Children’s Rights and Poverty Reduction Legislation:
Submission on the Poverty Reduction Act included in Bill C-97
by the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children

Introduction

The first parliamentary resolution to end child poverty by the year 2000 was adopted when Canada signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This year is the 30th Anniversary of the Convention. With over 1.4 million children living in poverty (19.6% of Canada’s children), child poverty remains a top concern among youth groups and children’s service agencies in Canada. Furthermore, the fact that the rate of child poverty in Canada is higher than comparable countries who have taken targeted measures to address it, such as the United Kingdom, suggests Canada can do much better.

The Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (CCRC) welcomed the introduction of Bill C-87, An Act Respecting the Reduction of Poverty, as a tool to better implement children’s rights. We now recommend similar provisions be included in Bill C-97, the budget implementation bill. The CCRC recommends that it include more ambitious targets, shorter timelines, and multiple indicators to measure progress for children.

Development as well as Survival

In Article 27 of the Convention, Canada recognized “the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.” The same article recognizes the primary role of parents, but also the duty of State Parties to “take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the children to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing, and housing.”

Of particular note in this article are the following points relevant to the Poverty Reduction Act:

a. Developing the full capacity of every child is the norm, not mere survival;

b. Parents, the state, and society have complementary duties to support child development;

c. Income supplements and support programs are essential to help children out of poverty.

While the CCRC understands the rationale behind using a Market Basket Measure for Canada’s Official Poverty Line, we ask parliament to ensure that the calculated costs for raising a child include resources to support the full development of children, including early childhood development and costs associated with participation in community programs for children.
Recommendations:

The CCRC recommends that:

1. Parliament explicitly recognize the relationship between poverty reduction and its duties to children under the Convention and other human rights covenants, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals, by including a reference to Canada’s human rights obligations in the preamble to the national poverty reduction act:
   “whereas poverty reduction contributes to meeting Canada’s duties under the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women, and other international human rights obligations;”

2. Parliament explicitly recognize that poverty reduction needs to consider the developmental aspects of childhood, as outlined in Article 24 of the Convention, by adding it to the criteria for reviewing the official poverty line in paragraph 7.2, to read:

   The Official Poverty Line is to be reviewed, on a regular basis as determined by Statistics Canada, to ensure that it reflects the up-to-date cost of a basket of goods and services representing a modest, basic standard of living in Canada, and, in the case of children, developmental needs as articulated in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

Children Cannot Wait for 15 Years

The impacts of poverty in early childhood warrant early focused attention. Canada has invested in decades of health research that clearly shows the benefits of early investment in child development, the importance of the social determinants of health for child development, and the life-long limiting effects of allowing children to grow up in circumstances of deprivation. The target of a 50% reduction in child poverty from 2015 levels by 2030 is too little too late, based on what we know about the impacts of deprivation in childhood.

Given Canada’s aging population, this target and timeframe is also poor economics. Canada needs to develop the full potential of its children for economic and social sustainability, as well as to fulfill children’s rights.

In Article 4 of the Convention, Canada committed to undertake measures to fulfill the economic, social, and cultural rights of children “to the maximum extent of available resources.” Through Bill C-97, parliament should hold the government accountable to show that the required
resources for child development are being considered a first priority for the allocation of available resources.

The experience of other countries shows that clear, short-term targets for reducing child poverty are effective. Canada’s own experience with the use of annual rolling targets to reduce the deficit in the 1990’s showed the benefits of short-term targets. In contrast, the ineffectiveness of the parliamentary resolution, 30 years later, suggests that vague, long-term targets are less effective.

At the conclusion of the last review of children’s rights in Canada, in 2012, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Canada:

="Develop and implement a national, coordinated strategy to eliminate child poverty as part of the broader national poverty reduction strategy, which should include annual targets to reduce child poverty.”"

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations: Canada, paragraph 68 (a), CRC/C/CAN/C0/3-4, p. 16, 5 October 2012.

Recommendation:

The CCRC recommends the addition of more ambitious, rolling annual targets for reducing child poverty with policies, programs, and budgets to achieve those targets, in line with the recommendation Canada received in the last review of children’s rights in Canada, and the commitment in Article 4 of the Convention to give high priority to children in the allocation of available resources.

Paragraph 6.c should be amended to add point (c) annual targets and plans to reduce child poverty.

Multiple Indicators to Measure Progress

The CCRC appreciates the research work being done to develop an evidence based for the consolidated market-based measure of poverty on a household basis. For children, however, multiple indicators of deprivation or well-being are needed to better reflect the important developmental nature of childhood and the particularly strong negative impacts of deprivation in early childhood. A more fully-developed measure of progress could also capture the importance of access to community services, for example, to help children escape poverty. A child with the same household income in a community with affordable support services has better opportunities to succeed than a child without access to such services.

One area of effective poverty reduction for children that is underdeveloped in the current strategy is food security. While we understand there have been consultations toward a national food security plan, the lack of one in Canada at the present time means that access to nutritious food for children requires special attention, given its importance for healthy child development.
Recommendation:

The CCRC recommends that the provision of additional metrics include a specific requirement to use multiple indicators to measure progress for reducing child poverty, by amending paragraph 8 to read, ... other metrics, including multiple indicators that intentionally reflect the developmental nature of childhood.

Advisory Panel Position

The CCRC appreciates that one person on the advisory panel will have expertise in reducing child poverty. We recommend selecting an appointee who is well-versed in children’s rights to help ensure that Canada considers all the rights of children in developing its strategy and makes progress toward fulfilling its duties under the Convention. Full implementation of the Convention would also greatly assist in making Canada’s federal system of governance more effective for the full development of every child and preventing the negative impacts of poverty for children.

Recommendation:

The CCRC recommends that the selection criteria for the advisory panel member specializing in child poverty include expertise in the implementation of all the rights of children, to help achieve the objectives of the Poverty Reduction Act and Canada’s obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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