

NATIONAL COUNCIL  WELFARE

**ROUNDTABLE
ON
SOLVING POVERTY**

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National Council
of Welfare

Conseil national
du bien-être social

Canada 

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ROUNDTABLE ON SOLVING POVERTY

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

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FACILITATOR:

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John Rook welcomed participants to the roundtable on *Solving Poverty*. The invitation to the meeting outlined some of the Council's recent efforts in solving poverty issues, a subject that has received a lot of attention. "Poverty is out of the closet," Rook said, and federal political parties are making "policies and commitments on how to deal with the issue."

NCW's report, *Solving Poverty: Four cornerstones of a workable national strategy for Canada*, was the focal point of the day's discussion. A timetable and an action plan are critical to advancing the issue, Rook said, noting that many organizations are a "transforming influence to change the face of Canada." Some take a broader approach; others are more focused. Given the limited resources, everyone must work together to make a difference.

Lynne Tyler said each of the report's four cornerstones would be considered individually, particularly in terms of the suggested discussion questions.

Session 1: Vision, Targets, and Timelines

Solving Poverty: Four cornerstones of a workable national strategy for Canada lists four steps, or cornerstones, that “need to be the foundation for lasting solutions to the problem of poverty in Canada.”

CORNERSTONE 1

Cornerstone 1 calls for “a national anti-poverty strategy with a long-term vision and measurable targets and timelines.”

Participants were asked to consider several questions:

- What are the elements of a national vision?
- How can we co-ordinate federal, provincial, municipal, Aboriginal and other people, and actions with a national strategy?
- What has been your experience with setting targets and timelines for anti-poverty efforts? What has been the response from governments and others?

A participant referred to the statement by the minister from Newfoundland and Labrador, who had articulated the province's vision for poverty

reduction. By 2014, Newfoundland and Labrador intends to move from having the highest incidence of people living in poverty in Canada to the lowest. He said he would like to see the federal government adopt a similar vision. The National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO) is asking everyone to refer to “poverty eradication” rather than “poverty reduction” as a long-term goal. Setting goals and timelines is necessary to achieve poverty eradication.

A participant said poverty is a non-partisan issue, and engaging people is a critical element to any strategy. The articulation of timelines and a vision stem from defining poverty. Therefore, it is important to agree on that subject and articulate commitments with specific goals.

A participant expressed concerns about a poverty-reduction strategy being “just a means to an end.” Goals might be problematic for those who do not think about the issue a great deal. There should be an outcome statement, such as “good and decent society,” that governments are trying to reach, he said.

A participant said Campaign 2000 is looking at a minimum 25% reduction in the poverty rate over five years and a 50% reduction over 10 years. The goal is to get the poverty rate into the single digits, she said. Research is looking at the Nordic countries, with their rate of 5%.

The framework of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) furnished numerical targets, said another participant. People had been discussing a vision for years, and “it's a hard thing to get your head into.” The New Zealand government framed the vision as “giving people a fair go,” motivating people to engage and identify targets. Before determining goals, she

said, it is essential to know what the Council itself wants to achieve.

An NCW member said he finds it “frustrating” that the Council has been producing documents for years, but no real progress has been made.

Both Québec and Newfoundland and Labrador have developed strategies and plans to combat poverty and social exclusion. Their approach is promising, as they have recast the issues “to enable people to think that solutions are possible.” *Solving Poverty: Four cornerstones of a workable national strategy for Canada*, is a beginning; its ideas are gaining ground. For the future, the member expressed his hope that the Council would be able to build momentum on the four cornerstones within all levels of government.

A participant said speaking about poverty as “an issue” objectifies the condition, so that it is more helpful to speak about people who are poor. The concept of poverty itself is easy to talk about, but talking about people who are poor puts the issue into perspective.

A participant said the strength of the Québec program is that it puts poor people at the heart of the process. There should be a national strategy with objectives aimed at all poor. While the ultimate objective is the eradication of poverty, the interim steps required to achieve the objective must be specified.

A participant said the strength of the Québec legislation is that it is based on the province’s social cohesion. The first step is a shared vision from which it is possible to move on to other areas, she said. She emphasized looking at measures to reduce poverty rather than

discussing eradication. A shared vision going beyond government to citizens and other communities is essential, she said, as is mobilizing people around the issue.

A participant said she preferred talking about people “who are poor” to people “living in poverty.” She said her response to the program in Newfoundland and Labrador was very positive, but an individual living in poverty would regard 2014 as very far away. Targets and visions are important, but they should be considered “floors instead of ceilings,” she said.

A member said the Council is struggling with its evolving role. Given the fragmented realities among the provinces and municipalities, a national strategy seems to be the way to enable everyone to reference a similar goal. The member said he prefers the idea of eradicating poverty rather than reducing it, and said the former goal is achievable. He expressed his hope that the meeting would consider whether a national strategy is appropriate and what NCW’s role should be.

A participant said Aboriginal people head the list of marginalized people in Canada. To address poverty, it must be considered as an issue of basic human rights. “People have a right not to be poor,” he said. The reason for the lack of success of federal programs is that they gave money rather than rights.

A participant said her organization is working toward eradicating poverty. Strategies should look at broad determinant issues as they connect to poverty elimination, particularly the impact of poverty on communities, she said. Because timelines are not always met, there is a need to look at measurable quality-of-life improvements.

In that way, she said, if poverty is not eradicated, it will be possible to see substantive improvements in people's quality of life.

An NCW member expressed her agreement with the concept of eradicating poverty. The Council should look into indicators and objectives: for example, people living in poverty lack food and housing. Poverty is relative, an NCW member said, and poor people should be engaged in the process.

Regarding mobilization, said one participant, the *Solving Poverty* report is "geared to the federal government and the national understanding," but everyone in Canada who can play a role in eradicating poverty should be mobilized toward this goal. Because the discourse has changed, attitudes and behaviours must change. The federal government is embracing the issue and "inspiring Canadians to be part of something bigger." Mobilization is a big issue, the participant said, because it feeds into a larger scale of activities.

A participant cited the work of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) about the growing gap and the large issue of income insecurity. CCPA's work illustrates that "data is not necessarily the best motivator of action." Framing income insecurity as a human rights issue might connect it to core values. He called the Newfoundland and Labrador plan inspiring, particularly because the government took action rather than waiting for the "perfect plan." It is important for the federal government to consider what the provinces and territories are doing, and what it can do to add value.

A participant said deciding "how much and how fast" would presuppose measures and

goals, which have not yet been established. Government cannot solve issues of inequity on its own, he said. Using income as a consideration ignores those people with no income at all. He used the example of Ireland, with its two definitions of poverty: consistent poverty, for which it has targets, and the likelihood of poverty, which has different measures and time frames. An individual with two elements in an index of 11 would likely be in consistent poverty. He said participants should be mindful of the successful measures used in other countries.

With respect to the third question, a member said in his experience with targets, there is a tendency to talk about income threshold. But when poverty is considered as a human rights issue, there are potential federal government initiatives, such as increasing affordable housing, which would improve the quality of life but might not show up in an income-based indicator. The member said he would like to probe others' experience with targets and timelines that affect inclusion and can engage communities in achieving these goals.

An NCW member said this refreshing and clear discussion reminded him of a meeting that took place about two years earlier, involving then-Minister Ken Dryden. Saying it was important to recast what was said so that people could see "through the maze," Dryden had coined the phrase "where there's a way, there's a will."

A participant said that for the last 10 years, groups have struggled to articulate new concepts for poverty and a new vision. Although human rights have been used "as an anchor to ground advocacy," the courts have not recognized those basic rights relating to poverty. A new vision must be articulated, and the move

must be made away from an economic base. The lived experience of poverty varies hugely across the country. It is important to not get bogged down on a global vision and to focus on what an interesting and innovative approach might be.

An NCW member outlined a need to grow together to develop different measures. In Québec, the emphasis is on working with people toward the vision. Collaborating on tools will change the way people look at the issue.

A participant said the country cannot wait for the federal government to act; he recommended celebrating provincial successes. If enough provinces are doing good things, the federal government will want to become involved, “to get in front of that parade.” He identified the issue of child care as critical.

A participant encouraged people to look at both global and local initiatives. To change people's attitudes and behaviour will take generations, she said. Looking at a global definition should be linked to a concern with specific issues, such as disabilities. She expressed the hope that the vision will include the rights of people.

Referring to the importance of “selling the idea,” a participant expressed the value of articulating what is being saved as a result of strategies. A community-based model will bring everyone to the table and create solutions to local problems. The roundtable's deliberation could have a tremendous influence, especially with people at the table who can make things happen. Any strategy developed should recognize urgency, involve all levels of government, and articulate government's potential return on investment.

An example was given of a business group in St. John leading the way.

A participant said a variety of groups should be involved to engage people. Those living in poverty, and the government making decisions affecting them, should work together. A guiding tool for a national campaign should be, “The improvement of incomes of the poorest fifth of the population takes precedence over the improvement of the income of the richest fifth.” Providing an income tax credit for the poor would do nothing for those living in poverty, who do not earn enough to pay taxes.

A participant described the need for champions. At the provincial level, perhaps a premiers' conference on poverty could take place, while in the federal public service, senior bureaucrats from across the country could meet and discuss the issue.

An NCW member said the country is working with a system that started after the Second World War. Although many positive accomplishments occurred at that time, the vision should reflect the current reality. On a cross-sectoral level, she said she was encouraged that business people are beginning to look at income issues. Organizations must learn how to talk with business people, because their language is different and their approach might be different, as well. The government is often dismissive of organizations involved in poverty initiatives because it deals with softer issues and does not speak the same language.

Session 2: Action Plan and Budget

CORNERSTONE 2

This session was based on Cornerstone 2 in the *Solving Poverty* report. This cornerstone addresses the need for “a plan of action and budget that co-ordinates initiatives within and across governments and other partners” to solve poverty in Canada.

The group discussed the following questions:

- What are the priority areas or most effective measures for an action plan?
- How does one assemble a national action plan?
- What are the issues associated with budgeting? In particular, how does one address the challenges of investments in one area or jurisdiction having savings or impacts in another?

