

Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction Report: Poverty Free Saskatchewan Responds

The following is the response of Poverty Free Saskatchewan to the Saskatchewan government's Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction report *Recommendations for a Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy* released in August 2015.

Introduction

Positive aspects of the report

The overall target of the report to reduce poverty by 50 percent by 2020 is attainable and is an important goal for the province to work toward. Poverty Free Saskatchewan supports this goal as a start toward poverty eradication. This overall goal validates what many anti-poverty groups have been stressing for the decades.

The report recommends the government utilize a comprehensive, integrated approach to reduce poverty. This is an important and necessary change that has also been put forward a number of times in the past.

It also recommends a pilot project implementing a basic income approach. This could be a very worthwhile initiative as much could be learned about the positive effects of providing incomes that support a basic standard of living and how that in turns affects families and individuals.

Weaknesses of the report

The report provides little, if any, any guidance regarding an implementation strategy. Although the report identifies six key components of a poverty plan, it does not identify any changes to government structures to carry out the policy and program changes necessary to affect the lives of those most affected by poverty. The report suggests an independent review body but does not indicate whether this work could be accomplished by a task force, a special poverty office or a new government department. Without a pathway to move the recommendations forward they can easily be lost in the complex relations among ministries. Poverty Free Saskatchewan has recommended an anti-poverty act be passed by the legislature to ensure responsible ministries would be required to carry out the law. Other provinces in Canada have experience with this approach; however, the AGPR report makes no reference to these models.

The report identifies a number of community-based organizations which are working locally to implement anti-poverty best practices. There is, however, no discussion as to how the provincial government could help these organizations to work together more effectively or how other communities could establish similar organizations and deliver programs more effectively. Community-based programs are an important component of poverty elimination.

Specific Comments by Section

1. Poverty in Saskatchewan

Single individuals and immigrants are not identified as vulnerable groups needing attention, yet there is a high incidence of poverty among these groups.

The 2020 poverty projections in the graph (p.8) are not sourced and there is little discussion of how these targets will be met.

2. Approach and Guiding Principles

Poverty Free Saskatchewan encouraged very similar principles and approaches as far back as 2009 in its document *Let's Do Something about Poverty*. Recognition of the recent Truth and Reconciliation Final Report was an important step forward by AGPR and identifies ways in which the provincial government could support that report's recommendations.

3. Areas of Initial Focus

The basic income pilot program is a solid step forward. The description of the basic income pilot is quite sketchy. There is no time frame identified and there is no discussion of how this pilot program would fit into achieving the 2020 goal. The report advocates for increasing social services benefits, but provides little or no detail. The discussion of the living wage concept is confusing. It cites an incomplete report by Poverty Costs and does not make clear whether the living wage level recommended is for a family or an individual. There is no strategy for building support for the living wage.

Under housing and homelessness recommendations there are no specific targets suggested for the increase of social housing that would be needed by 2020.

The early childhood development and childcare section does not provide any actual numbers of child care spaces required or how to develop a high quality affordable child care system.

The education section puts much emphasis on increasing the number of students attaining a grade 12. This has been a target for many years. Increasing investment in band schools to help attain this target is long overdue. There is not enough emphasis on a job creation strategy, or how employment targets for First Nations could be improved.

The health and food security recommendations lack targets and justification for the limited measures identified.

Conclusion

With respect to the main report goal and all the targets and measures related to the areas of focus, the report does not state who will be responsible for completion of this extensive work. Will it be left up to individual departments or some other third party? Without assigning accountability it is worrisome whether the report's recommendations will be followed up on or get lost over time.

Poverty Free Saskatchewan urges the government to move forward on implementation of the report by establishing a body charged with developing a concrete plan, a budget and programs which will lead to accomplishing its 2020 goal. Reducing poverty to half its current level requires immediate action.

Poverty Free Saskatchewan, October 2015