

# SUMMARY REPORT

## OPTIONS DOCUMENT

Phase II – The Roundtable

### DEVELOPING A POVERTY REDUCTION PLAN FOR NEW BRUNSWICK

October 2009



Bringing  
the pieces  
together



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## INTRODUCTION

In New Brunswick, as elsewhere, many of us living in poverty confront isolation, illness, despair, fear and anger every day. Poverty means never having enough: not enough money, not enough health, not enough security, not enough education, not enough skills, not enough work, not enough friends, not enough opportunities, not enough warmth, not enough hope.

June Callwood once famously compared poverty to being trapped in a mineshaft. She noted that society's response to a mine cave-in is to rush in the rescuers to remove the rubble so that those trapped can get out. Their goal is to clear a path to the surface and provide support for the climb.

Society's response to poverty, however, has been sluggish and fitful. Generally, social programs focus on maintenance rather than movement, aiming to bring some solace to those in the shaft because they are not expected to make it to the bright world above ground. Indeed, those who try to climb out find more obstacles to overcome, the systemic and social debris which often dooms them to a life in the shadows.

There has been little effort to prevent a tumble into the mineshaft, to secure people before they fall in or after they have scrambled to the surface. Having concentrated on the immediate issue of poverty reduction, we must ensure that future generations are intercepted and supported before they become trapped in dependency or isolation. It is in our power to change our attitudes, policies and programs so that they reduce and prevent rather than perpetuate poverty.

New Brunswick prides itself on Equal Opportunity. Here, ideally, every person has a chance to thrive. Everyone theoretically has access to the public services and community supports which promote growth and development. In fact, the reality is much different for the marginalized. Children born into poverty are instantly disadvantaged in terms of access to health, education, employment, inclusion and justice. They cannot seize the opportunities that other citizens take for granted. This is an injustice which New Brunswickers agree must be corrected. Equal Opportunity must mean what it says.

There is another pressing need to be addressed: our perception of people in poverty as liabilities rather than assets. People in the mineshaft have gifts to share with their communities. They have untapped skills, knowledge and strength. They have the resilience of the abandoned.

The world is changing rapidly; our response is urgent. We need everyone who can contribute in meeting the challenges ahead. For example, there is an increasing need to fill jobs left vacant by an aging population. Many employment opportunities exist for qualified workers. We must focus on ensuring that those living on the margins have the education, training, skills and supports they need to participate to their fullest extent in the workforce and to fulfill their individual potential for inclusion.

How do we do that? It will take collaboration and will on everyone's part: the government, the private sector, the non-profit sector and engaged citizens. Together, we can strengthen communities by investing our efforts and resources in a future of socioeconomic inclusion, justice and self-sufficiency. Together, we can build the opportunity ladder, help everyone to reach the sunshine, and seal the mineshafts forever.

But there is no quick fix. This task will not be accomplished without significant, authentic commitments and strong leadership which understands that it is in everyone's interest to make it happen. This is the time to focus on what unites us and to work towards responsible, collaborative partnerships. Self-interest must respect shared concerns as we struggle to achieve our goals while maintaining sectoral autonomy and sustainability.

This document is about possible options for action. They are based on the "Choir of Voices" report and the deliberations of the Roundtable, which was no ordinary forum. Traditionally, government has been responsible for public services, the business sector has driven the economy, and the non-profit sector has worked in all aspects of community development. The voice of people speaking from lives of poverty was sometimes present but infrequently heard.

The Roundtable brought together representatives of all three traditional sectors, as well as people who have had the experience of living in poverty, to transcend the silos and work towards overarching goals. It has been led from the outset by a group of respected members of each sector. In order to find common ground, it was necessary for the members of the Roundtable to step outside of their own sectors to understand the perspectives of others without sacrificing their own principles and purposes. For the most part, they were able to focus on the need for all sectors to pool their efforts and resources, and to contribute in their own unique ways, because they understand that the poverty of any affects us all. Everyone in New Brunswick has a stake in the outcome of this plan.

Since its first meeting last June, the Roundtable has looked beyond tinkering. The usual fixes - dabbling with policy, shifting resources, creating more bureaucracy - have been ineffective in changing the circumstances of those living in poverty. This menu of options presents choices for genuine transformation. It is up to the Final Forum to select those actions which will be the responsibility of each sector and which will enhance the quality of life for everyone in this province. These actions will require sustained commitment if they are to achieve their desired goals in the long term. But we must begin.

It is time now to take action to reduce poverty and create opportunity. It is time to restore hope for a dynamic future, in which each person can progress from deprivation towards sufficiency, from passivity towards engagement, from exclusion towards inclusion. We will all be richer when everyone has enough.

## THE PROCESS

The Roundtable Sessions represent the second phase of a three-phase public engagement initiative underway to develop a poverty reduction plan for New Brunswick. This initiative is being jointly led by the business community, the community non-profit sector and government. The official launch was on October 17, 2008; it is now moving into the last phase. The Final Forum will be held in November 2009.

This document is the result of a series of roundtable sessions held by very dedicated New Brunswickers who were tasked with developing options for the various components of a poverty reduction plan. Using the collective wisdom of over 2500 people who participated in the public dialogue, and calling on their personal experiences in all walks of life, the members of the roundtable attempted to articulate options which would reflect the demand for a new approach to poverty reduction and socioeconomic inclusion.