Greg deGroot-Maggetti introduced this session by speaking about strategies in Newfoundland and Labrador as one model for developing an action plan that the NCW found useful. That province created a working group to consult communities to identify priorities for a poverty-reduction plan. Instead of budgeting a specific amount for poverty reduction, each minister

suggested initiatives within his or her own area to contribute to the plan. The group examined each initiative to ensure actions from different parts of government would not counteract one another.

A participant described Québec's action plan, which is based on the province's *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* adopted in 2002. Québec's main objective is to achieve one of the lowest levels of poverty among industrialized societies by 2013. Other objectives include promoting the respect and dignity of the poor, reducing prejudice and inequalities, preventing social exclusion, and providing better social conditions for the poor by reinforcing the social safety net.

It is not easy to define poverty, which is not exclusively about economics, takes several steps to tackle, and requires indicators to measure progress, she said. Québec's action plan stresses the multiple dimensions of poverty, including housing, education, social protection, regional dynamics, and child care. The plan also emphasizes mobilizing people to find jobs and become engaged in the process.

Other key characteristics of Québec's action plan include accountability measures and an inter-ministerial committee. Each minister proposing a bill must present an analysis of its impact on the income of the poor. It is challenging to stop “silo thinking” and create a structure and will to move forward, the participant said. The work takes time, as “it is a way of thinking differently.”

A participant suggested that NCW approach deputy ministers at the federal and provincial/territorial levels to put the issue of solving poverty on their agenda. He noted that later

that day, the Ontario government would be delivering its throne speech, which would include announcements around poverty. The timing was right, he said, now that there were four provinces—Québec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Ontario—putting a priority on this issue, covering about 80% of the Canadian population.

The provinces and municipalities are really the drivers, said an NCW member. Perhaps the seed for a national action plan is through a bottom-up process and via local communities, he said. With different jurisdictions considering poverty in their own ways, he suggested identifying common themes to develop a national plan.

A participant recommended that NCW consult with CCPA's Inequality Project about how to construct a national action plan and communicate it to the public.

While many Canadians experience a sense of income insecurity, a participant said, the vast majority of Canadians do not see themselves as poor. He said that over the last 20–30 years, Canada has become richer, but most Canadians have not participated in this growth. Only those at the very high end of the income scale, the top 5% or even the top 1%, have benefited, while others are working harder to stay in the same place.

The participant said a large number of Canadians support reducing the gap between the rich and poor. Canadians support the government's role in carrying out this work, for example, by implementing policies to increase the minimum wage, provide affordable housing, and reduce tuition fees. Canadians are offended, he said, that someone could be

working full time and still be poor. However, many Canadians do not support raising welfare rates.

Citizens will readily support initiatives related to social housing and income security and support, said another participant. To generate a quicker response from the federal government to provide social transfers, she suggested framing actions around these issues and providing indicators that can show progress.

The participant also pointed to the need for strategies about communities that are differentially affected due to racial, gender, and other inequalities. Provincial/territorial support has been due to momentum from the ground, and all levels of government need concrete strategies.

A national strategy must have an action plan that reflects local and provincial realities, said one participant. This work is urgent, she said, and having a federal minority government presents an opportunity. She suggested that NCW interact with ministers at both the federal and provincial levels. Support is growing, but there is a need to leverage, find more allies, and build on community initiatives.

An NCW staff member said when some people involved in poverty reduction for Newfoundland and Labrador heard that the Minister of Children and Youth Services was responsible for Ontario's poverty reduction plan, they were concerned that it was the wrong way to do it. The government needs to send the signal that the plan will be comprehensive, cutting across health, justice, education, labour, and other dimensions, rather than making it a "women and children into the lifeboat first" arrangement.

Federal transfers must be dedicated to poverty issues to ensure they are not used for other purposes, said one participant. He cautioned against undermining the federal social safety net, such as in the area of medical insurance.

A participant suggested talking about a “prosperity agenda” rather than “poverty reduction.” Giving the portfolio to a finance minister would make a difference, she added. She also suggested calling the action plan a “co-ordinated provincial plan” so that it does not convey the impression of being imposed from the top down.

An NCW member said she agreed that the plan must come from a bottom-up process. Québec’s legislation on poverty arose from mobilizing and collecting ideas from many people. She suggested that NCW consult with the grassroots.

A participant asked NCW to contour the national action plan to respond to what Canadians are saying in polls. He noted that in a recent Angus Reid poll, 75% of the respondents said they believed something should be done about poverty. Another 75% of the respondents said government in general does a bad job at reducing poverty, and 50% characterized poverty as an individual deficit that individuals should overcome.

The participant called it a “negative vulnerability approach” to continually tell the public how bad things are. Instead, he suggested, use more positive language and talk about where progress can be made.

Lynne Tyler summarized the main points so far:

- There is a sense that movement is building from the ground up.

- Participants emphasized the importance of engaging those at the provincial and municipal levels already working on poverty.
- It is critical to mobilize citizens generally, and those living with poverty specifically.
- The national plan should not be simply handed down by the federal government.
- There are opportunities to make use of information from polls and to provide initiatives that resonate with Canadians.
- The plan must take into account regional realities and go beyond income-related elements.
- Housing and the minimum wage were frequently mentioned priorities, as were child care, tuition, precarious work, and EI.

A participant added a pension and a prescription drug plan to the list, noting the large income disparity at retirement between those with and without a pension plan.

An NCW member said he agreed with using language that empowers people, as well as looking at poverty as an issue of rights and prosperity. “It’s more a right to prosperity,” he said. Linkage to other cities is important, as well as initiatives that result in tangible things being done about the minimum wage or affordable housing.

A participant said the federal government has an obligation to bring about systemic change, make a priority of interventions affecting families, and support the obligations of provincial governments.

Moreover, painting a grim picture of social or health indicators in Canada has implications for society, she said. Communication plays an important role. The participant suggested that stakeholders do more to link their work, especially noting the CCPA's efforts on public perception around poverty.

A participant said a national strategy must be twofold: it must reinforce and communicate that Canada is a caring society, and it must address some systemic and structural issues, such as pensions.

The participant commended Vibrant Communities as an excellent resource on structural issues, and said a key challenge for communities is to lobby for funding but ensure it does not come with government structures. He said one of the leading causes of poverty in his city is the Ontario Works social welfare system, which gives people “just enough to keep them impoverished.”

A participant noted the need to improve income and wages, including the living wage. According to Statistics Canada, 41% of low-income children live in families where at least one parent works full time year-round, and the family still lives in poverty. She said many are employed in precarious work, such as part-time and contract work, which provides no benefits and no income or financial security. Campaign 2000 recommends restoring broad eligibility for employment insurance, and raising the minimum wage to \$10 per hour.

A participant suggested incorporating the issue of equality into the action plan and preparing a macroeconomic framework to demonstrate that the action plan is feasible. It is a matter of

political choice, he said. Regarding tax cuts, he cited a recent study, which found that the richest 5% of the population is paying a lower proportion of its income in taxes than the poorest 10%.

A participant said the federal role now is to “give lift” to existing and emerging leadership across Canada, such as in Newfoundland and Labrador, on issues of poverty, prosperity, and social welfare. The federal government must use taxation and spending power to provide resources to support provincial- and community-based initiatives. It must also restore progressivity and fairness in the tax system.

A participant said there must be a strong legal obligation for government to act on the action plan. A change of government must not mean all work has to be redone.

Another participant agreed that the effort to build engagement and agreement will ensure a strong foundation for action and prevent clawbacks to existing programs and other conditions that force migration to other jurisdictions. The issues are multi-dimensional, but clearly money is needed.

An NCW staff member said there must be significant investment up front to start turning the situation around. She also noted that Newfoundland and Labrador focused first on what it thought would work before determining how to cost it.

An NCW member suggested looking for the “quick win” to start the momentum.

A participant suggested the possibility of creating a national shared prosperity fund. The federal

government could allocate funds to individual jurisdictions based on their own planning priorities.

The federal government and jurisdictions like British Columbia have a surplus, said an NCW member, but the decisions about who receives that surplus need to be linked to the idea of prosperity for all. Moreover, these decisions must make good financial sense to business and non-traditional partners.

The previous participant suggested that in Ontario the “quick win” would be the measures to be announced in that day’s throne speech.

A member said NCW should examine issues around demographics and labour supply across Canada. The business community in the province of New Brunswick, faced with a labour shortage, believes that solving poverty and early childhood development issues will help businesses survive, he said.

Another member said specific indicators are needed to show progress being made. One useful indicator is the percentage of households with substandard housing: money allocated to create housing subsidies and increase affordable housing should be linked to targets of real housing improvement in people’s lives.

Another indicator might be the proportion of people in low-paying jobs that leave them in poverty. Schedules to raise the minimum wage could be linked to targets around such an indicator.

The member said there should also be similar indicators and targets around taxation, such as the impact of certain policies on the top 20% of income earners versus the bottom 20% in the

population. Governments are notorious for saying that tax cuts help the poor, he said. However, ultimately it has been found that higher-income earners receive tax cuts of much higher dollar amounts than low-income earners.

He added that enforcing labour standards would have significant impacts on lives: reducing the number of people in precarious jobs and jobs that pay less than a living wage can be helpful for formulating the action plan and budget.

A member said NCW has an accessible research bank and an historical view on issues affecting those in poverty. These resources, as well as networking opportunities, are readily available. He noted that NCW is not a group that can write a plan, but it can help people identify key priorities and link them to one another.

A member said one of NCW’s critical roles is having an ear to the government.

A participant emphasized the need to respect the private lives of those who live in poverty, and the need to put them at the heart of the process. He suggested talking to the poor in their own environment. Urban dwellers might be primarily concerned with housing, while rural residents might be most concerned with issues of transportation. The poor in Québec have the most social controls in their lives, he said—for example, they must report to the benefits office every two months. The cost to establish such controls must be taken into account. Moreover, government must undo some of the myths it has created around the meaning of “middle class,” “wealth,” and “poverty.”

A participant said the Centre for the Study of Poverty and Exclusion puts a higher priority on

helping groups that are underrepresented and more seriously disadvantaged in the labour force, including immigrants and disabled people. Employers must have the will to hire these people, she said. One approach is to put the job shortage in the context of opportunities.

Emphasize investments as opposed to expenditures, and ensure investment approaches that help people, said an NCW member. “The poor person’s dollar benefits all of us,” she said, and represents funds that will buy products and go back to businesses.

