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The Collective for a Poverty- Free Québec: A Case Study

by

**William Ninacs, with the collaboration of
Anne-Marie Béliveau and Francine Gareau**

September 2003

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

K1Y 4N7

Phone: (613) 729-3340

Fax: (613) 729-3896

E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org

Website: www.caledoninst.org

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Introduction</i> | 1 |
| <i>CAPMO: The precursor to the Bill</i> | 1 |
| <i>The context of the idea behind the Bill</i> | 3 |
| <i>From Proposal to Law: the Collective</i> | 5 |
| <i>Constructing the proposal</i> | 5 |
| <i>Validation</i> | 7 |
| <i>From the proposal to the adoption of the Bill</i> | 8 |
| <i>The Bill</i> | 10 |
| <i>Mobilization and participation</i> | 12 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 13 |
| <i>A note on methodology</i> | 16 |
| <i>Endnotes</i> | 16 |
| <i>References</i> | 17 |

Introduction

Over the last three decades, a paradoxical situation has been wreaking havoc in industrialized nations. It concerns the simultaneous creation of wealth and poverty which is linked to the profound structural changes occurring in a number of fields, such as new information and communications technologies and the production of goods and services. This has resulted in a form of poverty not seen before in which the gradual material and financial impoverishment of certain individuals is accompanied by their social exclusion. This new configuration of poverty is characterized by, among other things: a scale which fluctuates with the ups and downs of the labour market; a pronounced effect on specific population groups such as young families, in particular those with several children and single-parent families, persons with disabilities and people with mental health problems; and a territorial concentration. New ways of addressing poverty are therefore actively being sought.

A large number of those working with poor people do not see poverty as inevitable and believe its elimination is possible. Vivian Labrie, a Québec community activist, has subscribed to this vision for several years now. She contests that the systems currently in place are not even sufficient to ensure the effective application of basic human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In her view, poverty is what stops these basic rights from being respected, even though they are recognized by our governments, and this situation is both unacceptable in itself and incomprehensible in a society as wealthy as ours.

But whoever speaks of rights must also speak of legislation. The Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec, the organization that Vivian Labrie coordinates, believes that the elimination of poverty requires concerted actions, including legislation at the provincial level, that encourage commitment from both the state and its citizens. However, the Collective also considers that it is just as essential to have individuals who are living in poverty, and their associations, participating as experts in the development of any legislation aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion. The story that follows provides a marvellous illustration of the Collective's position by tracing the background and development of Bill 112. This Bill, aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion, was adopted unanimously by Québec's National Assembly in December 2002.

CAPMO: The precursor of the bill

The story begins with the *Carrefour de pastorale en monde ouvrier* (CAPMO) (Pastoral Outreach to Low-Income Neighbourhoods), an organization set up in Québec City in 1978 by priests and lay people from the Catholic Church. Its objective was to work actively to obtain greater social justice for the poor. The group has long taken its inspiration from liberation theology. This orientation leads it to react against any ideas and structures likely to generate oppression, with a vision and

a discourse based on liberation for all humankind, while taking the side of the poorest members of society or those left stranded on its fringes.

The preoccupations of CAPMO cover four main areas of activity: events and developments affecting working class and low-income people; the project for society; solidarity both here and elsewhere; and the spiritual life of persons who are socially committed. Once a month, it holds an open meeting for all interested participants on a theme defined by its Board, at which an analysis of the current situation is undertaken. CAPMO sees itself as a crossroads of sorts at which people passing by can stop for a time, reflect in order to act more effectively, and learn what they need in order to continue their journey. A report from each monthly meeting is distributed to a network of some 300 individuals and groups involved in this area of work.

CAPMO's objectives are multiple. First, CAPMO brings together people from a range of backgrounds, including those from low-income, working class and poorer neighbourhoods, and those involved for reasons of solidarity with people at the bottom rungs of the social ladder. It then helps them develop practices of mutual assistance, solidarity and citizenship. After that, with an approach centred on popular education, it works towards the development of economic and social solidarity and improving quality of life and working conditions with a view to countering misery and eliminating poverty. In short, CAPMO attempts to ensure a coherent stewardship built around solidarity and social justice, by combining the spiritual life with a life of action.

With respect to poverty, CAPMO has adopted a model based on reflection-action, which operates on three interconnected axes: dialogue, activism and proposition.

