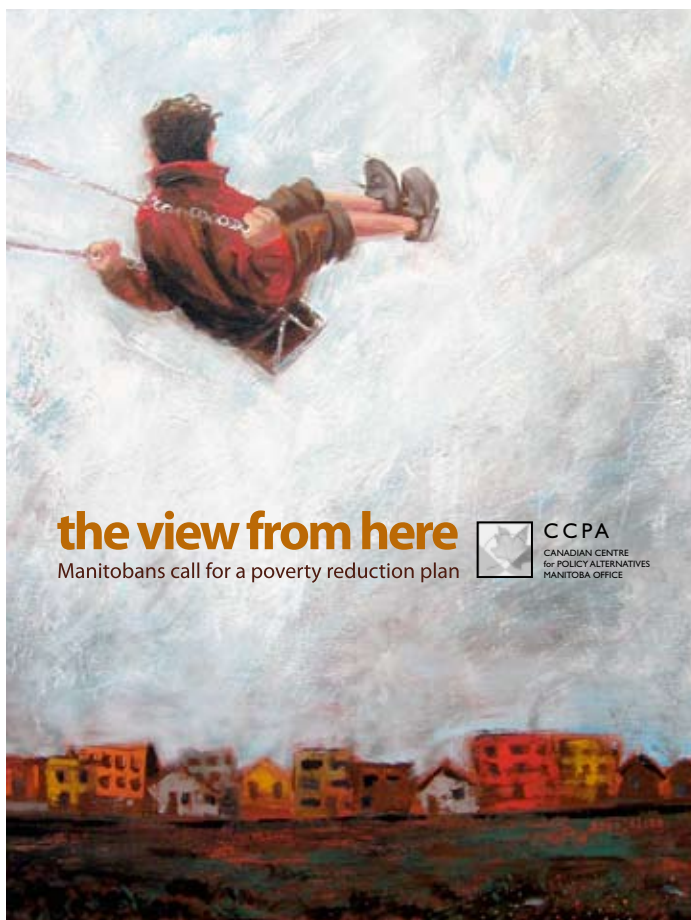
WHAT IS A POVERTY REDUCTION PLAN?

While the Province of Manitoba has taken important steps to address poverty and social exclusion in recent years, it has not implemented a comprehensive plan that shows Manitobans how far it has come and where it plans to go in its efforts to reduce poverty and social exclusion.

Other jurisdictions, both in Canada and Europe have developed such plans and strategies in recent years. While the Canadian government continues to show no sign of moving forward with a comprehensive plan for our country, many Canadian provinces have begun to take the

challenge of poverty and social exclusion seriously.

The best of these plans share the following common elements.



A comprehensive and coordinated approach

The causes of poverty and social exclusion are complex and often deeply rooted. Solutions are equally complex and require multiple policy and program interventions. These realities need to be reflected in a poverty reduction plan if it is going to be effective. A comprehensive approach would include an increase in income benefits; an expansion of social housing; increased access to childcare; increased access to recreation; increases in the minimum wage toward a living wage; and establishing policies that provide education and training opportunities that lead to good jobs rather than the precarious cycle of low-wage jobs that is the reality for many.

A process to consult meaningfully with citizens

The social exclusion legislation adopted in Quebec, the poverty reduction strategies established in Newfoundland and Ontario, and others in earlier stages such as Nova Scotia have engaged NGOs and anti-poverty advocates in identifying key issues and targets. All Manitoba citizens interested in building a more inclusive community, including anti-poverty advocates, community workers, progressive business and labour leaders as well as individuals most affected by poverty, should be consulted.

Targets and timelines

While economic circumstances beyond the control of governments can quickly throw a wrench in the best of plans, setting targets and timelines shows that governments are serious about poverty reduction. Governments that have taken this step are to be commended for taking

the risk. Targets and timelines make governments accountable and provide incentive to follow through with action. Without them, strategies can become little more than a public-relations exercise.

Communication and collaboration across departments

Departments must communicate in order to coordinate government activities and ensure all are working towards the achievement of common goals with respect to poverty reduction and inclusion. This can ensure that departments are not working at cross purposes and it can increase efficiency.

An annual evaluation and progress report

EU strategies are regularly evaluated by an independent evaluator to show where gains have been made and where more work is required, and to make recommendations when needed. Quebec legislation requires that departments evaluate progress annually.

WHAT CAN THEY DO?

