

## WE NEED MORE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO ERRADICATE POVERTY

ARTICLE BY THE DIRECTOR OF SSHQ, ELENI FAKOTAKIS

Poverty is no longer only the responsibility of the individual who is found within its confines. Gandhi declared, **“Poverty is the worst form of violence”**. I could not agree more! This very wise and well thought-out statement as it implies that, it is a society’s responsibility to eradicate poverty by ensuring that all people have equal and fair access to a quality life. Everyone must be included, everyone is important and covered by Canada’s fundamental principles. Failure to ensure this is a form of violence towards humanity.

Statistics show that unattached individuals are four times more likely to be poor than individuals living in families. They make up 44.3 % of the poor, added to this list are working-age adults aged 18 to 64, these statistics have not improved over the last 30 years. We are seeing younger people affected in greater numbers as they face high levels of unemployment and a lack of good entry-level jobs. Families are also touched by poverty. We see it around us, families are struggling to make ends meet, working long hours at low wages. There are also particular groups who are at risk of extreme economic insecurity, such as Female Lone-Parent Families, recent immigrants, Off-Reserve Aboriginal Peoples, persons with disabilities, and also autonomous workers and artists who are just starting out their careers or have unstable or seasonal work, who do not qualify for benefits such as sickness insurance, health and dental plans, and paid vacations for example. We observe individuals in some professions making hundreds of dollars per hour, while others, although just as worthy of respect, as they may contribute more towards the betterment of society, are being remunerated at close to minimum wage per hour.

The years of recession have magnified further the difficulties we face, as we have to deal with: Wealth inequality, people who are precariously employed (low wages or short-term employment, unstable employment, no wage increases), relatively high levels of unemployment, meanwhile the cost of living keeps rising. This is more noticeable in major cities, Vancouver and Montreal ranking the highest in poverty levels. It seems not to pre occupy most people but for those who suffer in poverty’s clutches and wrath, like the Welfare poor who rely on public assistance and for the single mom who works at a low-paying job, it most certainly causes them great anxiety, emotional pain, loss of dignity and hope. Particularly those who have been faced with the difficult decision between feeding their children or paying the rent.

Poverty makes it difficult for people to lead quality lives and has been declared to be the single largest determinant of health according to the **World Health Organization**. Poverty facilitates the onset of illness and the reverse is also true. **The cost to society of poverty is extremely high, as it burdens our economic, healthcare and criminal justice systems**. Therefore, it is in everyone’s best interest that our society identifies and develops very effective strategies and programs to combat poverty.

However, poverty must be measured if it is to be eradicated, in order to keep track of our progress. This is quite a challenge indeed. Poverty is very difficult to measure because it is complex. In Québec, we

have defined it with Bill 112 (An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion). To people like Gandhi and others who have tried to analyse poverty, the onus is no longer on the individual to improve their situation, it must be a joint effort, as we established earlier. Basic survival and quality living needs should be addressed on a society level, we must be able to face or find the right opportunities, but they have to exist in the first place. It is essential to have access to a sustainable livelihood, to have access to health care, for our society to be socially inclusive. This argument is easier to understand if we consider other parts of the world where opportunities for individual growth are not the same. For example, during war, or during an economic or social-political crisis or in a part of the world where girls or women are not encouraged to go to school because they are considered second class citizens, or because they live in a male dominant and controlling society. These unfair factors will affect one's choices and personal development, also, the lack of choices will limit one from developing as one should. The burden therefore, must be on society to correct the socio-economic obstacles to personal growth and to our healthy growth as a society. The definition of the Quebec bill on poverty states,

**“Poverty is to be deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and to maintain economic self-sufficiency and participation in society”.**

**How do we measure poverty?** **Statistics Canada** measures poverty and what we define as “poor” in a variety of ways but we cannot address it effectively and monitor the progress over the years because the circumstances surrounding poverty are complex and multi-faceted. No one measure is perfect and often many different measures are used to arrive at a consensus or a clear understanding of the scope and depth of poverty. In the past 40 years, poverty has been rated by the use of three popular measures, such as: the **LICO** (Low-Income Cut-Off), the **LIM** (Low-Income Measure) and the **MBM** (Market Basket Measure).