Through dialogue, it seeks to reduce exclusion by attempting to re-establish links between individuals that have been broken by, among other things, diverse prejudices. In order for dialogue to take place, a space must be available for exchanging views, and the expertise of all concerned – especially the poor – must be recognized. To illustrate, in 1997, CAPMO wanted to provide a place to allow poor people to reflect on oppression and hope, just as it had done with an activist and working-class meeting place that it had created along with other groups, the *Parlement de la rue* (Street Parliament), which held weekly meetings for exchanges that, in turn, allowed bridges to be built between different classes in society. Expressing one's reality or point of view during meetings like this is certainly not very relaxing for people who are not used to it. Thus, during various public events, some irritation was often noticed on the part of government Ministers or other participating authorities when faced with provocative questions from people who are not so well off. On the other hand, some meetings have led to the birth of unsuspected collaboration and even to the taking up of common positions, in spite of divergent interests or points of view. For example, this was the case during the development of the income security reform proposal.

CAPMO considers that its activism translates into the occupation of non-institutional public political spaces. A lot of attention is thus given to the symbolism of the events – *le Parlement de la*

ruie, le Carrefour sur les finances publiques (Discussion Group on Public Finances), *le Jeûne à relais du refus de la misère* (Community Fast to Protest Against Misery) – as well as on the establishment of a climate of trust so that all individuals can have a voice and an occasion for putting forward their differing points of view in a secure setting. However, dialogue requires non-partisan activism, even though it is not necessarily neutral. Hence, considering questions such as peaceful resistance and civil disobedience also constitutes activism for CAPMO.

CAPMO does not content itself with merely opposing injustice – it also comes up with “propositions for improving the way we live together,” in which a place is made for “readjusting the social and fiscal pact and for the re-establishment of inclusive citizenship.” As an example of this, CAPMO and other groups took advantage of the second International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, October 17, 1996, in order to launch the *Jeûne à relais du refus de la misère*. For two weeks, some 2,400 people fasted in more than 130 localities¹ in order to show their solidarity with people living in poverty and their support for the demands being put forward by community organizations working in the area of poverty within the framework of the Québec Summit Conference on the Economy and Employment. Four main claims lay at the heart of this Summit: 1) a state commitment to zero impoverishment for the poorest fifth of the population; 2) investment of new money for the creation of quality, lasting jobs in the social economy; 3) fiscal reform to stop the increasing gap between rich and poor and to begin reducing the existing gap; and 4) a public debate on the reform of income security, according a significant place to people who are currently receiving benefits. Without anyone being aware of it, these four claims constituted the embryonic elements of the future Bill on the elimination of poverty.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, CAPMO has also participated in diverse initiatives at both the local and provincial levels. For example, it has been involved in the establishment of a community economic development strategy in the inner-city neighbourhoods of Québec City. Through the participation of its coordinator at that time, Vivian Labrie, CAPMO has also had a role on a number of governmental and non-governmental committees, and even on the Advisory Committee on Income Security Reform. In fact, this participation increased the visibility of both Vivian Labrie and CAPMO as well as their credibility in the eyes of the state. As a result, positive notoriety was gained as much among those living in situations of poverty and social exclusion as among the multitude of Quebec social movements and even among decision-makers, something which constituted a major advantage when it came to putting the strategies adopted by the Collective into operation.

The context of the idea behind the Bill

Among the actions emanating from the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995 and, following from it international pressure, the United Nations (UN) decided to decree an International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Started in 1995, it would take place each

October 17. Although UN member countries committed themselves to becoming involved in the fight against poverty following the Copenhagen Summit, they were criticized for failing to take any concrete measures to follow up on their commitment. The following year, 1996, Leandro Despouy of the UN Human Rights Commission tabled a report on human rights and extreme poverty. In it, he favoured the framing of national policies within legislation since, in his view, this was a good way of making policies within a given country more concrete.

The Copenhagen Summit also led to certain developments in Québec, where the government of the day committed itself to putting concrete measures into operation over a ten-year period for each of the six themes adopted by the Summit. This included the elimination of poverty, which figured at the top of the list.²

Closer to home in May 1995, the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* (Québec Women's Federation) organized the Bread and Roses March, during which some 850 women presented a series of nine demands to the Québec government aimed at improving their economic conditions. Massive public support suggested a degree of open-mindedness with respect to demands that sought to improve the socio-economic conditions of the poor in general, and not just those of women, even though they formed the majority of those in poverty. The March also produced some significant political gains including the adoption of a Bill on the automatic collection of alimony and support payments (after ten years of non-stop effort on the part of women's groups), the freezing of tuition fees, places being reserved for women in non-traditional job training regardless of status (the recognition of the needs of women who were not beneficiaries was a considerable gain) and an increase in the minimum wage (much less than requested, but the largest increase in many years nonetheless).³