A participant commented that unions are another important player. For example, northern European countries with strong union movements have much lower levels of poverty and inequality.

In developing a national plan, since 50% of Canadians believe poverty imbalance is an individual deficit, a participant recommended talking to people about poverty in values they can accept. For example, one approach is to talk about the cost of making life tough for people. Another is to note that in an era of labour market demand, Canada cannot afford to have people living in poverty outside the mainstream of Canadian life. Moreover, Canada’s position

in the world will erode without everyone contributing to productivity.

In addition to employment, he said the limit of what is counted in the gross domestic product is a key issue. Some people choose not to work, and choices such as looking after aging parents may save money for the state and make major contributions to society. He recommended talking about skills development rather than employment as a solution to getting out of poverty.

Another participant said NCW cannot make the argument about the social cost of poverty on its own. To advocate and broaden public support, partnerships are needed around public health and other issues directly related to poverty. She suggested thinking about key partners to deliver part of the message.

She also suggested establishing a framework to provide resources to local communities that will enable them to mobilize and further their strategies at the provincial and municipal levels.

Session 3: Accountability Mechanisms

CORNERSTONE 3

This session focused on Cornerstone 3 from NCW's *Solving Poverty* report: "A government accountability structure for ensuring results and for consulting Canadians in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the actions that will affect them."

Participants were asked to consider several questions:

- What are important considerations and approaches in constructing meaningful consultation?
- What are some accountability mechanisms that have been effective in provinces or elsewhere, whether in poverty issues or other areas? What is it that makes them effective?
- How do we ensure cross-jurisdictional accountability for decisions by one sphere of government that may have impacts on others?

NCW member Sonia Racine introduced this session by stressing that, for the NCW, an accountability culture is necessary in the application of the process to combat poverty, but certain elements

can be legislated. For example, in Québec, under the 2002 *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*, the minister of employment and social solidarity was responsible for coordinating efforts. The Act established an advisory committee to provide advice and oversight as well as an observation, research, and discussion centre to develop a set of indicators to measure poverty. It was criticized for lacking "teeth," however because it contained several "open doors" that referred to actions being taken if they could be.

A participant said the National Anti-Poverty Organization has recommended the establishment of the office of poverty commissioner, which would report in public and possibly to the United Nations on Canada's progress, thereby ensuring greater accountability. It is a logical approach, but not a big budget item.

Referring to an NCW member's comments, a participant said Québec took two major approaches to the issue of accountability: the advisory committee provided surveillance, while the observation, research, and discussion centre developed indicators. The centre was managed by a committee of six individuals—three from the department and three from organizations working with poverty. The advisory committee was connected with the Study Centre of Policy Inclusion and was consulted regarding evaluation. The government was responsible for producing an annual report and for presenting a new action plan after five years. Although the action plan contained elements, such as housing, that were related but not exclusive to poverty, all were assessed from a poverty-fighting perspective. Québec's commitment is to achieve

one of the lowest levels of poverty among industrialized countries by 2013.

A participant emphasized the need to include people living in poverty at the discussion table, because they provide a different perspective. Their involvement brings with it special considerations, such as whether they have eaten or have a sponsoring organization to facilitate their attendance at meetings. Although the issue of poverty resides in one ministry in Québec, it is the responsibility of several ministries. Transparency, the participant said, is a critical part of the process.

On the issue of accountability mechanisms, a participant referred to the Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults (MISWAA) task force, in which Bay Street proposals were “ground truthed” with a community group of people living in poverty. One reason social programs are dysfunctional, he said, is that they were designed by individuals for people “they know nothing about.” Participants said different groups conduct business in different ways, so there is some value in keeping at least some discussions and consultations separate.

A participant said MISWAA consisted of groups coming together to gather a fact base that led to a strategy. The process merged a strategy-consulting approach with a settlement-house approach, where one listened to the people affected. There was a commonality of purpose, but also an opportunity and a need for all strata to have separate offline discussions. In response to a participant’s question, he said it would be possible to ask the community to bring the groups together.

The previous participant said it was significant that no people living in poverty were at the meeting. He stressed the importance of finding “a way that what they know feeds the process.”

Referring to the European Union’s (EU) approach to poverty reduction and social inclusion, a participant said the EU’s open method of coordination, in which goals are set and ratified, would be useful for Canada. The country has some similar tools, but needs an institutional mechanism to coordinate a national approach.

An NCW staff member said an interesting aspect of open coordination is that it includes very transparent planning and reporting.

An NCW member said the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec acted as an accountability mechanism, because it involved people and not the government.

Lynne Tyler said there might be two types of accountability—the government and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—that keep the debate alive.

A participant said governments were compelled to develop action plans, but she said she was unaware of whether the EU had commissioned a third-party evaluation.

Because accountability can be a bureaucratic exercise, a participant said a poverty commissioner would be a way of getting the information to the people. If this commissioner had a high profile, possibly by being housed with the auditor general, the issue could be made a higher priority. This would provide it with a high level of permeation throughout society.

An NCW member replied that he liked the idea of a commissioner, and the position could be linked to provincial and municipal roles. Although co-ordination of efforts seemed piecemeal, it was beyond the Council's mandate. Given the need for oversight and for best practices, communication and dialogue should be built into the role.

