

New Brunswick’s “Overcoming Poverty Together” Plan Earns Praise and Creates Hope

Introduction

Over the past decade, many industrialized countries have begun to address the issue of poverty, recognizing that their social safety nets are no longer adequate to deal with the social and economic complexity of today’s society. Aging populations will place even greater pressures on nations’ resources and will require as many working age individuals as possible to participate in the labour force. In Canada, the move to address poverty has been led by the provinces.

Québec was first to pass a law against poverty in 2002. Since then, Newfoundland/Labrador, Ontario, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and, most recently, New Brunswick have announced poverty reduction plans. Community groups in British Columbia, Alberta and the Northwest Territories are putting pressure on their respective governments to follow suit.

In New Brunswick, the province’s welfare and minimum wage rates had lagged behind the national average for many years. Groups such as the Common Front for Social Justice and the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), a poverty reduction group operating in Saint John, had urged the government to review social assistance policies and develop a broad-based approach to poverty reduction. Since his September 2006 election, Premier Shawn Graham has committed his government to making the province into a ‘have’ province – independent of federal government equalization payments by 2026. Poverty reduction will be woven into the government’s four main themes: transforming the province’s economy, workforce, relationships and government [Province of New Brunswick 2007].

In April 2008, Premier Graham announced that his government would sponsor a major public engagement initiative within six months. He had already engaged consultant Don Lenihan to work with the public service to design a new model for public engagement. This work culminated in *It’s More Than Talk* whose preface states: “that none of us can achieve the big goals we set for ourselves

without the help of others... Governments, stakeholders, communities and citizens need to have a real dialogue where they listen, learn and then act, together” [Lenihan 2008].

A decision was made early in the process that poverty reduction and increased social inclusion could not and would not be the sole responsibility of government. All sectors of New Brunswick society, including business, community nonprofit organizations and citizens, would share responsibility with the government for creating new opportunities for New Brunswick residents. Public engagement seemed like the right model at the right time. It differed significantly from the consultation processes previously used to reform New Brunswick social policies. No other province has used quite the same methodology when developing their poverty reduction strategies, though all had included some form of citizen consultation.

Assembling a leadership team

New ways of communicating and receiving input require new styles of leadership. Lawyer and community nonprofit leader James Hughes was appointed New Brunswick’s Deputy Minister of Social Development in late March 2008. Credited with reorienting the work of the Old Brewery Mission, Montreal’s largest shelter for homeless men, he was recruited for his ability to inject real-life experience and ask ‘what if’ questions in order to revive and refresh the government’s approach to the complex issue of poverty.

In October 2008, the poverty reduction public engagement initiative was launched. Gerry Pond and Léo-Paul Pinet, leaders from the business and community sectors, respectively, were invited to join (then) Social Development Minister Mary Schryer as co-chairs of the public engagement initiative.

Léo-Paul Pinet, General Director of the Volunteer Centre of the Acadian Peninsula, is fluently bilingual and has been a community sector practitioner for 33 years. He accepted the Premier’s invitation to act as a co-chair in part because he was intrigued by the tripartite approach and because he was interested in whether a role could be carved out for community economic development – community-based enterprises that serve a social and economic purpose.

Gerry Pond, former CEO of NB Tel (now Bell Aliant), Chairman of Mariner Partners Inc. and also fluently bilingual, was asked to bring his considerable business expertise and perspective to the initiative. Though adept in business, he knew little of the realities of living in poverty. His willingness to listen and learn inspired less confident speakers to tell their stories.

Kelly Lamrock replaced Mary Schryer as Minister of Social Development when she became Minister of Health in June 2009. He too was eager to learn from other participants and to find ways to support people in their journey out of poverty.

Just as the Government of New Brunswick realizes that progress on poverty reduction and social inclusion requires the participation of many sectors, it also recognizes the importance of

sustained investment and political commitment. To ensure that the public engagement process remained non-partisan, Opposition Leader David Alward committed his party to participate in and support the process. He also joined Premier Graham and the three public engagement co-chairs at their Final Forum press conference.

Overcoming Poverty Together: The New Brunswick Economic and Social Inclusion Plan was released on November 13, 2009. It commits to reducing income poverty by 25 percent and deep income poverty by 50 percent by 2015.¹ The plan will be reviewed and updated every five years.

