
Assembly of First Nations of Quebec
and Labrador

Presentation to the Standing Committee on
Human Resources, Skills Development, Social
Development and the Status of Persons with
Disabilities

AFNQL, FNQLHSSC and FNHRDCQ

About the AFNQL

The Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador is the regional organization that regroups the Chiefs of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador.

About the FNQLHSSC

The role of the FNQLHSSC is to assist the communities and organizations of the First Nations and Inuit of Quebec and Labrador in the defence, maintenance and use of their inherent rights in terms of health and social services, and to help them in the realization and development of these programs.

About the FNHRDCQ

The role of the FNHRDCQ is to support the employment and training services of 29 First Nations communities and 6 Urban Centres, and to defend their common interests in the area of training and employment integration.

“Many First Nations are facing a housing crisis. Unless action is taken quickly, the already unacceptable housing conditions are only going to get worse, with population growth on reserve that is twice the Canadian average.” Auditor General of Canada, Sheila Fraser (2003 Report)

Introduction

We wish to thank the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for its invitation to present this brief to members of the Canadian Parliament.

In recent years, the phenomenon of First Nations poverty has been widely publicized by the media. All this media attention, however, did not result in the adoption of concrete measures by the federal government to fight against First Nations poverty. We hope that after this meeting, it will be possible to establish a partnership between the First Nations and the federal government to tackle the problems of poverty, exclusion and marginalization faced by the First Peoples of Canada.

Measuring First Nations Poverty

Neither Canada nor Quebec has an official poverty line. This also applies to the First Nations of Quebec and of Canada. There are, however, several indicators to measure poverty, generally in relative and not absolute terms. These indicators do not take into account the disparities in the cost of living according to the place of residence. (Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2009, p.19 of the French version). Measures such as the Low Income Cut-offs (LICOs) and the Low Income Measures (LIMs) provide indicators of poverty in relative terms. These relative measures show, however, the income inequalities within a given population (Government of Quebec, 2005, p. 11 of the French version).

The United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) is currently the main indicator that is used by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) to measure the well-being of Aboriginal people in Canada. The HDI is a composite indicator that takes educational attainment, disposable income and life expectancy into account (Cooke *et al.*, 2004, p.4). According to the HDI (2003), the First Nations of Canada ranked 78th in the world while Canada ranked 8th in the world. This indicator has the merit of showing the disparities that exist between the Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian population with respect to living conditions. However, it does not allow to measure poverty in the strict sense and we must resort to other indicators.

Within the framework of its work, the Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Poverty and Social Exclusion decided to use the Market Basket Measure (MBM) developed by the Human Resources Development Canada. Here is how the MBM defines a person in low income: "a person whose disposable income is lower than the cost of the goods and services included in a consumer basket covering a range of needs and providing a standard of living that the designers of the measures described as 'honourable'" [Translation] (Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2009, p.20 of the French version). The cost of this basket is adjusted according of the individual's place of residence.

The MBM has the merit of taking into account the real cost of living in a region or community that is located far from large urban centres. A study conducted in Quebec shows that the cost of living is clearly higher in "isolated" regions (Duhaime, 2006). Social assistance benefits are not weighted to reflect this reality, which generally results in impoverishment that is more pronounced in remote areas. Use of the MBM in First Nations communities would allow to measure the income required to cover basic needs. The resulting adjustment of social assistance benefits could also help to improve the disposable incomes of First Nations who live far from urban centres and outside transportation and supply networks.

Social Inequalities in Health Among the First Nations of Quebec

The socioeconomic and sociosanitary indicators that are currently available to us clearly show the difficulties faced by the First Nations communities of Quebec and Canada: poverty, neglect, drug and alcohol addiction, diabetes, obesity, life expectancy, infantile mortality and suicide. These indicators reveal the significance of the social inequalities in health which face First Nations compared to the Canadian population. In Quebec, Aboriginal people are among the five groups most at risk of experiencing a situation of poverty and social exclusion (Quebec Population Health Research Network, 2008 and Government of Quebec, 2004).

A number of studies show the link between colonization, poverty and health problems. And as a result of colonization and assimilation policies, tremendous gaps between the Canadian population and First Nations are observed. "Indeed, health disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are primarily the result of socially constructed differences which led to the marginalization of Aboriginal people, whether they live in communities or in urban areas" [Translation] (Quebec Population Health Research Network, 2008). It is therefore urgent to end the colonialist relationship that prevails between Canada and Aboriginal people in order to ensure prosperity and health to the current and future generations.

