

Community Dispatch

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POVERTY IN CANADA: OUR DISGRACE

The United Nations has designated October 17 as International Day for the Elimination of Poverty. I thought it important on this day to reflect on Canada's record to eliminate poverty across our land. Poverty has a devastating impact. It represents serious disinvestments in society because of its profoundly negative impacts on physical and mental health, educational attainment, social well-being and economic productivity. The United Nations calls poverty "the greatest threat to political stability, social cohesion and the environmental health of the planet." This Community Dispatch shares selected observations and recommendations of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which reviewed Canada's record on poverty alleviation in May 2006. The verdict of this committee is an indictment of our policies and practices that relegate millions of Canadians to a life without opportunity.

Joey Edwardh

- The Committee notes that Canada still ranks near the top of the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Programme. On the average, Canadians enjoy a high standard of living and Canada has the capacity to achieve a high level of realization of all Covenant rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UN COVENANT BY CANADA

- The Committee reiterates its recommendation that the federal

Government take concrete steps to ensure that provinces and territories are made aware of Canada's legal obligations under the Covenant, that the Covenant rights should be enforceable within provinces and territories through legislation or policy measures, and that independent and appropriate monitoring and adjudication mechanisms be established in this regard. In particular, Canada should establish transparent and effective mechanisms, involving all levels of government as well as civil society, including indigenous peoples, with the specific mandate to follow up on the Committee's concluding observations.

- The Committee recalls that, within the limits of the appropriate exercise of their functions of judicial review, courts should take account of Covenant rights where this is necessary to ensure that Canada's conduct is consistent with its obligations under the Covenant, in line with the Committee's general comment No. 9 (1998)
- The Committee recommends that federal, provincial and territorial legislation be brought in line with Canada's obligations under the Covenant, and that such legislation should protect poor people in all jurisdictions from discrimination because of their social or economic status.
- The Committee reiterates its recommendation that Canada extend the Court Challenges Programme to permit

funding of challenges with respect to provincial and territorial legislation and policies.

- The Committee recommends that Canada ensure that civil legal aid with regard to economic, social and cultural rights is provided to poor people in the provinces and territories, and that it be adequate with respect to coverage, eligibility and services provided.
- The Committee recommends that Canada fully abide by its obligations under article 2, paragraph 1, of the Covenant to take all possible measures to the maximum of its available resources to ensure the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights for all. The Committee also recommends that Canada eliminate gaps in the area of poverty as a matter of priority. The Committee further recommends that Canada assess the extent to which poverty is a discrimination issue in Canada, and ensure that measures and programmes do not have a negative impact on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, especially for disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups.
- The Committee recommends that Canada take into consideration the right to work of women and the need of parents to balance work and family life, by supporting their care choices through adequate childcare services.
- The Committee urges Canada to adopt all necessary measures to ensure that minimum wages are increased throughout Canada to a level enabling workers and their families to enjoy a decent standard of living.

- The Committee recommends that Canada take steps to ensure access to employment insurance benefits, enjoyment of trade union rights and effective protection by labour standards for workers in precarious, part-time and temporary low wage jobs in Canada, particularly women.
- The Committee urges Canada to adopt effective measures, legislative or otherwise, to eliminate exploitation and abuse of migrant domestic workers who are under the federal Live-in Caregiver Program.
- The Committee recommends that legislation be adopted at the provincial and territorial levels, where necessary, to ensure equal remuneration for work of equal value in both the public and private sectors.
- The Committee strongly recommends that the compatibility of restrictions on the right to strike imposed at the federal, provincial and territorial levels with articles 4 and 8 of the Covenant be re-examined. Such restrictions should be eliminated where they are not strictly necessary for the promotion of the general welfare in a democratic society, for the protection of the interests of national security or public safety, public order, public health or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others, and where no other alternative can be found.
- The Committee recommends that Canada undertake a detailed assessment of the impact of the reduction of federal transfers for social assistance and social services to provinces and territories, on the standard of living of people depending on social welfare, in particular women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities,

Aboriginal people, African Canadians and members of other minorities. The Committee strongly recommends that Canada reconsider all retrogressive measures adopted in 1995.

- The Committee urges Canada to establish social assistance at levels which ensure the realization of an adequate standard of living for all.
- The Committee recommends that Canada reassess the Employment Insurance scheme with a view to providing greater access and improved benefit levels to all unemployed workers.
- The Committee reiterates its recommendation that the National Child Benefit Scheme be amended so as to prohibit provinces and territories from deducting child benefit from social assistance entitlements.
- The Committee recommends that Canada gather disaggregated statistical data in relation to the relinquishment to foster care of children belonging to low-income families, single-mother-led families, and Aboriginal and African Canadian families in order to accurately assess the extent of the problem. The Committee further recommends that, in accordance with the provisions of article 10 of the Covenant on the protection of families, the federal, provincial and territorial governments undertake all necessary measures including through financial support, where necessary, to avoid such relinquishment.
- The Committee recommends that Canada give special attention to the difficulties faced by homeless girls, who are more vulnerable to health risks and social and economic deprivation, and that it take all

necessary measures to provide them with adequate housing and social and health services.

- The Committee recommends that Canada ensure that low-income women and women trying to leave abusive relationships can access housing options and appropriate support services in keeping with the right to an adequate standard of living.
- The Committee reiterates its recommendation that Canada establish an official poverty line. The Committee also recommends that Canada integrate economic, social and cultural rights in its poverty reduction strategies.
- The Committee recommends that Canada significantly intensify its efforts to address the issue of food insecurity and hunger in Canada. In this regard, the Committee reminds Canada of its core obligation to fulfil (provide) the right to food when disadvantaged and marginalized individuals or groups are, for reasons beyond their control, unable to realize these rights for themselves through all means possible at their disposal.
- The Committee reiterates its recommendation that the federal, provincial and territorial governments address homelessness and inadequate housing as a national emergency by reinstating or increasing, where necessary, social housing programmes for those in need, improving and properly enforcing anti-discrimination legislation in the field of housing, increasing shelter allowances and social assistance rates to realistic levels, and providing adequate support services for persons with disabilities. The Committee urges Canada to implement a

national strategy for the reduction of homelessness that includes measurable goals and timetables, consultation and collaboration with affected communities, complaints procedures, and transparent accountability mechanisms, in keeping with Covenant standards.

- The Committee strongly recommends that, before forced evictions are carried out, Canada take appropriate measures, legislative or otherwise, to ensure that those affected by forced evictions are provided with alternative accommodation and thus do not face homelessness.

- The Committee recommends that Canada ensure by every appropriate means that higher education be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity.
- The Committee encourages Canada to actively engage non-governmental organizations and other members of civil society in a meaningful process of discussion, at the federal, provincial and territorial levels, prior to the submission of its next periodic report to the Committee.



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