The public engagement process

The public engagement initiative involved three phases: a public dialogue, a roundtable and a Final Forum. The work was overseen by the co-chair leadership team and supported by a Social Development project team led by James Hughes.

During the winter of 2009, the public dialogue heard input from 2,500 New Brunswickers. Small group community conversations with trained, bilingual animators were held in 16 venues across the province, each attracting between 30 and 100 people (774 in all). Letters, e-mails, and on-line survey and questionnaire responses totalled 902. Intra-departmental conversations gathered input from 464 public servants, and community group sessions heard from 221 participants. In each case, people were asked two questions: What causes poverty? What can be done to reduce it? Views were consolidated into a draft report entitled *A Choir of Voices*, published in June 2009. Over the summer, New Brunswickers were given the opportunity to review the draft. A final report that included suggested revisions from citizens was published in September 2009.

As the public dialogue got under way, members of the leadership team tracked the major concerns that were surfacing and alerted appropriate departments and officials. It soon became clear that a number of education, health and social assistance policies would require significant revision. Departments began the work of developing options for Cabinet approval. Recognizing that all or none of these options might be selected, they would nonetheless serve as the government's negotiating mandate during the Final Forum.

The Caledon Institute of Social Policy was engaged by the Department of Social Development to help envision a restructuring of the province's social assistance system. Its vision paper, *Reconstructing Social Assistance In New Brunswick*, will help guide the province's efforts to improve income security for people on social assistance as well as the working poor [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson forthcoming]. Rick August, a former Saskatchewan public servant and an expert on social assistance issues, was invited to provide input on the redesign of social assistance policy.

In the second phase of the public engagement process, a 30-member roundtable was tasked with shaping the ideas put forward by citizens in *A Choir of Voices* into a series of options that could be developed into a poverty reduction plan. Roundtable members were chosen first and foremost for

their life experience and expertise. They also included people that were currently living – or had previously lived – in poverty. They were provided with all the research and background papers necessary to debate and eventually distill a series of component options including the plan’s vision, global objective, delivery mechanism, priority actions, indicators of success and monitoring mechanisms. By the end of September 2009, an options report was ready for the final phase of the plan’s development.

On November 12-13, 2009, Premier Graham convened the third phase of the public engagement initiative, the Final Forum. Throughout the public engagement process, it was agreed that the plan would be consolidated, finalized and adopted at a Forum event to be chaired by the Premier. The road to the Forum had its bumps and skeptics, but the inclusion of non-governmental voices and the increasingly important role played by people with lived experience of poverty, signalled a change in attitudes towards poverty and a renewed sense that citizens could become agents of change. The leadership provided by the Premier, the three public engagement co-chairs and the optimistic energy of James Hughes were further evidence that New Brunswick was building to a watershed moment.

At the Final Forum, 50 participants agreed on the essential elements of the province’s poverty reduction and social inclusion plan. By this time, it was acknowledged that co-chairs Léo-Paul Pinet, Gerry Pond and Kelly Lamrock had been joined by a fourth co-chair – the collective voice of people with lived experience of poverty. The intense nature of the Forum discussions and the requirement to finish the process with a coherent, actionable plan made a deep impression on every participant.

Says Léo-Paul Pinet: “Three solitudes – the public, private and community sectors – came together and put their collective shoulders to the wheel. This was not a commission. People with lived experience had a chance to describe the ways in which poverty is always in front of them and the process allowed us to look at real solutions, including how we could reorganize government. We could see a way forward and capture it in concrete terms.”

Juanita Black was invited to join the Forum, partly because of her involvement in Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ). Convened by BCAPI, VCSJ is one of 12 initiatives across Canada using the Vibrant Communities collaborative, multisectoral model to address poverty reduction and community revitalization.² Juanita is the editor of *Around the Block*, a VCSJ- and City of Saint John-sponsored community newspaper that features stories and photographs submitted mainly by people living in five priority neighbourhoods.

Says Juanita: “The eight of us who have lived and experienced poverty were helped at every turn throughout the Final Forum and we were treated with respect. We were given briefing notes, tips on public speaking, and a room where we could talk and relax – we were even seated in pairs so that we could give one another mutual support. We had previously met all of the other players and we knew what everyone felt passionate about. At the Final Forum orientation session, Lieutenant Governor Graydon Nicholas, a member of the Maliseet Nation, addressed us in English and French. He reinforced that we were representing everyone in our province and that our efforts would have long-lasting effects.”