"All the studies indicate that regardless of country, gender or age group, the poor are sicker and die younger than those who are wealthier. The extraordinary progress in medicine and the protection provided by the universal access to medical services does not change anything: the poorest are more at risk of being exposed to sickness, to suffer from sickness at a younger age and to die prematurely. Poverty is ultimately the most powerful determinant of health problems. The more individuals are underprivileged, whether it is a lack of income, low schooling or difficulties accessing employment, the greater the health problems. In short, to prevent sickness, poverty must also be prevented" [Translation] (Government of Quebec, 2007, p.27a of the French version).

Poverty among Aboriginal youth is closely associated with health problems as well as cognitive and social development problems. In the most extreme cases, the effects of poverty on the health and development of individuals are long-lasting. First Nations communities are characterized, at the demographic level, by a young population. Among the First Nations of Quebec, 42% of the population is under the age of 25 compared to 31% of Quebec's population. The predominance of young children leads to a significant demand in services and programs in the First Nations communities.

The field data collected by the FNQLHSSC in the *First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Regional Longitudinal Health Survey* show that six children out of ten live in households that have at least 3 minor children. Nearly half the parents did not complete secondary school while the average annual income of households with children is \$22,500, which is below the low income cut-off (FNQLHSSC, 2006).

A few facts

- The death rate of Aboriginal children is three times that of non-Aboriginal children (Canada);
- Life expectancy is shorter by 6 to 7 years (Quebec);
- Diabetes is two to three times more common (Quebec);
- The risk of experiencing, from early childhood, situations of poverty, neglect and placement is three to five times higher (Quebec);
- Almost half the families are lone-parent families (44%) (Quebec);
- Two women out of three have an income of less than \$10,000 (Quebec);

- One adult out of four is faced with unemployment (Quebec);
- In 2006, 4,200 First Nations houses on a total of 12,500 were overcrowded (Quebec);

Sources: AFNQL, 2007a; Quebec Population Health Research Network, 2008.

Role of the Federal Government in the Fight Against Poverty

It is imperative that the federal government develops an action plan to fight against poverty. Such a plan should take into account the particularly critical situation of the First Nations and Inuit who live in conditions that resemble those of third-world countries: unsanitary and overcrowded housing, drinking water problems, outdated schools, high unemployment rate, etc. It is urgent to establish conditions that will address the problem of poverty in the short, medium and long terms.

The federal government should draw inspiration from the provinces of Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador, which have already established action plans to fight against poverty and social exclusion.

In the short term, the federal government must respect its fiduciary obligations and provide programs and services that are comparable to those offered in the provinces and territories. In fact, many programs and services provided to First Nations do not respect the standards and criteria set by the provinces. Child and family support services are a flagrant example.

However, it is only by addressing the substantive issues and taking appropriate actions in the long term that one can expect to see the elimination of persistent poverty among First Nations. It is important to fully recognize Aboriginal title and to settle specific and comprehensive land claims. Access to the natural resources of these territories and the recognition of First Nations governments are essential conditions for the economic development of the communities.¹ The federal government must implement measures that will put an end to the dependency and trusteeship that it exercises on First Nations.

Federal-Provincial-Territorial Cooperation to Reduce Poverty

The province of Quebec established an *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* in 2002. The government developed its first action plan in 2004 and is preparing to develop its second plan. The FNQLHSSC is currently developing its own initiative to fight against poverty and is collaborating with the *Ministère de l'emploi et de la solidarité sociale du Québec (MESS)*, which is showing a certain degree of openness towards the adaptation of measures and actions for First Nations.

A tripartite committee was created following the 1st First Nations Socioeconomic Forum in Mashteuiasth (2006). Consisting of INAC, the *MESS* and the FNQLHSSC's Social Development Office, the Committee was to reflect on better ways to fight against poverty and social exclusion. Following the Forum, the Quebec government committed itself to adapting its measures to the reality and needs of the First Nations. So far, the *MESS* has supported the implementation of the FNQLHSSC's initiative to fight against poverty and social exclusion. However, other measures have to be taken to ensure that First Nations communities can adapt the measures and actions developed by the Quebec government. The federal government, through INAC, should also financially support the development and implementation of our plan. We consider that this is part of the federal government's obligations towards First Nations.

¹ The *Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development* showed that self-government is a guarantee of economic and social success (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2007, p. 53).

It is important to note that an increased federal involvement in the fight against poverty and social exclusion should not be to the detriment of First Nations. First Nations must be at the table and be involved, but more importantly, they must be considered as any government worthy of the name. In the event that the federal government makes a financial commitment toward the provinces and territories, it is essential that the funding intended for Aboriginal people be transferred directly to the First Nations and not to the province.

