# **Objectives**

The Summit focused entirely on two targets: how can we take care of basic needs and how can we find the means of moving out of poverty.

The Summit was intended as an opportunity for people on low incomes and for social action groups to:

- meet and discuss various issues that concern them without any constraints;
- hear testimonials by people from all regions of New Brunswick;
- seek avenues towards concrete solutions to move out of poverty, in a workshop setting;
- create among them relationships and networks that will take advantage of the power of a group;
- get their voices heard by the public figures attending the Summit.

Another objective was to educate the general public about poverty and to create an impact on politicians by increasing their awareness of the existence of poverty and the overwhelming lack of social justice in our society.

#### Introduction

The first New Brunswick Summit was held in Moncton on October 27 and 28, 2006, under the theme "Moving Out Of Poverty". Nearly half of the 225 people participating in the Summit are living in poverty. A variety of social sectors were represented. Participants included individuals from labour unions in the public and private sectors, people of First Nations, poverty-fighting organizations, social justice groups and various community movements.

The Summit gave people living on low income an opportunity to discuss themes such as solidarity, social trends and possible solutions to reduce poverty. Several persons living in poverty came forward to give testimonies, and workshops were held on covering basic needs and the means of getting out of poverty.

Organizers wished to ensure that the voice of people living in poverty would not be eclipsed by that of public figures. That is why elected officials were only invited for the second day of the Summit. Mr. Claude Williams, member for Kent-South and Mr. Bill Fraser, member for Miramichi-Baie-du-Vin, were present on October 28.

The Summit received generous coverage by the media, both Anglophone and Francophone, but especially the latter. Radio and TV reports included interviews and testimonials by people living in poverty.



## Acknowledgements

The co-sponsors of New Brunswick's First Summit on Poverty, the NB Common Front for Social Justice and the NB Federation of Labour, wish to express their gratitude to everyone who participated in any way in organizing the Summit.

They are particularly thankful to the people who made a special contribution to help reduce the registration fee for people on a small budget or helped with their travelling arrangements or accommodations.



# Organizing the Summit

The Summit program was developed by a team of individuals involved in social action and experienced in the organization of similar events, including Jean-Claude Basque, Sr Auréa Cormier, Dave Daigle, Al Daly, Christine LeBlanc-Dubé, John Gagnon, James LeBlanc, Mary-Anne LeBlanc, Anne Levesque, Linda McCaustlin, Jean-Marie Nadeau and Ysabel Provencher.

A pre-Summit consultation with groups and individuals gave them an opportunity to share their thoughts on remedies to poverty. Their propositions were among those discussed at the Summit.

The event schedule included an evening meal served by Mobile One Community Services Inc., a Moncton organization that usually provides meals for the homeless.

Organizers prepared a varied program to ensure that the event attracted and encouraged the broadest participation possible.

# Friday October 27

#### Getting a clear picture of poverty

Organizers had planned the first day to allow participants to discuss the issue of poverty in NB among themselves. To open the Summit, four guest speakers were invited to paint the picture of poverty in this province in a panel discussion moderated by David Daigle.



In her vivid presentation, Vivian Labrie, of the Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté (Collective for a poverty-free Quebec), spoke of the roots of poverty which she compared to a tree's roots. Progress, she stated, is the outcome of a verdant society that draws its strength from its collective wealth. She likes to strike the imagination, using high-mileage words and overt displays such as wearing a badge on her lapel. She used the image of two escalators, one of which is going up and the other going down. People who live in poverty are often trying to move up on a downward-moving escalator. Is it any wonder that they can't move out of poverty?

Everywhere in the country, people are fighting against poverty and exclusion. Both are often present together. The Collective for a poverty-free Quebec has organized breakfast meetings with members of the legislature to raise their awareness of social causes. It has also created what it calls a Carrefour desSavoirs (Development Gateway) with people experiencing poverty.

The struggle must proceed on all fronts to prevent any backsliding. Our perspective must include the education system as well as the health system and employment, but also jurisdictional issues. We must release poverty from its rigid bounds and consider it first and foremost as a social justice issue. The fight against poverty can easily degrade into a fight against the poor, she warned.