The options provide alternatives for consideration by the participants of the Final Forum which will be held in November 2009. The task of the participants of this final phase of the public engagement initiative will be to decide on which of these options will be adopted as the components of an action plan to reduce poverty in New Brunswick.

This report is an options document that presents draft vision statements and objectives, options for actions to reduce poverty in New Brunswick, potential measures of progress and models for being accountable for implementation and monitoring achievement. It offers the opportunity for us to develop a new perspective on poverty and to create a framework for implementation based on a vision, goals and objectives which will facilitate transformational change.

The public engagement process provided opportunities for all citizens to participate in creating this plan, and the roundtable process consolidated the findings of this process into a document for consideration. The task of the Final Forum is to select those actions which its members believe are the most important to tackle in the short term, recognizing that not all of the options can be implemented immediately. Nevertheless, the options document provides a framework for building a ladder up and out of the mineshaft and for preventing entrapment in poverty.



## COMPONENTS OF AN ACTION PLAN

At the end of the day, the result of the public engagement initiative will be the adoption of a plan of action for reducing poverty in New Brunswick. Like all action plans, the Poverty Reduction Plan will need to include a vision statement, a global objective, a set of indicators to measure progress towards achievement of the objective, specified actions to be implemented and an accountability and monitoring mechanism to report on the results.

## MESSAGE FROM THE ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

The task of the Roundtable was to review the input received from participants of the public dialogue phase which culminated in the development of a Report entitled: A Choir of Voices – The What Was Said Report and to glean from the input options for actions for consideration by the Final Forum. What follows, then, is a sort of menu - a list of possible courses from which to choose those which best suit the tastes, nourish the future, and align with the resources of New Brunswick.

It has been clear from the outset of this process that New Brunswickers view poverty not only in terms of income, but also in terms of exclusion. Poverty marginalizes people and keeps them forever on the outside looking in. So poverty reduction must be at its heart a plan for socioeconomic inclusion. This focus requires that the plan be primarily led from the top and generated from the bottom, with a significant government initiative which fully engages the talents and strengths of both the business and the community sectors. It also challenges us to understand poverty reduction not as an expenditure to be written off, but as an investment which pays extensive socioeconomic dividends en route to provincial self-sufficiency.

In selecting options for consideration by the members of the Final Forum, the Roundtable participants based their choices on these operating principles:

First, the plan should be focused on providing opportunities for all New Brunswickers to grow, learn, work, earn and participate.

Second, the plan should be based on the assumption that most people living in poverty want to work, because work generates income and promotes inclusion.

Third, the plan should be structured to provide timely and adequate assistance to those climbing out of deep poverty, as well as to the working poor who are toiling to become self-sufficient.

Fourth, the plan should be developed as an authentic partnership among all sectors through a process of engagement and commitment which involves everyone from start to finish.

Finally, the implementation of the plan should be a joint responsibility and a combined effort of all sectors: the public sector (government), the private sector (business) and the community sector, including non-profit organizations, people with lived experience of poverty, and other concerned groups and individuals.

With these principles in mind, the Roundtable suggested options for being, becoming and belonging.

## OPTIONS FOR ACTIONS

Since the implementation of the poverty reduction plan will require a joint commitment by all sectors, it is expected that the responsibility for the actions that are adopted will be distributed collaboratively, as each sector identifies and accepts its share according to its interests, mandate, capacity and resources.

The Final Forum participants will be responsible for selecting those actions which can have the greatest impact in achieving the objective. It is suggested that they not select too many actions to be implemented as the shot gun approach has not worked in the past. This plan requires an enduring commitment to attitudinal and systemic change, and all of these actions are significant. But some are more urgent and will be needed in the short term to spark major, long-term innovation. It will be important that the Final Forum participants debate priorities for actions that all sectors of New Brunswick society can focus on together. The potential for collaboration among the sectors should be a strong factor in the final choices.

These options for actions were presented as a continuum, from meeting basic needs to socioeconomic inclusion. If implemented in an integrated manner, they will help people to move from a basic existence (Being) through learning and developing skills (Becoming) to participation in the mainstream (Belonging).

The following is an overview of the options for actions that could be adopted by members of the Final Forum and incorporated into a poverty reduction plan.

### Options for Creating Opportunities for Being (meeting basic needs)

- redesign of social assistance program
- improved access to health services
- increased incomes
- access to transportation
- affordable, adequate housing
- Community Volunteer Agencies as community-based resource centres
- early childhood services
- strengthened non-profit sector
- integrated service delivery models

## **Options for Creating Opportunities for Becoming (learning and acquiring skills for personal development and employment)**

- literacy and numeracy skills
- lifeskills
- alternative learning environments
- community schools
- transition to work for youth
- increased employment opportunities
- integrated community-based service delivery

## **Options for Creating Opportunities for Belonging (participation in the community mainstream)**

- incentives for personal engagement
- mixed housing neighbourhoods
- access to extra-curricular activities
- access to skilled workforce
- poverty lens
- public awareness
- community development
- Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative model