



KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives

**Report on Cross-Canada Citizen Dialogues
on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights**

**Submission to the
United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**

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KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives

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About KAIROS:

KAIROS unites Canadian churches and religious organizations in a faithful ecumenical response to the call to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Informed by biblical teaching, KAIROS deliberates on issues of common concern, striving to be a prophetic voice in the public sphere.

Inspired by a vision of God’s compassionate justice, KAIROS advocates for social change, amplifying and strengthening the public witness of its members.

Responding to Christ by engaging in social transformation, KAIROS empowers the people of God and is empowered by them to live out our faith in action for justice and peace, joining with those of goodwill in Canada and around the world.

KAIROS member churches include: Anglican Church of Canada, Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Canadian Religious Conference, Christian Reformed Church in North American (Canadian Corporation), Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, Mennonite Central Committee Canada, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, The Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), The United Church of Canada.

1. Introduction

The 2006 review of Canada's performance on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides an opportunity to increase Canadians' knowledge of their rights, and to hear from Canadians about their experiences in meeting these rights.

It is important that the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights be provided with detailed analysis of social and economic conditions in Canada as part of the review, as the main body of this report provides. It is also important, we believe, that the Committee hear more directly the voices and experiences of marginalized people in Canada.

To this end, KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, the National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO), and Low Income Families Together (LIFT) decided in the fall of 2005 to organize public dialogues or "People's Forums" in partnership with community organizations. Forums were held in 11 Canadian cities and towns in six different provinces between January 17 and March 21, 2006. There were 290 participants in at the Forums.

The Forums were designed to:

- improve public understanding of economic, social and cultural rights
- document experiences of economic, social and cultural rights violations so that they can be presented to the Government of Canada and United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- strengthen local action to protect economic, social and cultural human rights in Canada.

The Forums were organized in partnership with local churches and community organizations. A model workshop design, logistical advice and in some cases facilitation support was provided by KAIROS, NAPO and LIFT.

At the workshops, participants identified and prioritized the articles of ICESCR that they felt were being violated. Participants shared experiences relevant to these articles and identified solutions and actions to better protect these rights.

Particular effort was made to recruit marginalized people to the Forums. As a result, there was representation of Aboriginal people, women, people with disabilities, homeless people, and low-income people more generally.

Information provide by participants was recorded on flipcharts or notepads. This information was transcribed by local organizations, and submitted to KAIROS. Staff at KAIROS then compiled this report based on these submissions. A draft report was circulated to representatives of organizations hosting Forums to ensure accuracy. We summarize participant observations by Covenant Article, and similarly, report participant recommendations for change by Article.

2. Summary of Case Data From Forums

Articles 2 and 3. Enjoyment of Rights Without Discrimination

Various forms of discrimination were identified by Forum participants: discrimination of Aboriginal people, women, injured workers and people with disabilities, people of colour and refugees and immigrants.

The most frequently mentioned form of discrimination concerned Aboriginal peoples.

In Lethbridge, Alberta, participants said that discrimination against Aboriginal people is blatant and overt. Disrespect takes the form of social barriers, name-calling and stereotyping. It is easier for Aboriginal people to access education, which many do, than to obtain employment corresponding to their skills, especially on the reserve. Older Aboriginal people who have had bad experiences of residential schools have been discouraged from involvement in the community. Nepotism was felt to be a fact of life on First Nations' reserves: available funding gets channelled to relatives of those administering it.

In Regina, Saskatchewan, Aboriginal participants felt they were not treated equally in the areas of employment, housing, services or education. They had been refused proper housing, both on and off reserve. Racism was felt to be real, affecting how services and education are provided to all Aboriginal people (particularly the young). Moreover, due to racism, Aboriginal people do not have access to employment opportunities

In Melville, Saskatchewan, Aboriginal participants spoke of always being the first to be blamed when a crime is committed. They spoke of being told that they cannot bring medicine bags to school. They spoke of the continued legacy of abuse at residential schools, schools which tried to take away their language and culture and identity.

Participants from Winnipeg, Manitoba, said that Aboriginal peoples with disabilities are further discriminated against because they usually have to live off-reserve, which immediately limits their options. Participants from Edmonton said that Aboriginal people are continually discriminated against and are often denied housing.

Participants at the Woodvale Forum on Prince Edward Island said that native people are treated differently when they go off the Lennox Island reserve. Prior to 1985, Native women would lose their rights and status when they married off reserve. Currently, children of women who marry off-reserve continue to lose their status.

“Regarding employment, I am treated okay on Lennox Island, but when I leave the Island, I am not necessarily treated equally.” – Woodvale, PEI participant.

Other forms of discrimination were also spoken of at the Forums. In Lethbridge, it was stated that gender discrimination affects women in job or promotion access. A participant with a visual disability who is unable to read spoke of being the victim of the use of force

by police in order to extract a confession of a crime he had not committed. He also raised the concern that as a single father, he is unable to access to the same benefits enjoyed by mothers.