Contrasting the legislative approach used in Québec with the provincial plan approach used in Newfoundland and Labrador, an NCW member asked about the structure in which accountability would take place. Whatever method is chosen should be important, necessary, and have teeth. The member asked whether full and transparent disclosure against standards "was enough to constitute sufficient accountability."

A participant replied that in Québec, the report was tabled in the National Assembly, thereby ensuring public accountability. Because the legislation requires the minister to report every year, there is also integrated accountability.

An NCW staff member said the idea of having a poverty commissioner on the same level as the auditor general had merit. Based upon her past experience, she said it would be good to have bureaucratic involvement as well, to ensure consistent reporting across the country. An auditor general function is the best way to ensure things stay on track.

A participant said he disagreed with the idea of an auditor general role. It would be important to have the cachet of the auditor general, but that position only assesses the government against its own previous commitments to action; the auditor general's role would not permit the office

to consider interactions. However, interactions must be assessed somehow, because there can be negative implications when programs are not coordinated.

Regarding accountability, an NCW member emphasized that special groups must be involved so that their needs are not bypassed. Tracking should not lose sight of the most vulnerable people.

A participant said government often appoints outside investigators to look into allegations, such as the Schreiber inquiry. This tends to imply that the government cannot be trusted to act fairly, and that investigation must be placed in the hands of an individual or a group with no accountability to the Canadian people. It is important to select the vehicle with the greatest ability to engage the public, she said. NCW should articulate the criteria against which it wants the vehicle to be measured.

A member said accountability should be part of the action plan process, and the poor should be included in the design, implementation, and evaluation of any plan. He referred to Ireland, which had tabled its second 10-year plan and had recognized the need to update measures given the current state of its economy. Canada requires an accountability mechanism that continuously moves forward to a more inclusive society—it is a process of ongoing engagement. The community groups involved in the initial design of the program in Newfoundland and Labrador still want to be involved in its implementation and evaluation.

Given Canada's makeup, with different provincial jurisdictions, an NCW member said it would be difficult to establish an accountability

process. Apportioning blame on another for the failure of a process is the easy way out, she said.

A participant said that in the Newfoundland and Labrador model, the commission was established with some government clout. He said he appreciated that the province did not wait to find the perfect program, but took action. Because the issue of combating poverty is becoming prominent at this time, a member advocated a *carpe diem* approach. It is important to start with some successes, he said.

When Canada was trying to structure its report to the United Nations, said a participant, it turned to NGOs and civil society for assistance. The work of those groups must not be lost if a commissioner is appointed. He suggested that a hybrid model might be best.

A participant said there are lessons to be learned from Canada's handling of productivity. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business acts as "a foresight in terms of accountability."

Different concepts of accountability lead into different levels of accountability, said another participant. While external oversight is important, she said she was reluctant to give up on elected officials. Just as fiscal accountability was demanded after the sponsorship scandal, so should "social accountability" be demanded to bring out the aspect of money and its impact on social issues. Most Canadian citizens are represented by at least three levels of government, which should have roles in social accountability.

Regarding evaluation, a participant said one possibility would be "an evaluability evaluation" to show what can be measured and what

it makes sense to evaluate. Another is a "developmental evaluation," which "looks at what is being done and how to make it even bigger and better."

A participant said First Nations' targets should be seen as a special type of accountability.

At the request of participants, Lynne Tyler summarized the discussion that had taken place about consultation, evaluation, and an accountability mechanism for the development of an action plan, its implementation, and actual progress:

- Accountability could be internal, external, or hybrid.
- Suggestions for mechanisms included:
 - An inter-ministerial committee with different departments;
 - A consultative committee, which would involve significant participation of people living in poverty;
 - A commissioner of poverty, with perhaps a Royal Commission to kick-start the process.
- Participants also spoke about a hybrid committee involving government and civil society.

A participant gave the example of an organization which was involved in the Canadian International Human Rights Network (CIHRN). The network brought together NGOs and civil society working on human rights issues. He expressed his belief in the need for this type of body now, suggesting that it would be beneficial for the groups working on those issues to meet occasionally to avoid duplication of efforts.

A participant said whatever mechanism is selected should be enshrined in legislation and have an appropriation to ensure its survival. If not, the mechanism could be easily defunded and ignored at the decision of the government.

An NCW staff member said there are different levels and concepts of accountability, but all types are necessary vehicles to ensure work is accomplished. Although different groups are accountable for different things, the central principle is good governance.

A participant provided two examples of accountability mechanisms. In Ontario, the health tribunal produced a quarterly report that was largely internal and did not mobilize the public. In contrast, she referred to Claudette Bradshaw, a former minister whose portfolio included homelessness. Bradshaw acted as a champion and articulated concerns within government and across jurisdictions. If NCW decides to go that route, she said, the organizations must be aligned with a ministry and not a secretariat.

Regarding evaluation and monitoring, the participant recommended that an NGO assume oversight responsibility. Support is required for local level networks to facilitate the involvement of people in the planning process. This inclusion rarely happens, and when it does, it is "somewhat tokenistic." Localized strategy monitoring is essential. Governments change, while bureaucracy remains; therefore, a bureaucratic champion with anti-poverty strategy implementation is needed.