Reducing First Nations Poverty: A Few Immediate Solutions

Education

The school dropout rate associated to chronic underfunding in education curbs the social, human and economic development of First Nations. Education is, and must remain, an escape from poverty. Thus, Canada should adequately fund the education sector in order that First Nations communities can provide education that is comparable to that offered to the entire population of Quebec. Let us keep in mind that the funding formula for First Nations schools dates back to 1988. Many schools are in a poor state and new technologies are almost non-existent.

Housing

The measures announced during the last federal budget for increased development in housing is a step in the right direction but more significant efforts must be made in order to settle the First Nations housing crisis. In Quebec alone, the needs of First Nations in terms of housing consist of 8,000 new units, including 3,500 social housing units (AFNQL, 2007, p. 11 of the French version).

Housing must provide a context that favours the social and human development of children, youth and families. While 4,200 houses are overcrowded and 6,700 are in urgent need of repair and/or decontamination, it is difficult to imagine that this environment can be conducive to academic success, not to mention all the social and health problems that are generated by such lack of privacy.

Income Security

The Income Security program should be enhanced in partnership with the province in order to allow recipients to meet their basic needs according to the MBM. We firmly believe that raising the disposable income of individuals who are in poverty situation will increase their chances of contributing to society as a whole.

Economic Development

The federal government's investments in First Nations economic development are marginal and clearly insufficient to ensure their economic growth. Only 8% of the amounts reserved for Aboriginal people in Canada are invested in economic development (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2007, p.9 of the French version). Economic development programs should be revised and enhanced, especially during a time of economic crisis.

Child and Family Assistance

The government must make every effort to help families and communities to take actions that will enable them to develop their full potential. Appropriate budgets must be made available to First Nations to assist children and families in difficulty. Measures to cope with the social problems that were created with the adoption of the *Indian Act*, the development of reserves and the application of policies aimed at the assimilation of First Peoples must also be developed.

Current Federal Resources for the Fight against Poverty

The Income Security program currently keeps recipients of social aid benefits in persistent poverty.

INAC's various social development programs do not allow to effectively fight against poverty. Furthermore, these programs do little or nothing to contribute to individual or collective empowerment. They consist mainly of tax measures that are intended to improve the Income Security program.

Here are the programs:

- First Nations Child and Family Services Program (FNCFS)
- Family Violence Prevention Program (FVPP)
- Assisted Living Program (AL)
- Income Assistance (IA)
- National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS)

With regard to income security, 35% of First Nations citizens living within a reserve receive income assistance compared to 5.5% for the Canadian population (national average) and this is based on the rates and criteria set by the provinces. But the cost of living in remote First Nations communities is clearly higher than in urban centres. INAC's Food Mail Program – which is intended to ensure food security for isolated communities – does not serve all the said isolated communities but only those that are not accessible year long by truck, train or boat. In short, the program applies especially to communities that are located further north, while communities located a little further south should also benefit from special programs.

According to an INAC study, 95% of income assistance recipients do not have access to the tools required to enter the labour market (INAC, 2006). Few employment and training services are currently available. In this context, the federal government should develop long-term integrated employment assistance measures to assist those who are furthest from the labour market.

Canada's economy has changed during the course of the last decade and the natural resources sector is a vital part of First Nations ancestral territories. The settlement of land claims associated to the establishment of appropriate partnerships with First Nations would guarantee significant economic changes within the communities. Various forms of royalties should be paid to First Nations given that this development is located at the heart of their territories.

AFNQL, FNQLHSSC and FNHRDCQ Strategies for Reducing Poverty

The FNQLHSSC established an initiative to fight against First Nations poverty in 2006.

Here are the main projects that are directly dedicated to the fight against poverty:

- Project for mobilization, collaboration and action
- Social economy development
- Agreement with the *MESS*
- Foundation: *New Pathways: Foundation for the Future of First Nations*

The FNQLHSSC also undertook various steps to assist the communities in the aspects of health, social services, social development and early childhood. A decennial plan entitled *Quebec First Nations Health and Social Services Blueprint 2007-2017: Closing the Gap, Accelerating Change* was adopted by the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador in 2007.

APPENDIX I

Employment and Training Issues

The issue of employment is a determining factor of poverty. In our communities, 55% of the population is not employed, compared to 31% for the general population of Quebec. In addition, among these not employed individuals, 75% have not completed their basic education or have not acquired the essential skills for entering the labour market.