Participants in Thunder Bay, Ontario, spoke of discrimination against older workers, injured workers and people with disabilities. It was said that many employers will not hire injured workers. There is a lack of accommodation for disability in training or employment. Injured workers get the cold shoulder when searching for jobs, and experience the humiliation of being rejected over and over. Participants in Edmonton also spoke of continued discrimination against disabled people.

In Winnipeg, participants discussed the difficulties faced by refugees and immigrants trying to pay back landing and other fees while trying to learn English or French. They raised concern about the lack of recognition of international degrees, and discrimination due to race and accent. It was noted that people of colour experience higher than average poverty levels.

Article 6. Right to Work and Right to Freely Choose Work

Concern was raised about the lack of available work. Concern was raised about being forced to take work or continue in undesirable work due to fear of being cut off social assistance.

In Saskatchewan, concern was raised that people are no longer able to freely choose work due to a shift in the way that people are provided social assistance. In the past, individuals or families only had to show they were in need of financial support in order to receive assistance. Now, if a person is employable, she or he is required to take any job on offer. If a person refuses to take a job, quits a job (for any reason), or is fired, she or he will no longer qualify for assistance. It was felt strongly that this violates the right to freely choose work.

Participants from Prince Edward Island spoke of lack of available work, a reality that employers take advantage of by paying low wages. Participants spoke of working up to 100 hours per week, 7 days a week, at \$9.25 per hour. In the words of one participant, "After 8 years of this, one is burned out."

Article 7. Right to Just and Favourable Conditions of Work

The most frequent concern raised about working conditions was the inadequacy of wages of many jobs. Low wages force workers to work multiple jobs and many overtime hours. Concern was raised about the increase in non-standard and precarious work arrangements.

a) Inadequacy of minimum wages

Participants at most Forums raised concern about low and inadequate wages. Participants in Winnipeg emphasized that minimum wages are not enough to support families, especially part time jobs without benefits.

In Lethbridge, participants said that a minimum wage netting \$12,000/year does not provide adequate housing for a family.

In Edmonton, casual labour – even highly skilled labour in some cases – is paid around \$8/hour. Corporations are taking advantage of the large pool of people seeking casual labour. The highest wages are \$12/hour for painting, carpentry.

Inadequate wages mean that the working poor cannot afford safe housing, eye or hearing tests, and medication costs. Clothing, transportation (especially in Sudbury, Ontario, where public transit is sporadic or non-existent in outlying neighbourhoods), quality licensed day care, and education opportunities are also difficult to afford. One participant stated, “If you can’t make enough to live how do you save for education?”

In Sudbury, it was stated that jobs are getting more and more unstable with more part-time, contract and seasonal work. There is a little job security.

b) poor working conditions

Participants in Woodvale spoke of harsh and unsafe working conditions.

“At Royal Star Foods [in Tignish] there are negative head games. We work ten hours per day, standing at one spot all day. People can’t take it and have to leave. Seniority didn’t exist. Breaks are 15 minutes, when we get them. They off-loaded breaks, give no breaks, and [have] no bathrooms. We have to go to the woods. There are several examples of no washrooms.” – Woodvale, PEI, participant.

Article 9. Right to Social Security

In addition to its inadequacy in terms of income level, social security programs were criticized for their inaccessible, punitive, bureaucratic and stigmatizing nature.

a) Access to social security

One of the most common concerns about social assistance concerned the numerous barriers posed to accessing assistance.

Lack of services was a first concern. In Winnipeg difficulty in getting professional advocacy and legal help was mentioned. The lack of services for disabled people, especially those who are blind, was raised.

In Edmonton, it was indicated that there are not enough shelters for women fleeing family violence (there is only one Aboriginal shelter in Calgary). Social workers are said to be overloaded, with client lists of more than 500 people. People cannot get in to see their counsellors. There is no support for the people who are looking for direction to get a job. There is a need for more career counselling. There is not much help for disabled people from the provincial or federal government. Some gains have been made in terms of special

access to transportation and recreation (at the municipal level), but there are long waiting lists for many programs and services.

The way in which services are delivered also creates barriers.

In Saskatchewan, the government introduced Call Centres in 2003 to process applications for social assistance. The approach assumes that everyone has a telephone, when many people do not.

A single mother at the Regina Forum shared her story of how she needed to apply for assistance in February 2006. She had no telephone and had to use an outdoor public telephone on the corner across from her home. This woman had to take her small children with her, and the temperature with the wind chill was minus 51 (-51) degrees Celsius that day. She was fortunate that someone responded to her need right away.

In many cases the people who contact the Call Centre get a message manager, but cannot leave a message because they have no number at which to be called back. There are also instances when message managers are full, meaning people can not leave a message.

The Call Centre has taken away face to face interaction with social workers. Social workers cannot properly assess people over the phone. For example, if a person has slurred speech, this could be due to a health issue, a speech impediment, or drunkenness. This opens up the doors for discrimination based on a misunderstanding of the cause of the slurred speech.

In Lethbridge, a focus of discussion was on the AISH (Assured Income for Severely Handicapped) program. It was said to be difficult to apply for AISH: there are many guidelines and forms, and the qualification criteria are very difficult to understand. Social workers often discourage clients from applying for AISH.