A participant added that all accountability mechanisms are not mutually exclusive; there is an interaction. The minister knew she would

be asked questions by the government, and, because of the report, she had accountability.

Regarding the EU's open co-ordination, a member asked whether it would be helpful to engage people at the community level in the design, so their input feeds into local, provincial, and federal action plans at one time. To counteract the problem of buck passing, an Ontario forum on housing invited all levels of government to participate. Although only three of the four levels attended, the forum mobilized action.

Tyler summarized the key points:

- Four or five mechanisms exist at the federal level:
 - A responsible line minister with a budget and a requirement to report to Parliament;
 - A bureaucratic champion;
 - A consultative commission;
 - A commissioner;
 - An NGO.
- The commission and the commissioner must operate with transparency, a budget, and accountability.

In response to comments from delegates, Tyler said the model works both federally and provincially.

"There should be a law and appropriations," said one participant. While it is key to have the finance minister at the table, s/he should not lead the exercise; each ministry should be responsible for talking about what it is doing on poverty reduction, and for giving that aspect of the plan priority within its portfolio.

A participant said an action plan does not need another social security review. Those types of studies have a way of collapsing.

If attitudes and the expectations of the Canadian public really changed, another participant said, it would be immaterial who supplied the accountability information. People would mobilize because they were angry that their expectations were not being met.

Referring to the fact that the Ontario minister responsible for the program had a very large portfolio, a participant asked if anyone was concerned that the job would be too heavy to allow poverty to receive the attention it deserved.

A participant replied that the minister was the chair of a newly created cabinet committee that

should function as an inter-ministerial committee. In Québec and in Newfoundland and Labrador, the ministers responsible already had portfolios, as well.

A participant said the women's caucus in Ontario made a huge push to include the issue in the committee's platform. An assistant deputy minister was appointed, and the language she used was more about engagement than consultation.

A participant said the size of a minister's portfolio—even a junior minister—is less important than their approach. The minister must have a global vision. Still, one must remember that the primary portfolio will always come first.

Session 4: Indicators

CORNERSTONE 4

Cornerstone 4 addresses the need for “a set of agreed poverty indicators that will be used to plan, monitor change and assess progress.”

The group discussed the following questions:

- What approach might lead to developing a set of national indicators, given the range of opinions?
- What indicators do you consider most appropriate? Why?

A participant said it is important to look at a basket of indicators, not just one—and not just income indicators. Look at low-income cut-offs (LICOs), the Low-Income Measure (LIM), and the Market Basket Measure (MBM), he said.

The participant made three comments: First, he suggested using common sense indicators that ordinary people would think of. Even if imperfect, the indicators would still help ensure better accuracy in media reports. He said in his experience he had seen reporters who were unfamiliar with social policy issues assigned to cover social policy stories.

Second, he referred to a recent Angus Reid poll, which reported that 75% of the respondents thought government had not done well

in addressing poverty. It is important for a government to show progress, he said, since much funding has been allocated to reducing poverty. There must be at least one indicator that shows the good this funding has done.

Third, he said the current indicators are fraught with flaws and value judgments. For example, Canada does not have an official poverty line, but Statistics Canada's LICO indicator has been widely used as the poverty line anyway. As well, lifestyles change over time, so it was the right thing to do for the MBM and LICO indicators to define a benchmark family as a standard for comparison.

A participant suggested pushing for more international work using the half-median income measure that LIM uses, because the United Nations and other countries also use it.

He also said people call LICO a relative measure of poverty, because every few years Statistics Canada recalculates it relative to the average Canadian family's median income. Each time this is done, the poverty rate jumps up slightly. The last recalculation was done in 1992., and until the next recalculation, LICO becomes an absolute measure of poverty. He said he did not acknowledge it as a relative measure of poverty.

The participant recommended that Statistics Canada also publish data about single adults, single parents, and families with children with annual incomes below \$15,000, \$20,000, and \$25,000 respectively. These are the minimum incomes that would ensure decent living standards for these households.

With the income Canada guarantees to the poorest seniors, a combined total of Old Age

Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement, a single senior receives about \$13,636, while a couple receives about \$24,688. Working-age people with disabilities receive significantly less, the participant said, as do people on welfare.

Poverty is related to other areas, such as health and education, said another participant. She suggested finding poverty indicators related to these areas.

A participant said the Québec legislation requires progress to be measured and follow-up to be done in a multi-dimensional way. It also requires the ability to make international and inter-provincial correlations. After studying different indicators, she said her organization concluded that no perfect measure exists. However, it must prepare a choice of indicators by next spring to present to the Québec government. The organization is also now considering looking at inequality factors, such as social exclusion.

People have different opinions about the right amount of guaranteed income supplements, said one participant, noting that the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec carried out a two-year consultation to arrive at the measures it recommended to the Québec government. The collective gave people a questionnaire to fill out and a table to prepare a budget. The aim was to get to the very root of people's day-to-day lived experience, including welfare recipients, the unemployed, and other groups. Indicators should take into consideration factors such as access to education and regional differences, he said.