The LICO is the oldest measure and defines an individual or family as being in a “Strained Circumstance” if they are spending 20% more than the average equivalent household on food, clothing and shelter. There is a table of about 35 different LICO measurements depending on the individual or family size. This measure is limited as it does not take into consideration regional differences, such as cost of housing and size of municipality. In addition, this measure has not been indexed or updated since 1992 according to CPJ (Citizens for Public Justice, 2012).

The LIM groups individuals or households as living in low income situation if their income is 50% below that of the **median** income of individuals or families. This simple measure rules out the extreme variances and is used when comparing poverty on an international level and facilitates in measuring the effectiveness of Poverty Reduction Strategies.

The MBM was developed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. It defines low income in relation to a specific basket of essential goods and services. Therefore, if the individual or family does not have access to this basket, they are considered to live in poverty. This measure determines the cost or value of the basket and takes into consideration regional differences and family sizes. It applies the

individual or family's after-tax income to the basket value. An example of the basket items (food, clothing, footwear, shelter, transportation, furniture, toiletries, telephone, recreation, entertainment).

There is also another way that poverty is measured, developed by the **CCSD** (Canadian Council on Social Development), it is the **Poverty Line** measure. The poverty line is based on half of the average Canadian family income. If an income is below the poverty line, it is defined as poor. Adjustments are then made for family size but not for place of residence. The simple Poverty line measure will not take into effect the location of the household (ie. if they are in rural or urban area).

Other equally important measures are the depth and duration of poverty. Depth has to do with how far below the poverty line a poor individual's income falls and duration, whether poverty is a short or long-term experience for the individual. The depth is defined further by the gap or the **Poverty Gap**. This is the difference between the low income threshold and average income of all households. Apparently, Canada has made little progress in reducing the poverty gap over the last 30 years, according to statistics illustrated in the Poverty Trends Scorecard Canada 2012 by CPJ, the rate is just above the 33% mark, it was getting lower in the late 80's, early 90's (30%) and reached a peak in 2005 (35%). One good thing that was noted, is that fewer people (40%) are experiencing long-term poverty (5 years and up) than before.

As one can imagine, statistics, although varied at any given point in time, illustrate that the population that is living in poverty is anywhere from 9% to 15% of the population. While other statistics, depending on who is conducting them, the measure used and specific population studied, the rate of poverty can be much higher, for example statistics for 2010 illustrate the rate of poverty to be affecting: 26.9% of unattached individuals, 17.6% of recent immigrants and 15.2% of Off-Reserve Aboriginal Peoples. **These are pretty alarming rates, if one in 4 unattached, one in 5 or one in 10 people around us is living in poor or in strained circumstances! This is too many and unacceptable, considering Canada is often referred to as one of the wealthiest nations.**

After visiting food bank sites, as well as, **Statistics Canada** and looking through a multitude of studies and reports on poverty, I would like to share the following statements, statistics and costs to society which are quite astonishing and hard to go unnoticed:

- **The federal government spends between \$10.4 billion and \$13.1 billion a year to fight poverty**
- **In 2011, the federal government spent \$19.9 billion on Employment Insurance benefits alone, almost \$4 billion was transferred to low-income families and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation cost \$3 billion in tax dollars. 8.8 % of Canadians had low incomes.**
- **3 million Canadians are affected by poverty, 1 in 5 are children (600,000 children)**
- **1 in 3 or 33% of children had at least one parent who worked full time throughout the year in 2008 and still lived in poverty, (Statistics Canada 2008)**
- **3.1 million households pay more than 30% of their income on housing**

- **450,000 – 900,000 Canadians represent the hidden homeless, (Wellesley Institute 2010)**
- **With respect to longevity, there is a 21 year difference in life expectancy between people living in the poorest neighbourhood and the wealthiest neighbourhood, (Hamilton Ontario, 2010, McMaster University study)**
- **Poverty costs the Canadian health care system 7.6 Billion \$ per year, (Assoc. of food banks)**
- **\$1 invested in a child, living in a low-income family before the age of 6, saves \$9 in future spending on health, (report on public health in Canada)**
- **In 2012, 872,379 Canadians used food banks each month (Association of Food Banks)**
- **In Québec, 5% are homeless and sleep on the street**
- **24% of Quebecers received help from a food bank or charity during the year**
- **Moisson Montréal allocates to the various boroughs of Montreal between 336,000 kg to 945,000 kg of food annually through non-profit organisations and food banks (2010)**