Furthermore, thanks to the mobilization of women during the March, the Québec government became open to the idea of developing a new social discourse at the community level. For the first time ever, the state even invited the women's movement and community organizations to participate in the Conference on the Social and Economic Future of Québec in March 1996 and again at the Summit Conference on the Economy and Employment in October of the same year. During the Summit, groups demanded that the rapid elimination of the deficit (zero deficit policy) should not be allowed to aggravate the situation of the poorest fifth of the population. In other words, they were asking that no changes be made in the legislation, regulations or programs related to income security (zero impoverishment). The government did not want to reduce its flexibility with respect to persons unable to work and therefore refused a commitment to this end. However, it responded by setting up the *Fonds de lutte à la pauvreté* (Fund to Fight Poverty) in order to support the reintegration into the job market of economically disadvantaged individuals. The \$250 million set aside for the Fund was supposed to be used to finance job creation projects carried out by sponsoring organizations.

In October 1997, CAPMO, along with other groups, launched the idea of a law on the elimination of poverty within the framework of *Le Parlement de la rue* during which people camped for a

month in front of the National Assembly in Québec City. This coincided with a parliamentary study on welfare reform. Without knowing anything about the Despouy report, it was agreed that a law should be written that would ideally take the place of the one that was being officially discussed. The first draft of a Bill on the elimination of poverty was rapidly put together and circulated, and in no time at all it collected more than 1,200 supporting signatures from diverse quarters, including some people living in poverty.

In light of such a success, CAPMO understood that it had to go even further and it began to disseminate the concept to an even larger community. In the winter of 1998, the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty was set up to collectively put together a law that would be the result of a vast public consultation using the initial, albeit imperfect, draft as a basis for discussion. To facilitate the start of this process, CAPMO agreed to temporarily act as the administrative and legal entity for the Collective, and it released Vivian Labrie from her other duties for a period of two years in order to lead the project.

From Proposal to Law: the Collective

Constructing the proposal

From the start, the Collective was a coalition of ten organizations, mainly union, feminist and religious groups, but also some organizations of the poor. Apart from CAPMO, it included:

- *ATD Quart Monde* (ATD Fourth World)
- *la Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec* (the Québec Teacher's Federation) [since become *la Centrale des syndicats du Québec* (the Federation of Québec Unions)]
- *la Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (the Confederation of National Trade Unions)
- the Canadian Religious Conference, Québec region
- *la Fédération des femmes du Québec*
- *le Front commun des personnes assistées sociales du Québec* (the Common Front of Québec Welfare Recipients)
- *le Regroupement des ressources alternatives en santé mentale du Québec* (the Québec Coalition of Alternative Resources in Mental Health)
- *le Syndicat de la fonction publique du Québec* (the Québec Public Service Union).

Today, some five years later, the Collective is now incorporated and about 30 new members have joined since, including three other unions – *la Centrale des syndicats démocratiques* (the Federation of Democratic Unions), the Québec Nurses Federation and the Québec Federation of Labour – and more organizations of the poor:

- *l'Association québécoise des banques alimentaires et des Moissons* (the Québec Association of Food Banks)
- *Au Bas de l'Échelle* (At the Bottom Rung, which works with low-income workers)
- *la Fédération des associations des familles monoparentales et recomposées du Québec* (the Québec Federation of Associations of Single-Parent and Blended Families)
- *la Fédération des locataires de HLM du Québec* (the Québec Federation of Low-Income Housing Tenants)
- *le Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain* (the Citizen's Action Front for Urban Redevelopment)
- *le Mouvement québécois des camps familiaux* (the Québec Family Camps Movement)
- *le Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec* (the Québec Coalition of Community Kitchens)
- *le Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec* (the Coalition of Québec Citizens' Literacy Groups).

But the partnership widened even further with the arrival of organizations involved in international development (*l'Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale* [the Québec Association of International Co-operation Organizations]), in community economic development (*le Collective des entreprises d'insertion du Québec* [the Collective of Québec Training Businesses]) and in the defence of human rights (*la Ligue des Droits et Libertés* [League of Rights and Liberties]) as well as others coming from a range of community, student and co-operative movements:

- *la Caisse d'économie Desjardins des travailleuses et travailleurs (Québec)* [Québec Worker's Credit Union]
- *la Confédération québécoise des coopératives d'habitation* (Québec Confederation of Housing Co-operatives)
- *la Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec* (Québec Federation of College Students)
- *la Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec* (Québec Federation of University Students)
- *le Regroupement des Auberges du cœur du Québec* (the Québec Coalition of Shelters for Homeless Youth)
- *le Regroupement québécois des intervenantes et des intervenants en action communautaire en CLSC et CHSLD* (Québec Coalition of Community Organizers in CLSCs and CHSLDs).