Vivian Labrie invited us to become aware of barriers in the lives of people, prejudice that is being fed against the poor, the devastating effects of social marketing, and over-consumption. Concentration of wealth, the rise of the right wing, and the way society tolerates inequality were also cited as causes of poverty. Some researchers are conducting purely abstract studies that do not stop to consider what \$3,000 per year represents for some people.

The Summit is providing a wonderful experience in equality, she commented. When a group strongly commits to the concretization of a project, when it sets objectives for itself and outlines propositions, when it disseminates information on its project to a large number of people, and when its states its demands in terms of dollars and percentages, the group has a positive and winning experience. Determined people who support each other in friendship will go far in getting oppressive rules changed. And the process may be as beneficial in itself as the results of the group's efforts.

### Economists state their point of view

Samuel LeBreton et André Economists Samuel LeBreton and André Leclerc prepared an overview of trends related to poverty in NB. Samuel LeBreton is Senior Economist, Service Canada in Fredericton, while André Leclerc is an economics professor at the Université de Moncton campus in Edmundston.

They used tables to compare current income levels to the low-income cut-off set by Statistics Canada. Data seems to indicate that the poverty rate in NB has dropped between 1999 and 2001, therefore that there has been a significant improvement. This apparent decline in the rate of poverty is attributed in many cases to the increased number of two-income families, a stronger labour market and the apparent decrease in the number of social assistance recipients.

One participant pointed out that the province has changed its definition of a

social assistance recipient and decided to include only designated categories of recipients in the new definition, which distorts the data. Another suggested that more recent data might have revealed a different trend.

The economists reviewed a number of social issues, citing inadequate minimum wage, regressive changes to the employment insurance program, the increased use of food banks and the fact that at least 250,000 people in this country are homeless.

Their view is that our financial situation is sufficiently strong to let people move out of poverty. All it would take would be to solve the problems linked to access to education and student debt, for example. We are indeed rich in collective terms, but we need to learn to share it out.

One of the economists pointed to the large gap in standards of living and benefits provided to single-



parent families and to couples with children. As for single individuals capable of working, he said, their benefits are about 20% lower than the low-income cut-off.

When it comes to the minimum wage, the problem doesn't lie with indexation, because the minimum is periodically adjusted to the inflation rate. The problem is the basic level is too low. Currently, the minimum wage should be \$8.55 an hour, instead of \$6.70, for it to cover the cost of living.

Overcoming poverty must be given top priority by government. It is possible to move people out of poverty by revising the policies that affect their daily lives.



# Consequences of poverty

Linda McCaustlin, Common Front co-chair, spoke of the effects of poverty on people. She described what it's like to feel pain, fear, hunger, exhaustion.

She explained that various circumstances in her personal life led her to become an advocate for the poor. As she participated in a study on social assistance she gained a better understanding of the impacts of poverty. The study examined the recipients' relationship with case managers, reviewed regional policies and assessed the efficiency level of the social assistance system.

In NB, there is little face-to-face contact between case managers and recipients. Communication is mainly by telephone or letter. Case managers are given instructions not to give out information, but only to reply to direct questions.

Many policies are written in such a way that they give case managers the power of deciding... and of refusing, which might explain the variations in their interpretation. It is difficult to obtain copies of policies and recipients are not always advised of changes in policies. Generally speaking, policies leave little leeway for special cases and unusual situations.

Increasingly, budgets are being allocated regionally. It appears that each region has a limited number of medical cards that it can issue.

Recipients are subjected to constant surveillance, and sometimes to abuse and intimidation, by the case managers.

Most of the recipients are locked in the "transitional" category, as if they were moving towards employment. This is not fair treatment for all those people with reduced employment capacity. Many suffer from chronic ailments such as arthritis. Their work disability is not recognized as such and they cannot appeal that decision.

Linda McCaustlin ended her review on a hopeful note, saying she felt comforted by the fact that people had come to attend the Summit. In her opinion, nothing less than a public enquiry should be undertaken into this province's income support system.



## Solutions to reduce poverty



Claude Snow, spokesperson for the group Comité des 12 pour la justice sociale, reviewed a number of solutions to reduce poverty.

He started out by explaining that everyone agrees with helping the poor but the measures proposed to do so depend on the various schools of thought. Self-protection and community assistance programs are favoured by those who defend economic interests. Those who support social values, on the other hand, are demanding that social security be provided through a more equitable distribution of our collective wealth.