When the measure ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care Services) was used to compare Canada with 35 other developed countries, UNICEF placed us in 24<sup>th</sup> place with respect to the incidence of child poverty. This is why Canada launched the, “Lets Invest in Canada’s Children” campaign in 2000. **Canada is striving to be poverty-free by the year 2020. Since CPJ’s assistance in establishing the All-Party Anti-Poverty Caucus in 2012, there appears to be a consistent effort in place.** (“Dignity for All”, 2014). CPJ has also in cooperation with World Vision Canada, produced “Poverty at Your Doorstep” a set of reports highlighting poverty in the cities of Vancouver, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Toronto and Montreal (“New Report Puts Canadian Poverty Under a Microscope”, 2013) and the necessary steps needed to beat poverty.

What is Canada doing to eradicate persistent and in some cases, rising inequalities and poverty rates? What has happened since the **1965 Privy Council Office** established a group of specialists to study and encourage greater federal-provincial co-operation in combating poverty? Financial assistance programs over the years seemed to have helped curb senior poverty substantially with a variety of programs for seniors, **CPP** (Canada Pension Plan), **QPP** (Quebec Pension Plan), Old Age Pension, Spouses’ Allowance, in addition to other provincial supplements, etc. Also influential was the **Claude Castonguay Commission** which examined the social security in Quebec. Programs that have helped over the years include the **Unemployment Insurance Act, the Child Tax Credit, benefits to low-income families, the National Child Benefit Supplement for low-income families with children, the Family Allowance, Low-income housing, food-banks, the Guaranteed Annual Income Supplement, summer employment initiatives and a multitude of other initiatives (including local ones) have played positive roles.**

However, progress is slow, poverty and unemployment rates have decreased only several percentage points since the early 80’s. Although, overall there has been a reduction, rates are still considered high. Food banks are fairly accessible, however, low income housing is much less so, due to limited units and long waiting lists, priority is given to single mothers with children as they are at high risk of poverty and

therefore high on the criteria priority. So, what then is the answer, more social programs? Will such programs ever be enough?

Is employment for all the answer? Studies have shown over the years that stable employment not only provides financial stability but also improves the psychosocial development of the individual. It seems to me that unemployment should be eradicated completely. Everyone must find their ideal spot in the market place. Everyone is capable of working and would want to work at a job that was ideal for them, where they would super productive. This should be the challenge. Even people with the most severe handicaps have abilities that can be employed with some adaptations to a work place. Everyone would be so much more productive in a job that brought out their best self. There should be much more legislation and inspection of the workplace, both in the public and private domain, to make sure that people were treated fairly, with equality and respect.

There are many other ways that society can be rid of poverty: Quality education and quality of life for all; making sure that there is equal employment opportunities; equal remuneration for men and women for equal work (which goes without saying for profit and not-for-profit organisations alike); giving low income employees more tax benefits; ensuring better compliance measures are in place with respect to child support after separation or divorce; ensuring more daycare spaces so single parents or moms can work; giving greater child supplements to low income families; increasing social housing units; greater financial assistance and specific vocational training to individuals with intellectual and or physical limitations; benefits for people who contribute to culture and the arts; benefits to retirees for volunteering their time to community organizations; giving more money to non-profit organisations who seem to know and to help their clients more effectively; combating corruption, thereby making more money available for social programs, to name a few.

The important thing is to lobby the government to make effective changes and to implement these and other creative ways to beat poverty. One way would be to create special committees to implement effective strategies at a borough level involving the representation of key players, such as: citizens, local elected officials, local companies and local partner groups and organizations.

Our service, SSHQ, also known as the **Hellenic Social Services of Québec of the Hellenic Community of Greater Montréal** operates two, weekly food banks, one in Montreal and another in Laval. Thanks to Moisson Montréal, to the donations from the students of **École Socrates-Démosthène** and to some private food donations, since 2005, we are helping to fight poverty. We take this responsibility very seriously, especially when we see very young adults tangled in its web. We do our utmost to get them back on their feet right away and not to rely on the food bank for long.

When I met Isabelle (not her real name), my heart sank. She entered my office in tears, 21 years of age, with no hope in her eyes, she was overwhelmed, tired and alone. We listened to her, then, our team helped her to deal with each one of her particular challenges. Within two months, Isabelle had found a job and was back on her feet, paying her rent and dealing much better with the loss of her friend, her employment and economic challenges. We were there for her and believed in her ability to help herself.

She has since come back to volunteer her services from time to time to give back to others some of the success and wellness she achieved with our help.

This kind of support is absolutely necessary in helping to get people back on their feet and out of poverty. Through our food-bank service, we offer non-perishable food to low-income families and individuals of all origins. We serve approximately 221 individuals or 109 homes yearly. About 34% or **76** are children, 22% or **30** are elderly and 3% are students. In the Montreal food bank the clients are **mostly male beneficiaries (64%)** who address our services, while in Laval, they are **mostly female beneficiaries (53%)**. Consistent with statistics discussed earlier, most of the beneficiaries of both food banks are people **who live alone (70% in Montreal, in comparison to 54% in Laval)**.

In **Montreal 65% of households** come for food every week, while in Laval most recipients come for food between one and three times in a month.

The families change somewhat from year to year, some stop using the food banks and **about 8% new families** address our food bank services yearly. For example we are helping three new Syrian families, who recently immigrated to Canada and live in Laval. When individuals or families remain on our Food bank list as recipients for more than five (5) years, we intervene to evaluate and find ways to help these beneficiaries to improve their situation and to not have to depend on the food bank for much longer.

**Refer to the table below for more statistics:**

Stats are in numbers & not in a percentage % 1 unit per home	MTL	LAVAL	Total
Recent immigrants	14	21	35
Single-parent family	4	5	9
Bi-parent family	13	12	25
Couple, no children	5	1	6
People living alone	48	21	69
Work PT	9	4	13

<b>EI</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Welfare or no income</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Old Age Security</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Invalidity</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Rent</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Social housing</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Other (live with friends or *own house)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5(3*)</b>	<b>6</b>

So, where are Canadian programs failing? With all these efforts, why is there still poverty? We have already established that Canada must invest in its future prosperity by having an effective anti-poverty strategy. What is this EFFECTIVE ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY? The majority would have to agree to it to some extent, so that it is implemented at all three-levels of government. Do we need a more collective or socialist system where wealth is distributed according to the needs of the poor? How will such a program be administered? Must the very affluent give even more taxes? Should every single person find a place in our market system, even the physically and mentally challenged?

Poverty may be difficult to measure, but we all agree that it still exists with high measure! There is no doubt that society must implement more appropriate and effective assistance and educational programs. We must have more effective political and socio-economic laws and policies on poverty that are just and equal to all. Through which effective strategies will be implemented and will be more successful as they will be more representative of local needs and wishes. We have to lobby our government officials to follow recommendations made by special commissions and committees on the subject of poverty and hold them accountable for a certain amount of progress. We have to agree on a 0-tolerance on poverty.

On an individual level, we must all do our part to help out. We should participate at the borough level, stay informed, vote, lobby, help a community organization who works to curb poverty. Our service for example, is reaching out to the community for perishable food items such as milk, eggs, fish and poultry. We are also seeking volunteers to help out during food-bank activity and are appealing to the general public for the donation of a van that is necessary in order to collect food donations, as we no longer

have access to a van. We have been unable to obtain any government or regular private funding in order to stabilize and to guarantee our food bank distribution services in Montreal and Laval. It would be ideal to acquire some government funding for this effort and to have greater help from the neighbors where our food banks are located.

This is where YOU come into the picture, we need your help!

Nelson Mandela said **“...that it is in our hands to change the world and to make it a better place...”**  
So, roll up your sleeves and come help us do this!