The province's Aboriginal population participated in the public dialogue phase and Chief George H. Ginnish of the Eel Ground First Nation participated in the Final Forum. The New Brunswick Chiefs and the provincial government have agreed to work together on a nation-to-nation approach to poverty reduction and social inclusion in First Nation communities.

In the days and weeks that have followed the Final Forum, New Brunswickers have looked back at their accomplishments with pride. Says Deputy Minister James Hughes: "The process design was well thought out and led to a sense of mutual trust among participants, especially during the second phase where the menu was developed, and the Final Forum where the decisions were made. The process also had a built-in accountability and took a realistic approach to poverty reduction. We know that the job will take a long time and will require tenacity. In five years we will review our progress and renew our mandate. In the meantime, we will stay together to be responsible to our promises."

New Brunswick's business community has taken a keen interest in the plan's development and design. In October 2009, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative and the New Brunswick Business Council held "Activate: A New Brunswick anti-poverty convergence." This inaugural one-day event brought together 75 business leaders from around the province to explore the causes of poverty, review promising solutions, define the economic and social benefits that occur when poverty is reduced, and discuss how they could help their communities to reduce poverty.

Gerry Pond continues to consider how the Activate conference and his experience at the Final Forum have influenced his thinking and future plans. Since his official retirement from NB Tel in 2001, he has founded six information technology startup firms and is considering how to use social media tools to launch a community economic development enterprise. Says Gerry: "I used to help look after my community by donating my time and money, but the Forum proved that we have to go further in order to change the community. We have to break the old paradigm of creating wealth, taxes and employment, but we can't help one another until we understand one another. We have to figure out collectively how things are working in our community in order to re-instill the spirit that together, we're stronger."

From euphoria to practicality

Between November 2009 and February 2010, the poverty reduction and social inclusion plan moves from paper to action. The three co-chairs continue to consider how they will move the dialogue more deeply into their respective sectors, and the machinery of government has already implemented three short-term social assistance reforms identified as requiring immediate attention.

As of November 13, the province eliminated its Interim Assistance Program, a low social assistance benefit for single employable people, who are now covered under an existing higher rate program. Second, the province has extended supplementary health care benefits paid through the health card for up to three years – up from 12 months – for clients who are leaving social assistance for a job. (This is a necessary interim step while the province works to create a health benefit for all people living with low incomes.)

A third, pressing issue is the elimination of the social assistance system's household income policy. Though it included many exceptions, the existing policy can best be characterized as one which assumes that all members of a household share equally the economic responsibility for one another. As a result, it restricts the receipt of social assistance in many instances. Forum participants living in poverty stated repeatedly that in order to better their circumstances and exit the social assistance system, they needed to be able to pool resources and share expenses with no penalties being applied to their eligibility for social assistance. The province will release further details of changes to this policy in February 2010.

While these changes are an impressive display of government's willingness to institute change, they represent a small fraction of the 22 action areas identified in *Overcoming Poverty Together*. The plan is divided into three sections: Opportunities for Being, Opportunities for Becoming and Opportunities for Belonging. Social assistance reform – one of seven areas listed under the Opportunities for Being section – includes the three short-term changes outlined as well as ten more to be instituted over the next five years. "Opportunities for Becoming" lists six areas of work related to life-long learning and skills acquisition. "Opportunities for Belonging" cover five community participation-related areas.

Governance and accountability structures are another important element for achieving the plan's overall goal of imbuing every area and sector with responsibility for the work. Taking a leaf out of the Vibrant Communities book, the province will establish a multisectoral Economic and Social Inclusion Board which will support the establishment of local networks. The networks will be responsible for implementing the provincial plan at the community level. The final number, complexion and exact location of these Community Economic and Social Inclusion Networks are yet to be determined.

Networks and Board will have representatives from government, community, business and people living on low incomes. The Board will be presided over by four co-chairs – one each from the four partner groups. To ensure a continuing high level of government involvement and accountability, Ministers and Deputy Ministers will be assigned as the province's representatives. A secretariat will provide administrative support to the Board and Networks.

Managing expectations

As other provinces have experienced, the benefits derived from poverty reduction strategies can be a long time in coming and can be negated by other sources of political and social change. The state of the economy, for example, will have a major impact on government priorities. Says Caledon President Ken Battle: "Abolishing poverty and dependence on social assistance does not happen overnight. It can take years to implement the kinds of bold and progressive changes New Brunswick has outlined in its plan. People also need to acknowledge that changes in the system will not automatically turn people into non-poor earners. Making it easier to leave the welfare system and providing effective training and skills programming that allows people to become more independent are key to fundamental reform of the province's income security system."

Kelly Lamrock believes that his province now possesses the right ingredients for becoming more generous and less punitive towards people who live in poverty. Says Minister Lamrock: “Government can make the welfare system more humane, and business can ensure that low-paying work is more humane and generous, too. If we become more outcome- and less rules-driven, we will do better at lifting people up. Now that the work of moving from the theoretical to the practical is being assigned to local networks, communities can take concrete action based on what they believe will benefit their members.”

Governance is another important aspect of realistic reform. Says Léo-Paul Pinet: “I was very glad to hear the topic of governance mentioned at the roundtable and Final Forum phases. I was also pleased to see more mayors beginning to take part in public engagement discussions. Their participation in the next steps may lead to action on the topic of local governance. We have 20 of our 101 mayors involved right now. As a member of the community sector, that tells me we have a great deal of work to do to get everyone aware of the plan and our vision for where we’re going.”

Minister Lamrock believes that as the local networks allow business, government, community and people in poverty to establish common ground, communities will make the adjustments necessary to accommodate longstanding differences. Says Minister Lamrock: “The genius of the statutory solution is that those things that can be best managed at the local level will be handled there. From here on, government should be steering, not rowing. Our collective focus is on a population experiencing various intensities of poverty and that will ultimately lead us to fairness.”

Determining whether or not the plan succeeds in its goal of lowering poverty rates significantly by 2015 will require multiple quantitative and qualitative indicators. These could include monitoring changes in the rate and depth of poverty (with and without government transfers and income taxes), income inequality, income trends and labour market trends for various categories of the population. Health and education indicators will also provide a measure of the plan’s effectiveness and progress.

Staying true to the principles of multisectoral involvement, confirming local authority for identifying needs and action, and establishing and monitoring poverty reduction targets – all in a non-partisan atmosphere – are at the heart of *Overcoming Poverty Together*. New Brunswickers have successfully navigated through the complexities of plan development, but are now in the fast-moving transitional phase that will test the province’s commitment to sharing power and acting with its partners. Will Aboriginals become engaged with the work and become a fifth member group of the Community Economic and Social Inclusion Networks or the provincial Board? Will long-standing urban and rural tensions surface over delivery of services and competition for economic development projects? What will be the impact of increased levels of immigration, seen as a solution to the province’s slow rate of population growth?

Monique Richard lives in eastern New Brunswick and participated in the Final Forum. She was intrigued by the forum’s process and results and hopes to become a member of the Board. In her words: “People have to be realistic about this work. Our goals laid out a five-year process and it will take at least the first two years to get our feet on the ground. If we can make the changes we’ve outlined, we will have more people off welfare and more suitably employed.”

Residents of New Brunswick have discovered that reawakening the sense of mutual concern that is the basis of a caring community is hard work. Getting the conversation started and completing a comprehensive plan was a major accomplishment. The real success of the province's poverty reduction planning process will be the actions New Brunswickers – individually and collectively – actually take.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the 'community stories' series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Endnote

1. Specific methodologies for determining poverty and deep poverty levels will be developed as the work evolves. According to Statistics Canada's after-tax low income cut-offs, an estimated 60,000 or 8.2 percent of New Brunswick's population of 728,000 lived on low incomes at last count, in 2007. A different measure, HRSDC's Market Basket Measure, estimates that 97,000 or 13.3 percent of the province's population lived on low incomes in 2007.

2. Established in 2002, Vibrant Communities was developed in partnership with Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Selected conveners from 12 cities across the country are involved in a Pan-Canadian Learning Community in which they come together on a monthly basis to share ideas, resources and strategies on local solutions to reduce poverty. They scale up their individual efforts through this collaborative strategic approach. For more information, visit: www.vibrantcommunities.ca

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1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401, Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6 CANADA
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org Website: www.caledoninst.org
Phone: (613) 729-3340