He gave an historical overview of social assistance since the 60s. Proposed governmental solutions were

examined, including reduction in benefits, work related constraints, mandatory parental support and the promotion of volunteerism, with an explanation of the arguments pro and con for each option.

Snow underscored the fact that the government has gone back on its commitments, not only in terms of monetary assistance but also in the area of personal services provided, which means that people living in poverty are doubly impacted by cutbacks.

His conclusion was that the only effective way to reduce poverty is to reinforce the social security system. This system should be instituted under a legislative framework, allocated sufficient funding and managed according to best practices in public administration. In Snow's view, federal transfer payments solely dedicated to social security are the only way to remedy the current situation.

#### The homeless

More subsidized apartments and residences are needed to provide shelter to street people.

At this time, no legislation is in place to regulate landlords who own rooming houses.

Roomers are entirely at the mercy of these landlords, and when they are subject to abuse, they are unable to appeal to the Rentalsman. This means that the most basic rights of people from a specific segment of society are not respected.

One woman explained that when she requested a transfer to a new room, the landlord charged her a \$25 service fee.



# Lively discussion...

Participants broke off into ten workshops to discuss how to meet basic needs and the means required to move out of poverty. Small group discussion promotes individual participation and the sharing of ideas and pathways to solutions.

Among other topics, people were asked to reflect on the reasons for the current prevalence of poverty in a rich country such as ours. How can we allow a fellow citizen to get his electrical power shut off in the winter, and spend several days suffering in the cold? Are we not ready to share our resources to guarantee a minimum income to everyone so that they can meet their basic needs? Is it normal to expect a person to get by on \$3,312 a year in income assistance when the cost of living for that person is estimated at \$11,470 in an urban setting and \$12,150 in a rural setting? Is it surprising that people are thinking of working under the table, dealing in drugs, shoplifting and prostitution as ways of earning enough to live on?

# Consensus and testimonials

# Enough for a decent living

There was a consensus on the fact that a single individual needs a monthly income of at least \$1,000 to survive (subsistence minimum) and that this minimum is \$2,000 for a family of 4. The threshold of poverty, which measures the income needed to live decently, is even higher. This low-income cut-off is set at \$17,800 a year for an individual living alone.



Based on these figures, individuals living alone should receive at least \$1,000 monthly in social assistance benefits to cover the subsistence minimum, or be paid a minimum wage of \$8.55 an hour to move out of poverty. The minimum wage in New Brunswick is currently \$6.70 an hour. A person working full time at that wage for an entire year earns a mere \$13,936. Even for a single person, this is much below the poverty line. When an entire family has to survive on it, that amount is overwhelmingly inadequate.

The idea of demanding significant increases was perceived positively by some participants but criticized by others, which speaks to our need for a well-honed strategy. For instance, a request to double the funds is usually better received than a request for a quadruple increase, despite the fact that in certain cases, doubling the current benefits would still not be enough.

# Further consensus...

### Employment insurance

In 1996, the government began to cut back on employment insurance payments and to accumulate billions of dollars in its cash reserve. The amount now in reserve is currently 53 billion \$.

While the period of employment required to qualify for employment insurance has been increased, the amount of benefits and the assistance period have both shrunk. A divisor rule has been introduced (income is divided by a variable figure to set the amount of benefits). Maternity leaves have also been shortened. As a result of these and other measures, the number of unemployment insurance recipients has decreased from 87% to only 46% of unemployed persons, over the past few years

Depending on where they live, workers need between 420 and 734 hours to qualify for unemployment insurance (and 910 if it's the first time they apply), while we are asking that it be set at 360 hours. Benefits are provided for only 45 weeks at this time, while we are calling for an increase to 52 weeks, and even more in the case of elderly workers. We are also requesting that the employment insurance fund be independent of government, and it be used to establish initiatives such as development funds.

We are also calling for the abolition of the waiting period that deprives people of benefits for 2 weeks, especially in the case of seasonal workers. We are also asking that the whole process of accessing employment insurance be simplified and accelerated, and that acceptable earnings while receiving benefits be increased.

Weeks of employment and study programs with the sole purpose of accessing unemployment insurance are rarely cost effective and turn out to be more expensive, in the end, than broadening access to benefits.