From the outset, the Collective sought to bring together a great many people around the concept of a future Bill and at making sure that these people, including the poorer participants, played a role in its development. It opted for a strategy involving action based on citizenship and popular education, and a small team was set up after obtaining some preliminary funds from the *Fonds de lutte à la pauvreté*. Their task focused on facilitating the process of collective construction, which entailed the training of regional coordinators as well as the collection and analysis of the results of the different discussions. Their work bore fruit, since in the following two years, the Collective

conducted one of the largest operations involving consultation and promotion in the annals of social action in Québec.

Thanks, among other things, to the collaboration of regional branches of the Collective's members, training sessions were held in 1998 and 1999 throughout Québec. Equipped with a facilitator's kit designed according to principles of popular education, team members from the Collective sought first of all to train a number of facilitators and, after that, a group known as 'multipliers,' meaning people who would spread the word about the actions being undertaken by the Collective by promoting the bill within their own network and by gathering all points of view during training activities. The facilitator's kit was the main tool used in this work; it contained a detailed explanation of the reasons underpinning the steps that were being taken, a facilitator's guide, a petition to copy and have signed, a discussion guide and an open form on which people could put down their own ideas.

The Collective instituted a process very similar to that which actually leads to the adoption of real legislation, but with the difference that the consultation was taken to the people rather than the other way round. In addition, substantial numbers of persons living in poverty participated in it fully by providing comments on the proposed legislation. Thus, special interest groups did not monopolize the proceedings; rather, it was the people who were primarily concerned by the bill who had a say. In all, nearly 6,000 people participated in this extraordinary process of popular democracy and thousands of comments were gathered during the hundreds of meetings that took place between September 1998 and June 1999.

Because of the magnitude of the response to the Collective's appeal, specific tools had to be created not only to compile the different points of view, but especially to try and take into consideration the range of opinions as much as possible in the final written text. The development of a database known as the 'Cauldron' helped to provide the means to group and synthesize the wide range of comments and suggestions. This allowed the Collective's drafting and content committees to go over the first draft of the bill during that autumn. The Proposal for a Bill on the Elimination of Poverty was made public on December 9, 1999, during a gathering held in front of the Montreal Stock Exchange.

Validation

During the winter of 2000, the Collective organized three months of decentralized citizen-led parliamentary sessions – more than 200 in all – in order to allow poor people gain a better understanding of the proposal and to be able to debate the issues without fear. The participation of citizens and especially of people living in situations of poverty demonstrated that such people were able to clearly understand the why and the wherefore of the Collective's project. The now celebrated

phrase by Lucien Paulhus, scribbled on a piece of scrap paper left behind after a session in Drummondville, eloquently expresses the problem that needed to be solved and the solution envisaged as well as everything to which people affected by poverty aspire. He wrote: “I am a leaf beside the tree. Once the bill is passed, I will be in the tree.”

This consultation led to a process of validating the text, which gave rise to a new and exhaustive compilation of comments. It also enabled the drafting committee, supported this time by a Laval University law professor, to ensure that the text of the proposal was in conformity with the standards of legal writing, while remaining faithful to the ideas expressed by the thousands of people who had taken part in its construction. The citizens’ parliamentary sessions showed a new way of going about things that was highly unusual, in which a population had the means of developing the contents of a piece of legislation before going ahead and requesting its application from the government. In fact, it was an example of participatory democracy in which not only do elected officials see to a law’s application, but where citizens also participate at each stage of the process.

The final version of the Proposal for a Bill on the Elimination of Poverty was adopted unanimously by the Collective at a large open meeting on the morning of April 20, 2000. It was then publicly launched on May 13 during a gathering in front of the National Assembly of some 2,000 people from practically every region of Québec. Now, all that was left was to transform this proposition into a piece of genuine legislation or, as the Collective likes to put it, “to change this logical dream into reality.”

From the proposal to the adoption of the Bill

During this whole period, from 1998 to 2000, the Collective was also circulating a petition, the same one contained in the facilitator’s kit, in order to demonstrate that the idea of such a law and particularly the main outlines of its contents had the support of the general public. The petition was tabled in the National Assembly on November 22, 2000, jointly by three MNAs representing the three main political parties. It contained 215,307 signatures and provided remarkable testimony concerning public opinion on the subject.

On the same day, the National Assembly adopted a motion – diluted, it must be said, as far as the Collective was concerned, but significant nonetheless – requesting that the government develop a global strategy for combating poverty. One might have thought at this stage that the Collective’s numerous efforts had at last been crowned with success, but unfortunately this wasn’t the case. To some degree, ignoring both the signatories of the petition and the organizations that had supported the Collective, the government of Québec decided to go its own way. Following consultations with a good number of experts (including the author of this text), but without the meaningful collaboration of the Collective itself, it published its orientations and perspectives for action with respect to

combating poverty on June 15, 2001. As the Collective lamented, “the government failed to mention the work done by the Collective [and] it described the overall situation as though there had been no general mobilization of the public on this question.”⁴

There followed a period of intense activity on the part of the Collective, starting with a comparative analysis of what the government was proposing and the widespread distribution of a Manifesto for a Poverty-Free Québec. This document, made public on May 1, 2001, International Workers Day, constituted tangible support from the major labour unions for the bill that the Collective was piloting. This was substantial support on its own, but it must not be forgotten that more than 1,400 organizations of all kinds – community kitchens, parish committees, local unions, chambers of commerce, municipalities (including 18 large towns and cities in Québec), regional county municipalities, organizations and authorities in the health care, education and local development sectors – had also provided support for the Collective’s efforts along the way.

Thus, from September 2001, meetings for the collective analysis of the provincial budget were organized – accompanied, of course, by corresponding tools – liaison bulletins were published, press releases issued, various papers tabled and a citizens’ forum (400 people) held. In short, the Collective was well and truly ready when, on June 12, 2002, the government of Québec tabled Bill 112, ‘An Act to combat poverty and social exclusion,’ accompanied by a statement of its strategic intentions related to this piece of legislation.

But the Collective was no longer the only one ready to react. In fact, at least 160 depositions were submitted to the Minister of State for Social Solidarity, the Family and Childhood, who was responsible for the bill. The majority of these were presented during a Parliamentary Commission held during the months of October and November. Several weeks after the Commission had finished sitting, Bill 112 was adopted – and applauded – but with reserve.

The Collective for a law on the elimination of poverty salutes the unanimous and historic adoption by the National Assembly of an improved Bill 112 which introduces the perspective of permanent and concerted action in the direction of a poverty-free Québec. The Collective is still awaiting the concrete measures that will improve the income of the poorest members of society and repair in the short term the deficit in terms of coverage of the most basic needs that affects hundreds of thousands of people in Québec. To this end the Collective insists that the action plan, which must quickly follow this legislation, seriously attack this problem. The Collective requests that the government immediately prepare budgetary forecasts as a consequence and that the sums required for the application of this Bill be allocated as a matter of priority.⁵

So despite its imperfections, this legislation remains, in the eyes of many observers, “a major political innovation, if only because it makes the fight against poverty a political priority that is both explicit and central.”⁶ There is no doubt that this was a victory!

The Bill

Bill 112 is what is known as enabling legislation, meaning a legislative text that defines general principles and which leaves it up to the government to decide how it is applied. Nevertheless, Bill 112 goes further than a simple statement of principles – even if this is of high import – by instituting a national strategy for combating poverty and social exclusion and by creating certain obligations and structures. For example, it obliges the government to table an action plan stating how it plans to attain the objectives described in the bill, to establish a *Comité consultatif de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale* (advisory committee on the prevention of poverty and social exclusion), to create an observatory to document the same theme, and to replace the *Fonds de lutte à la pauvreté* by the *Fonds québécois d'initiatives sociales* (Québec Social Initiatives Fund) which will be partially decentralized on a regional basis. The bill also sets certain standards of accountability: a mandatory annual report from the Minister responsible concerning the activities carried out within the scope of the governmental action plan as well as a triennial report from the same source describing just where Québec society finds itself in relation to the attainment of the objectives set out in the provincial strategy. As for the advisory committee, the bill obliges it to submit to the Minister, within two years of being set up, recommendations concerning minimum income targets and the means of attaining them, and requires that the Minister produce, in the following year, a report and recommendations concerning these same issues.

While that is all well and good, in fact very good indeed, the question remains: does it respond to the basic request put forward by the Collective and the hundreds of thousands of people that supported its efforts? To find out, one has to return to the eight priorities outlined by the Collective in its submission to the Parliamentary Commission in October. These priorities ensued from the comparison of the government's Bill with the proposal that the Collective had launched two years earlier in May 2000. By analyzing Bill 112 in this way, one has to admit that, in the end, the Collective won out on a number of points, since six of the eight improvements find themselves partially or entirely contained within the new amended bill:

- the Collective requested that the objective of creating a basis for a poverty-free Québec – and not just fighting against poverty and exclusion – be included in the bill, and this was done
- the Collective insisted that the proposed strategy be founded on the genuine realization, with dignity, of the recognition of the rights of all concerned, which was retained in part: The respect for dignity and the recognition – but not the realization – of rights can now be found in the preamble as well as in several sections of the bill
- the Collective had wanted the bill to include two specific targets to be attained within ten years – to join the ranks of industrialized nations counting, firstly, the fewest people living in situations of poverty and, secondly, the smallest gap between the poorest fifth of the population and the wealthiest fifth; the first of these objectives was entered into the bill