A poverty reduction plan can:

- Demonstrate that governments take seriously the issue of poverty and social exclusion and aim to make it a priority.
- Highlight existing initiatives, expose gaps, and provide direction for future action.
- Provide a mechanism for governments to engage citizens in discussion about what might be incorporated in a comprehensive strategy.
- Increase transparency and help hold governments accountable to their commitment to poverty reduction.

- Act as an education tool to raise awareness of the complex nature of poverty and social exclusion and why prioritizing its elimination is important for the entire community.

Newfoundland and Labrador's 2006 *Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* includes specific targets and timelines. The initiative engages participation across government, and is coordinated through the department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment. While it is still early to evaluate progress, the anti-poverty community is optimistic and generally pleased with the government's commitment to the initiative.

FIGHTING POVERTY IS AFFORDABLE

Calculations derived from Statistics Canada show that the after-tax incomes of all poor people in Manitoba could be brought up to Statistics Canada's low income cut-off (LICO)—the most commonly used poverty line—for a total cost of just under \$516-million a year. Some of that money would have to come from government, but much of it could be provided by employers paying a living wage. Closing this "poverty gap"—the total depth of poverty of all low-income residents—is easily affordable in a province like Manitoba where the "poverty gap" represents a mere 1.1 per cent of the overall provincial economy (Manitoba's GDP in 2007 was \$48.5-billion).

WHAT SHOULD BE IN A MANITOBA POVERTY REDUCTION PLAN?

The View from Here recommends the following targets and timelines for a Manitoba plan.

- Using Statistics Canada's after-tax low-income cut-off (LICO-AT), reduce Manitoba's poverty rate from 11.4% to 8.5% in five years, and to 5.5% in ten years (approximately a 25% reduction in five years and a 50% reduction within a decade).
- Ensure the poverty rate for children, female lone-parent households, single women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, and recent immigrants likewise declines by 25% in 5 years, and by 50% in 10 years, in recognition that these populations are particularly vulnerable to poverty.
- Within two years, ensure there are no Manitobans living 50% or more below the LICO-AT.
- Reduce the share of Manitobans facing 'core housing need' by half by 2015.
- Reduce the waiting list for Manitoba Housing by half within four years.
- Improve food security for low-income individuals and families. Reduce food bank use from 3.4% to 1.7%, a 50% reduction, within ten years, and set a date for the elimination of food banks in Manitoba.
- Reduce the share of low-wage workers. Manitoba should demonstrate progress in reducing the share of workers earning less

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than two thirds of the median wage every year.

Recommended Priority Actions

Based on a community consultation by Make Poverty History Manitoba the following initiatives were identified as the most critical and achievable elements to be included in a poverty reduction plan.

Housing

Income Security: *Employment and Income Assistance; Jobs; Wages; Employment Standards and Labour Legislation.*

Education: *Early Learning and Child Care; Kindergarten to Grade 12; Post Secondary Education; Adult Learning and Training .*

Neighbourhood and Community Approaches

Transportation

Disability Supports

Health

The view from here outlines specific actions in each of the above policy areas.

HOW SHOULD THIS BE PUT IN PLACE?

The view from here recommends that a cabinet committee chaired by the Minister of Finance be tasked with the implementation and monitoring of the Poverty Reduction Plan. The lead minister should be required by legislation to table an annual progress report in the legislative assembly, so that progress on the plan is transparent to the public, and members of the legislative assembly can monitor and evaluate progress, and seek elaboration on

government performance as required. A cross-sectional public advisory board should be appointed to monitor progress and ensure that timelines and targets are met.

A comprehensive poverty reduction plan will require the participation and cooperation of citizens, the private sector, the non-governmental sector, and government agencies and authorities across many sectors.

Combating poverty in Manitoba will require the coordinated efforts of all levels of government. However, in many of the areas outlined, the Province has been left with major challenges because the Federal Government has either shirked its responsibility or refused to step up to the plate to meet the challenges of the 21st century. But while we recognize that all levels of government have a role to play, we believe that the Province must take the lead role in developing and implementing a plan using existing tools, including provincial taxes and federal transfers to meet timelines and targets, and should be held primarily accountable for the plan's success.

There is nothing inevitable about poverty and homelessness in a society as rich as ours. A commitment to a bold plan could lead to a reduction in poverty and social exclusion within a few short years.

The full report, *The view from here*, will be available on May 26 at www.policyalternatives.ca. After that date individuals and organizations can add their names to those who have endorsed the Plan at www.makepovertyhistory.ca.