# Off the census

A large number of Canadians are no longer represented in any statistical survey for the simple fact that they live on the street and have no fixed address.

Because they can't afford a telephone, neither are they part of telephone surveys conducted by Statistics Canada.

The number of people without a home or shelter is estimated at 100,000 to 250,000 in our country.

One woman explained how she was distributing bottled water to street people because she feels this is a basic necessity. She says that strangely enough, transients and homeless people themselves are the ones who supply her with the water to be distributed, much more than the government, the city, or the business community.



## Poverty, an all-encompassing problem

One participant called attention to the issue of the distribution of taxpayers' money. A slight decrease in military expenditures, he claimed, would allow us to take better care of people living in poverty and help all children stay in school. He indicated that Canada's military spending is a whopping 788 billion \$ a year.

Government must provide adequate funding not only to supplement income but for other basic needs, such as support services, daycare, public transit services, mental health counselling services, classroom assistants and addiction treatment services.

In addition to the problems caused by lack of income, there is a woeful lack of resources for people who have cancer or other debilitating conditions.

For people who base their decisions on profitability, lowering corporate taxes will result in more economic prosperity and eventually in better social programs. Those who favour social solidarity, on the other hand, are convinced of the need for an equitable redistribution of our collective assets.

#### A boot to prejudice

It's time to stomp out the notion that social programs promote laziness and that they are generally the cause of budget cutbacks.

The concept of poverty varies according to mentalities. Rightwing thinking is often dominant in the mind of our elected representatives.

Lobbying of politicians must become more structured. Why don't we attend pre-budget consultations held in each region of the province, and demand measures to help eliminate poverty?

# A political challenge

It's somewhat surprising to have to fight against those we have elected to represent us and defend our interests. It isn't a question of asking government to take charge of us but rather of telling them what our needs are. The more articulate we can be in our arguments, the better we can be heard.

The MLA for Miramichi-Baie-du-Vin reminded participants that they should not be afraid of coming to their elected members with their grievances. He made a commitment to educate the government on the subject of poverty in this province.

## Working to get through the winter

Fishplant workers have a demanding occupation. These women often work in water and cold temperatures. Their daily existence is rife with injuries, aches and rheumatism. Uncertainty as to what to expect from one day to the next, and from season to season, is a perpetual torment. Their anxiety reaches its peak each spring, just before the start of the fishing season.

Most of the people termed "low-wage workers" earn so little that it's impossible for them to set aside money. They can only work the minimum number of hours to survive the winter, and the following spring, the same scenario plays itself out.

## Unable to return to the work force

A fifty-year-old worker who has found it impossible to return to the job market came to the mic to explain his reality. A former civil servant and later the owner of two businesses, he experienced a reversal of fortune and illness which destroyed his financial situation. He said that his insurance company refused his claim and that he had to dispose of the totality of his assets before he could benefit from social assistance.

#### Cheap labour in NB

The province has been successful in attracting businesses by selling them on the idea that the local work force is plentiful and available at a bargain price. Call centers are the perfect example of this. They threaten to move their facilities elsewhere if the minimum wage increases too much.

But the only alternative to social assistance, often, is to take a low-paying job.

## Call centres

Some call centres will not hire single mothers, and we consider this an infringement of human rights.

Legislation against discrimination must be applied in this employment sector. At the very least, the government should persuade call centres to offer flexible work schedules that are suited to single mothers.

# Casual employment

Workers aged between 55 and 65 as well as youths with no job experience have a hard time finding employment.

Incitement to work often leads to unstable and underpaid jobs. The entire social protection system must be closely examined. The problem does not lie with inciting people to work but in linking social assistance to unacceptable working conditions.

#### Food banks

People who wish to access food banks must first apply for permission to do so, then find transportation, which can cost them up to 15 or 20 dollars. If they are unlucky enough to arrive at the wrong time, help is simply denied them.

Soup kitchens, shelters and drop-in centres are some of the places where homeless people can go for help. In large centre, people who are unable to provide their address because they live on the street are often banned from food banks.

Approximately half of the people who use food banks in Canada are social assistance recipients who are not getting enough aid to survive. One participant stated that she was taking care of people who are refused at the food bank.

In the Shediac region, near Moncton, about 100 new requests for boxes of food are received each month.

It is imperative to change the operation of food banks and their criteria for access.

#### Economic units

Among social assistance policies, the most questionable is undoubtedly the one that defines economic units. It prevents adult individuals from living together to make better use of their resources, by penalizing them if they do. They are registered in the same file and they receive less financial assistance than if they each had their own file. In certain cases, income assistance recipients are not allowed to take in boarders, thus denying these individuals a right enjoyed by other citizens.

# Poverty among children

Pathetic testimonials were given that served as a reminder of the fate of children who lack basic necessities at home.

A young boy about 10 years old bravely came to explain to participants what it means to children to live in destitution. How sad it is, he said, to see children experience so much suffering.

Others added that it's humiliating for children to go to school with half a sandwich in their lunchbox, and to have to wear layers of sweaters to keep away the cold, because there's no heat in the house.



# Suggestions from the workshops

The following are among the many suggestions for the reduction of poverty that were developed during the workshops.

- 1. There should be catching-up increases in the minimum wage, in social assistance benefits, and unemployment insurance benefits. All should be periodically increased, in a relatively short period of time.
- 2. The increase in minimum wage should take place before any increase in social assistance or both should occur simultaneously.
- 3. A directory of businesses that pay their employees at least \$8.55 and hour should be prepared, and used as an incentive to dissuade people from shopping elsewhere.
- 4. The government should only give out subcontracts to businesses that pay their employees at least \$8.55 an hour.
- 5. The government should provide a stopgap in the case of workers who are out of a good paying job, rather than see them

leave the province

(a scheme that would bridge the difference between a well-remunerated job and one that is less so).

- 6. The government should intervene to regulate the price of certain basic goods. An increase in income is meaningless if expenses also increase.
- 7. Employment insurance should consider the specific needs of seasonal workers.
- 8. Earning exemptions for social assistance recipients should be calculated on an annual basis, to compensate for the months where seasonal work is unavailable.
- 9. Government should bring back its special benefits within its income assistance program.
- 10. Government should provide support services in conjunction with financial assistance, as was the practice previously.

- 11. The Rentalsman's mandate should be broadened to include rooming houses. A charter of rights for boarders should be enacted.
- 12. Support that is extended to social assistance recipients (medical card, transportation expenses, dental and vision expenses, heating supplements) should also be provided to low-income workers.
- 13. Personal services to people with addictions should be increased to prevent aggravation of their addiction when they earn supplementary income.
- 14. Government should better manage public funds. The federal government could save 12 billion \$ by a more efficient management of the public sector.
- 15. We should work more closely with the Literacy Council and other socially active organizations.



# Saturday October 28

# The many faces of poverty

The October 28 session opened with a Round Table moderated by MichelBoudreau with participants Myrna Munn, Tina Barber and Aldo Noël, who spoke respectively about women living on social assistance, youths living in poverty and the working poor.

Myrna Munn had a moving testimonial. She explained her personal problems both in the area of health and linked to her situation. She is now forced to live in a single room. She tries to work to improve her quality of life. Her life is a constant struggle. She is not allowed to live her life.

**Tina Barber** is an in-your-face young woman who gave an articulate account of the problems of youths she meets who live in deprivation and go around begging for basic necessities such as taking a shower and feeding themselves. She also spoke of the transient experience, including the sore lack of something to do. Some of them, she stated, are safer in the street than in their home. Youth centers are an indispensable resource to prevent them from sinking into desperation. She pleaded for measures designed to end the cycle of poverty for young people.

Aldo Noël described what low-income workers have to do to get out of poverty, to give their children an education, and remain hopeful for the future. He confided that he personally had to fight like a wolf and overcome many obstacles that were making him angry. His faith helped him grow out of that, he stated. He formed a group with others to support people whose rights are being infringed. His feistiness has mutated into militancy for social causes. Today he is proud of his three children, to whom he has given a solid foundation by teaching them not to give up fighting when they feel vulnerable.



Walking proud

People living in poverty often have to resort to begging for a living, despite the moral and legal obligation of governments to protect them. The right to a basic living income is legally recognized in Canada, and equal rights for everyone is part of our Constitution.