This means that more than half our people do not work and that three-quarters of them will require sustained support to overcome the numerous obstacles that separate them from the labour market. And yet, although this is a considerable challenge, and even more so with the continuing increase of our working-age population, we must deal with a level of resources that is already clearly inferior to that of the province, and which is affected by the impacts of inflation, having never been indexed to the cost of living.

Due to the service structure that the AFNQL has set in place in the First Nations communities since 1996 (where such programs as the HRSDC employment and training programs are provided), we nonetheless succeeded in slightly reducing the gap that separates us from the employment rate of the Quebec population.

Therefore, to reach employment parity with the non-Aboriginal population of Quebec from now to 2017, we must continue and even strengthen our efforts in order to increase the current number of Aboriginal workers by 30%, an objective that we can only achieve if our resources are in keeping with our challenges.

It was recently shown, moreover, that if parity of employment, income and schooling were to be reached in 2017 between First Nations and the general Canadian population, this could contribute up to 137 billion dollars to Canada's Gross Domestic Product, a potential that one cannot afford to ignore.²

Economic development in the communities is stagnant, and although we prioritize jobs in the communities in order to help in the development of our First Nations societies, we are aware of the real opportunities that are offered to us outside the communities and in the regions. Indeed, Quebec's labour force is aging and the labour needs of businesses are growing (or will be again once the economic recession is ended). This is a real opportunity to allow the youth of our communities to access rewarding employment.

To do so, the AFNQL's Commission on Human Resources Development is working towards implementing an employment strategy that calls upon the Quebec government and its Employment Pact, the sector-based labour force committees and the *Commission des partenaires du marché du travail* as well as other civil society stakeholders such as the CSN, the CCQ and private businesses.

² *The Potential Contribution of Aboriginal Canadians to Labour Force, Employment, Productivity and Output Growth in Canada, 2001-2017*, Research report No. 2007-04, Andrew Sharpe, Jean-Francois Arsenault and Simon Lapointe (Centre for the Study of Living Standards), November 2007

Although we establish these partnerships with key labour market stakeholders, it remains the responsibility of HRSDC's Aboriginal employment strategy to provide us with the basic resources that are required for developing our labour force. It is therefore as a key partner that the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada must undertake:

- 1) To recognize the service structure created by the AFNQL to provide training and employment services to our populations, in and outside the communities, which is far from being assured based on what we have learned to date in our exchanges with HRSDC concerning the next employment strategy scheduled for 2010.
- 2) To enhance the current strategy in order to cope with the demographic pressures which contribute, along with inflation, to greatly reducing our intervention capacity. According to our calculations (the results of which have been shared with HRSDC officials), we believe that without a substantial increase in our financial resources, we will only be able to intervene, in 2013-2014, at 56% of our 1996-1997 capacity.

This situation is even more deplorable if one considers the cumulative effect of the decrease, year after year, of our intervention capacity. If nothing changes, the AFNQL will have lost an equivalent of five years funding in 2013-2014, which is approximately 80 million dollars!

- 3) To maintain and enhance the funding intended for preparing the labour force for the labour market. The size of this challenge must not be under-estimated. The dropout rate is alarming. Young adults who call upon employment services must first complete their basic adult education before accessing targeted vocational training that will allow them to enter the labour market.
- 4) To train and empower our local, regional and provincial stakeholders for the development of employment integration and retention programs with businesses.
- 5) To enhance the services intended for the urban clients, given also the significant demographic growth³ and chronic underfunding of this population segment. Note here that the Quebec government also contributes to the funding of employment and training services for our urban citizens, but in a complementary manner with the federal government and on a non-recurrent basis.
- 6) To take advantage of the service structure that it helped implement, with more than 400 services points across Canada, in and outside the communities, by integrating to its employment strategy for Aboriginal people all new programs that are directly or indirectly linked to employment development, rather than developing such programs outside the strategy, with centralized funds and application processes, as was the case in recent years with the ASEP and the ASTSIF.

The AFNQL is requesting you to hold hearings on the new Aboriginal employment strategy. The current agreement holders have issues with this new strategy. They developed expertise in the delivery of services, they know the needs of the clients, they have innovative solutions to propose and they know the challenges of our societies. They now wish to be heard.

³ It is to be noted that those who examine the question of migration generally agree that the increase of the population residing outside the communities is not occurring at the expense of the local population of the First Nations communities, which also continues to grow. [cf. *Aboriginal Peoples and Postsecondary Education in Canada*, Michael Mendelson (Caledon Institute of Social Policy), July 2006; *Population Projections for Canada and Regions 2021*, INAC (in collaboration with Statistics Canada), 2003]

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