- the Collective also requested that the three principles contained in its proposal be included in the bill – that the elimination of poverty be made a priority for governmental action until such time as it was accomplished; that an improvement in the income of the poorest fifth of the population be given priority over that of the wealthiest fifth; and that persons living in situations of poverty and the associations that represent them participate in the conception, establishment and evaluation of the measures to be taken to attain these objectives. In fact, several sections of the bill demonstrate the government’s will to involve people living in poverty in the process and to ask for their expertise, in the same general spirit as the third principle, however, the first two principles do not figure anywhere in this legislation
- the Collective identified the aspects the bill must contain including coverage of basic needs for all as well as an improvement in labour standards and in the manner of fixing the minimum wage. In fact, one section refers to the coverage of basic needs, another compels the government to improve the income “of persons working full-time or on a sustained basis who live in poverty” and yet another institutes the principle of a minimum benefit, the whole constituting the first steps towards establishing a baseline threshold so much sought after by the Collective and its members
- the Collective had insisted that there should be a clause ensuring an examination of all governmental decisions in the light of their effect on poverty and on the gap between society’s richest and poorest members. An impact clause, although weaker than had been hoped for, appears for the first time in a law.

In addition, as a seventh priority, the Collective called for a series of measures to be undertaken immediately from the moment the law went into force: a guarantee of minimum basic benefits for those receiving income security payments; assured access to voluntary orientation measures, training and job reintegration; and an increase in the minimum wage. As a last priority, the Collective considered it essential that adequate budgetary resources be made available to ensure that the provincial strategy could be implemented in its entirety. As it stands now, everyone is still waiting – with some impatience, it must be said! – for the tabling of the government’s action plan and a budget taking the bill into account. The provincial election of April 2003 – and the change of government that resulted – has noticeably slowed down the process of its implementation.

In summary, the adoption of the bill did not signal the end of this process, but only one more step – a major one, obviously, but the loopholes in the bill and especially the delays in putting it into effect mean that no one can afford to let up yet. It is certainly a story with a great deal more to come.

Mobilization and participation

An analysis of the bill shows a clear desire on the part of the government of Québec to act on the question of poverty, even if concrete actions seem to be delayed. Yet it seems doubtful that this attitude would have developed without the unrelenting efforts of the Collective with respect to mobilization, education and the popularizing of the issue. This legislation is definitively the result of concerted community action that has been led with rigour and vigour.

“Social action is expressed by the setting up of advocacy and pressure groups with the aim of resolving the social problems most strongly felt by oppressed people and shifting power into the hands of community organizations.”⁷ The work of the Collective clearly falls into this area. In addition, in contrast to other models for social action based, for example, on lobbying or political action, the grassroots model used by the Collective is empowerment-oriented. This is due to the control members have over its actions and also because the Collective considers such control to be a key element in attaining its objectives.

In truth, the Collective goes even further by ensuring the full and equal participation of its constituents – meaning, people living in poverty – in the validation of its most significant decisions since, according to the Collective, “fighting against poverty without the poor being involved leads irrevocably to a fight against the poor themselves.” This participation played a key role in understanding of what it is like to live in poverty and consequently in the development of an appropriate legislative strategy to respond to it. For example, the Collective clearly gives priority to the economic dimension of poverty with its insistence on emergency measures of an economic nature, such as a minimum income threshold for people on welfare, coverage of basic needs, free medication for welfare recipients and for those receiving the guaranteed income supplement, and an increase in the minimum wage. In fact, one might think that poor people must have had something to do with placing the economic problem to be resolved at the forefront of the Collective’s preoccupations since, even if the poverty they are experiencing has repercussions at other levels such as housing, food and health, it is the economic aspect which remains the fundamental one.

The question thus arises as to how to reconcile this economic emphasis with the call for a global approach in the fight against poverty. In fact, it is within the bill itself that the Collective succeeded in enshrining the notion of the coverage of essential needs, an idea that is embedded in Section 8 concerning the actions required to reinforce the social and economic safety net. This clause deals with the income level provided to individuals and families living in situations of poverty; maintaining or reintegrating employment for low-income workers; access to health care services, social services and education; and the supply of food and housing at affordable prices, including community support for homeless people. But a truly global approach must also take into account other factors particular to poverty, like those noted in the law related to disparities between men and women (hence the need for gender analysis), to the stronger occurrences of poverty in certain regions or areas of the province, and to the specific needs of certain groups in society which present special difficulties, notably due to age, ethnic origin and particular deficiencies or disabilities.