The state has considerably reduced its involvement in the social sector over the past few years and must be forced to fulfill its responsibilities.

A participant in one of the workshops was heard to exclaim: "It's scandalous to make us feel guilty for demanding things that we should be getting."

# The role of volunteers

Volunteerism has its place, and it isn't in providing basic needs for survival. NGOs play an important role in countries that don't offer social protection to their citizens. However that model cannot apply in a country such as ours.

When people are desperately looking for work, it's insulting to be asked to volunteer to support their own. Volunteer work becomes an unpaid job that further drains the resources of these volunteers.

# Economic impact

Increasing the buying power of poor people would lead to economic growth. A number of local businesses depend on transfer payments for their existence. Government must legislate to ensure that owners of rooming houses do not cancel out any increase in buying power by increasing rents. It must also ensure that an increase in minimum wage will not be undermined by a decrease in hours of work, as recently happened in the case of hours of home services providers.

## **Homemakers**

People working as homemakers are in a precarious position because they are paid minimum wage, work on split schedules and pay their own transportation costs. As soon as their income reaches the level of social assistance benefits, they can't claim their medical expenses for reimbursement. which means that on the whole, they may be earning less than if they received social assistance.

# The experience of hardship

People living in poverty often go without heat and go to bed without supper. They are deprived of the medications they need. They are also unable to pay for transportation to keep their appointments. One woman challenged politicians to live on the income of a social assistance recipient, and then to give an account of their experience in the press.

#### Guaranteed income

One man portrayed a Summit such as this as a form of sharing based on justice and fairness. He pointed out that in any society, wealth deserves to be fairly distributed, and this inevitably leads to some form of guaranteed income.

An economist among the participants pointed out that the reason that governments are reluctant to consider guaranteed income as a solution to poverty is that there are so many political and administrative pitfalls that must be avoided. It has nothing to do, he said, with financial capacity.

# **Closing the Summit**

## From reflection to action...

The Summit emerged as a real collective challenge focused on change and progress. Several commonalities in our thinking came to light. As time went on, individual thinking gave way to collective thinking. We have understood we must have a mobilizing and positive attitude if we want to move out of poverty. One city was commended for its slogan: "Let's pay our employees a fair wage".

#### Elements of consensus

- Three actions are absolutely critical in remedying the current situation: increasing *social assistance* benefits to cover basic needs as defined by the Market Basket Measure, and indexing them to the cost of living; increasing *minimum* wage to \$8.55 an hour to reach the poverty line, and improving eligibility to the *employment insurance* program.
- Another consensus emerged on the urgency of revising the provincial policy regarding *economic units* and of regulating *rooming houses*.

#### These points are also foremost:

- An individual should have a monthly income of at least \$1,000 to cover the current cost of living.
- There must be solidarity among us, and we must work in partnership with elected officials and civil servants to move forward. We must also establish connections with First Nations.
- We have to think strategically, which means being realistic in our expectations, and choosing reasonable but well-defined deadlines. By putting specific figures on our demands, we are eliminating escape routes and giving our demands more credible.
- Many myths survive because people aren't aware of the facts. Poverty is a human creation that can also be reversed by humans. The topic of poverty should be part of an ongoing political education process.
- The Common Front for Social Justice has enough material to adopt a plan with key actions attached. It is recommended that each of the eight regions in the province establish a permanent connection with the Common Front.

### **Empowerment**

Some people found that creating their own jobs was a way for them to move out of poverty. The experience of the Fredericton Anti-Poverty Organization is exemplary. This recycling business has been able to balance its budget while employing a few people and helping nearly 15,000 families per year, by selling items donated by the community. The organization is instrumental in making a success of people helping each other and acquiring political power in the process.

# Lessons for the next forums

- 1. Provide a profile of the demographic, social and economic situation that is as up-to-date as possible.
- 2. Examine the issue of medication coverage by the provincial drug plan and the income assistance medical card.
- 3. Provide data on the social cost of poverty, including its impact on the health and justice systems.
- 4. Address the issue of work disability.

# A scarf campaign, why not?

The Summit ended on the image of a tricolour scarf being gradually knitted, its interlocking strands forming a solid chain. A scarf campaign could become a symbol for a collective struggle to provide for essential needs, such as keeping people warm in winter.



#### Want to know more?

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