A participant said an indicator that measured the percentage of households with core housing needs would provide useful information for tracking and monitoring. She said she would like

to add another indicator that monitors property for groups marginalized due to gender, race, and income. Such an indicator should also monitor property for seniors, youth, children, and low-income parents. Some of these groups are already being monitored, but others need to be added.

A participant referred to Marvyn Novick's Campaign 2000 policy perspectives report from September 2007, which compared the value of LICOs After Tax (LICO-AT) to the LIM After Tax (LIM-AT) poverty indicators. The more measures one uses, the more accurate the tracking, she said.

However, some things cannot be tracked with income measures. For example, Campaign 2000 tracks families with housing needs and is advocating for major investment in affordable housing. It also tracks the waiting rates for social housing. If these rates decline, it will be an indication that affordable housing is having an effect.

Campaign 2000 also tracks, by province and territory, the percentage of children up to the age of 12 for whom there is regulated child-care space. As a result, it is advocating for major investment in early learning and child care. A participant noted that the Ontario government is going ahead with full-day junior and senior kindergarten as part of its poverty reduction strategy.

A member added that a statistical agency in Newfoundland and Labrador created a tool to produce a set of "community accounts" profiling the MBM poverty indicators for communities down to the neighbourhood level. This tool can

be used to support community-based as well as federal and provincial responses to poverty.

Community mapping by the United Way of Toronto and the Human Early Learning Partnership in British Columbia found that neighbourhoods with a high concentration of low-income families also have few community resources. Integrating these indicators will help determine how to make progress and identify where the needs are. A member said it would be interesting if indicators could intersect with a community's assets or lack of assets.

A participant said the University of Toronto is doing some mapping of determinants of health across Toronto neighbourhoods, including factors such as income, obesity, and diabetes.

Tell the narrative when communicating the impact, said one member. It is about not only numbers or percentages, but also what it means for the little girl who has no access to recreation, for example. This kind of story touches people and gives a face to poverty.

The previous speaker noted that homelessness has an impact, but is not yet being tracked nationally.

An NCW staff member followed up on a participant's earlier point that the United Kingdom and Ireland use the measure of "deprivation" in their analysis of poverty. She said NCW has used 50% of LICOs as a type of deprivation measure. NCW has found that even if progress is made for people at the lowest income levels, the results may not appear in the standard LICO values. Thus the first focus must be on those with the very, very lowest incomes, she said. Ireland and the United Kingdom aim for all of

their indicators to move up, covering those most deprived as well as the income groups at risk of poverty.

A participant said he agreed that the emphasis should be to help the ones who need help the most. In Halifax, in the period 1995–2005, the lone parent with one child had an average income of about \$12,000, on average about \$8,000 below the poverty level, he said. Developing a full child benefit for children in low-income families would be one way of reducing the depth of poverty.

A participant said one of the Campaign 2000 goals is to have a minimum reduction of 50% in the LICO-AT child poverty rates by the year 2017. Achieving this goal would reduce the 11.7% rate in 2005 to below 6% in 2017.

An NCW member said the indicators will group around health care, income, education, and housing. He encouraged the participants to look at a tool used by Newfoundland and Labrador, called the "community account," which can instantly generate the profile of a neighbourhood on all of these measures of poverty. Instead of a community's poverty, the tool measures its well-being, which is the ultimate goal desired. The tool is able to drill down deeply to the local, community-based level, as well as aggregate the data instantaneously. More discussions need to centre on prevention, he added.

An NCW staff member suggested capitalizing on recent announcements of plans to reduce poverty, and suggested two priorities to be highlighted: addressing the needs of those with the very lowest income, and putting in place the ability to do international comparisons.

Canada needs to have an official poverty line, she stated. Below that, a range of information exists that can feed into the analysis to allow better understanding and help program design. For example, administrative indicators from employment insurance and other programs can give data about the number of people receiving benefits.

A member suggested letting government pick one or two indicators and make a commitment. He said he was uncertain that “depth of poverty” would be adequate. There also needs to be a way to show the impact of government initiatives. For example, if the depth of poverty is \$8,000, government should at least set a lower bar, perhaps stating that no one should have to live more than \$5,000 below the limit. It is politically important to show that gains are being made.

NEXT STEPS

CHAIR:

John Rook
National Council of Welfare

John Rook thanked participants for their valuable input and invited ideas on specific next steps.

A participant said some of the topics discussed might not be part of NCW's mandate, although they are important issues. She suggested that NCW become the mechanism for the participants to talk with one another to maximize and push forward some of the day's ideas at different levels.

Rook said he agreed. NCW is a gatekeeper, not an advocacy group, and as gatekeeper it has a great responsibility to listen to stakeholders and build a meaningful, effective national strategy with manageable targets.

A member said NCW also has limited resources, but each organization can help by using its own agendas and campaigns, and by working with other groups to mobilize people under a national strategy.

A participant referred to efforts such as the Make Poverty History movement and the work during the recent Ontario election that was pivotal to obtaining platform commitments on poverty. It is important to encourage actions to be taken nationally, she said, adding that she would like to see a discussion like this one that involves all low-income people.

Rook noted that representation from Canada's North was missing; this has been an issue for NCW. NCW will try to obtain other stakeholder input so it can capture issues concerning the North.

James Hughes thanked the participants on behalf of NCW.