The Collective's astounding feat of having these elements of a global approach enshrined in the bill would surely not have been possible without the close collaboration of the networks of various community organizations already active in these fields. The same may be said for the organizations of disabled people and women's groups that also assisted. The fact that the Collective was able to reach out to the diverse regions of Québec in order to listen to people in their own settings was certainly another key to its success. Even its travels will have repercussions in the future, since they have led to the emergence of new leaders in certain regions. Finally, the ongoing participation of the poor themselves in all the Collective's activities vividly demonstrates that poor people must be considered as assets within their communities and society at large, especially when it comes to helping find solutions to problems that affect them.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, no one would have dared to speak of the idea of eliminating poverty. Indeed, Vivian Labrie states that a project as ambitious as this one can raise a great deal of scepticism, but she reiterates that the notion of the elimination of poverty originally belongs to the vocabulary of the UN. She further notes that people's good will alone is not enough, that when a society takes a new direction, it is marked by a piece of legislation, since "a law prescribes, frames and implements changes by giving them a permanent character which extends beyond the life of any one government."⁸ She cites health care reform as an example, which was in fact marked by the adoption of legislation in the 1970s.

L'Assemblée des évêques du Québec (the Assembly of Québec Bishops) sees the adoption of the bill as an important starting point for the edification of a new society based on the logic of sharing. It is already true that throughout its different activities and by means of its participatory approach, the Collective encourages sharing on a number of levels, notably with respect to know-how and learning. And it is possible to think that when the bill is put into operation, it will initiate a process of sharing at the level of society as a whole, even if only through the medium of a more equitable redistribution of taxes as outlined in the bill.

However, exercising citizenship does not rely solely on the sharing of material and financial resources, because full participation in society depends equally and particularly on the sharing of power. Bill 112 opens the door slightly in this direction, by indicating that people living in a situation of poverty will be asked to contribute at the different stages of its implementation. This obviously presupposes direct contact around a common objective between persons living in situations of poverty and others who do not. And of course, the drawing together of two such groups is not at all usual for either of them.

What's more, for those living in poverty, since they are generally excluded from this type of activity, a learning process is required in order to allow them to experiment and become familiar

with the processes involved. This is the reason why the Collective created the “AVEC” project several years ago, starting with the idea that it is necessary to “think together, decide together and act together.” Centred on the notion of “taking the floor” and speaking up about “what ails them,” AVEC provides cross-references to a range of collective activities aimed at developing knowledge and practices that allow individuals to transform their way of seeing and acting so as to take into account the know-how provided by those living in situations of poverty over a range of questions affecting their reality. The list of these activities is quite long, but it includes occasions on which poor people were able to express themselves concerning the government’s proposed legislation as well as on the budget, which followed its adoption. It also revealed in creative and unexpected ways how poverty can affect them, for example, by using objects from daily life to make their point. Wanting to develop relationships of solidarity which would lead to concrete changes in the quality of life of those living in situations of exclusion and poverty, AVEC also organizes externally-oriented actions, such as discussions with parliamentarians and citizens’ groups, and a tour and some regional training sessions also are foreseen. Participation and mobilization in a spirit of collaboration and inclusion therefore continue to figure in the forefront of the Collective’s methods.

Certain activities of AVEC have already helped the Collective develop an action plan to accelerate the elimination of poverty, which would start by putting into operation certain urgent measures and include evaluations using criteria related to the Collective’s priorities after five years and then after ten years. If the new Québec government uses this plan as inspiration, a permanent action plan for overseeing this process could at last see the light of day. It could then be ensured that, from one decade to another, the results obtained from past action plans could be preserved and that the causes of poverty would not then reappear. We would then truly be in a poverty-free Québec.

Unfortunately, the decisions taken and the statements made by the new Prime Minister of Québec, Jean Charest, as well as by the other members of the Council of Ministers since their election in April 2003, indicates that such a scenario verges on utopia. Admittedly, the Minister for Employment, Social Solidarity and the Family reiterates the commitment of his government to put in place next year the urgent measures contained in the law – baseline threshold, indexing of benefits, free medication. In the fall, he will also produce the action plan stipulated by Bill 112 and, at the same time, establish the baseline threshold for welfare benefits. The problem is that no new money has been allocated to finance the measures, which will be included in the action plan.

Worse, the budget appropriation of the Ministry for Employment, Social Solidarity and Family (MESSF) was cut by \$132.9 million for the current year! The previous government had calculated that \$1.5 billion would be needed over five years to fulfil the requirements of Bill 112. According to the current Minister, some leeway will spring from monies reserved for programs but not spent before the end of the year. Although this is indeed likely, it is more likely that the MESSF is depending upon the \$188 million saved by the reintegration into the labour market of 25,500 people receiving social assistance to help finance its action plan. The MESSF also intends to recover \$20 million

or more by a more rigorous application of the penalties to people receiving benefits and considered able to work who refuse to follow training courses or to accept a job. The Ministry bases its analysis on a forecast of 640,000 jobs that will become available between now and 2006. It presumes that a good number of them will be suitable for some of the 175,000 people considered to be able to work among the 359,700 households presently receiving income security benefits.

These measures ensue from a ‘new philosophy’ within the MESSF, one centred on the personalized and speedy accompaniment of new benefit applicants without severe work constraints. However, for the Collective, there’s nothing new in this approach and it’s a net loss instead. According to Vivian Labrie, “it will intensify poverty by leaving people less protected from precarious employment. It creates a captive labour market.”⁹ Her remarks are echoed in the editorial pages of Québec’s daily newspapers which treat the change from ‘soft’¹⁰ requirements to receive assistance to workfare based on ‘zero tolerance’¹¹ as a ridiculous, cynical and even sadistic exercise.¹² All agree – the Collective, editors and academics – that coercive measures are, at the very least, unproductive and that their application, as Jean-Yves Desgagnés of the *Front commun des personnes assistées sociales du Québec* emphasizes, “rests on a prejudice according to which people receiving social assistance don’t make any effort to leave it.”¹³ Thus, in the eyes of the Collective, “the Minister will transform the battle against poverty into a battle against the poor, a return to square one as regards the prejudices with which Bill 112 began to dissociate itself.”¹⁴

Since the Liberal Party of Québec (PLQ) came to power, the Collective has had to expand public communications, and the eagerness of the new government to act so fiercely has forced the Collective to react very quickly at times. The Collective’s approach these last few years as well as the many documents which it has produced, are among the tools which have enabled it to clearly articulate its disagreements with the directions of the new government and to identify inconsistencies with positions previously taken by the PLQ – including motions that its own MNAs have previously introduced in the National Assembly and that are in flagrant contradiction with the government’s current objectives.

The Collective’s primary strength remains its exceptional capacity for mobilization centred on the participation of people living in a situation of poverty – a capacity it can use again. Moreover, it warns the Liberal caucus “that its network, present all across Québec, detects the duplicity within the language presently used by the government [and that this] network will not allow, without acting, a change in course for a law which it spent five years to develop.”

The fall of 2003 is thus likely to be a hot one! Even with unanimously adopted legislation, citizen vigilance remains essential and the Collective surely will continue to strengthen and stimulate the participation of impoverished people.

A note on methodology

In addition to the quotations and certain specific statistics referred to in the endnotes, the information presented in this case study came from the Internet site of the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty (<http://www.pauvrete.qc.ca>), from the CAPMO site (<http://www.clic.net/~capmo/>), from documents included in the references which follow and from the first-hand knowledge of the author who was among the first of those to sign the petition supporting the CAPMO project in October 1997.

Endnotes

- 1 According to the “Communiqué treize” issued on October 29, 1996, by the organizing committee of the Jeûne. [http://www.mrci.gouv.qc.ca/publications/doc/cit_2.., site visited in November 1996].
- 2 <http://www.mce.gouv.qc.ca/h/objets/dev-social-francais.pdf>, site visited on March 29, 2003.
- 3 <http://www.ffq.qc.ca/actions/pain-roses.html>, site visited on May 18, 2003.
- 4 <http://www.pauvrete.qc.ca/ancomp.pdf>, site visited on May 19, 2003.
- 5 <http://www.pauvrete.qc.ca/Bull119.pdf>, site visited on January 20, 2003.
- 6 Noël, 2003, 1.
- 7 Ninacs, W.A., 1999, 85.
- 8 Boisvert, R., 2002, 24.
- 9 Normand, G. “Refuser un emploi coûtera 150 \$ par mois.” *Presse*, July 4, 2003, A4.
- 10 Boileau, J. “Vaines pénalités.” *Le Devoir*, July 7, 2003, A6.
- 11 Chouinard, T. “Tolérance zéro pour assistés sociaux aptes au travail.” *Le Devoir*, July 4, 2003, A1 and A8.
- 12 Pratte, A. “Le sadisme libéral.” *La Presse*, July 10, 2003, A15.
- 13 Chouinard, T. “Aide sociale : le PLQ revient sur ses principes.” *Le Devoir*, July 8, 2003, A1 and A8.
- 14 <http://www.pauvrete.qc.ca/Bull138.pdf>, site visited on July 10, 2003.

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