In Edmonton, it was indicated that people need to fill out a 17-page form to access capital housing. People are in crisis and yet they do not get the support they need to navigate the system.

In Sudbury, participants felt that the social service system is intimidating and inaccessible to those with mental health issues. The system was also seen to be inflexible, not recognizing the special concerns that mental illness brings. There was concern about delays in receiving child support, delays caused by the fact that there is no support office in Sudbury, and that a mother has to find the father and submit his income information herself, which is both difficult and complicated.

b) Conditions / Exclusions

Various conditions and exclusions make it difficult for many people in need to access their full benefits.

In Winnipeg it was mentioned that people on welfare can not own property. Moreover, social assistance creates a barrier to participation in education.

One Edmonton participant, a woman with three children living in a co-op was interested in training to be a child care worker. Yet she was not able to receive financial assistance from the government. The government's response to her request for training and funding was that "welfare is not in the business of schools." The government wouldn't pay her to go to school, but instead encouraged her to apply for a minimum wage job, which would not pay her enough to live on and go to school.

In Edmonton, the application process for getting support for people with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and mental health concerns is complex. The eligibility requirements are becoming stricter, excluding more and more people. Application forms and testing constitute a real barrier as people in need are being denied these resources. Finally, people cannot apply and receive social assistance without an address.

In Lethbridge, it was mentioned that men with families on AISH do not get allotments of money for dependents. As well, cash gifts of money have to be claimed, and are deducted from AISH income. Finally, there are unrealistic expectations: people in poor health are expected to go to work training sessions when health, not skill, is the barrier to work.

"I'm on Social Services and I'm raising a daughter on an income of \$684 a month. The system is designed to set me back, I would love to get my education upgraded but to do so I lose the funding I have, and the system is not designed to help me become independent again." – Lethbridge participant.

In Ottawa, Ontario, and Sudbury, Ontario, it was stressed that social assistance programs across Canada are geared to getting people into the waged economy, and thus fail to recognize the value of non-waged labour (e.g., parenting, elder care).

c) "Clawbacks"

Concern was raised that money is clawed back from social assistance recipients for various reasons, impeding people from moving from welfare to work, and exacerbating income inadequacy. For example, in Alberta, it was indicated that AISH limits earnings to \$400/month before federal money is clawed back.

In Saskatchewan, when the Child Tax Benefit Supplement was introduced, the Minister of Social Services (now the Premier of Saskatchewan) stated they had taken children off Welfare. What this really meant was that the Government of Saskatchewan no longer gave the families the \$160.00 supplement per child. Families on welfare have not reaped the benefit from this program.

d) Stigmatization

The treatment that people receive as welfare recipients was described as stigmatizing and condescending, exacerbating the stress of lack of money and the indignities of poverty.

In Winnipeg, authorities were described as “indifferent” and “oppressive”. The attitudes of people in government and the bureaucracy towards poor people were considered very harmful. “People are *not* being treated in a very humane way. They are being looked down upon. Agencies should be empowering people, not victimizing them.”

Participants in Ottawa spoke of the need to restore dignity to people who encounter the welfare system, a system which at present perpetuates stereotypes and stigmatizes welfare recipients.

In Regina, people spoke of being “talked down to” by their welfare workers.

e) Lack of information

The adversarial nature of social services, and a lack of provision of proper information about benefits was raised in Winnipeg. Welfare workers are not forthcoming with information that people need in order to get proper benefits. People felt that had difficulty in getting information about their rights, which was not being disclosed to them by agencies. Moreover, people received inconsistent information from different agencies about programs and services.

In Regina, participants concurred that most people do not understand their rights and responsibilities. Indeed, most Regina participants were surprised to find out some of their rights as welfare recipients.

Social assistance recipients in Saskatchewan are not being informed by their workers about their full entitlements. They are also not given access to a full policy manual, only a shortened booklet version. Regulations are confusing and always changing. Clients need a fuller explanation of their rights, about the role of advocates, and about who is available in their community to advocate for them. It was noted that advocacy services do not exist in every community, therefore many people do not have access to advocacy services when they are in need of help, or wanting to appeal a decision.

Indeed, in Ottawa, participants mentioned the importance of individual advocacy skills or having a social worker to advocate for you as a person (and not for the system, which is focussed on cutting costs). This is even more important for those facing language or other barriers.

f) Intrusiveness

In 2003, the Government of Saskatchewan introduced the Transitional Employment Assistance program (TEA). The program was intended to be less intrusive and to allow people to manage and budget their own money. Yet participants at Forums in Saskatchewan indicated that while they formerly had to take part in a review of their circumstances yearly, they now have to report quarterly under the TEA program.

In Ottawa, participants felt that the questioning of medical prescriptions, and demands for evidence of disability constituted an invasion of privacy

g) Punitive practices

Several examples were given of ways in which threats and punishments were part of the welfare system.

For example, Ottawa participants spoke of the lifetime ban - or the perception and fear of lifetime ban - for acts of welfare fraud. It was also mentioned that if the welfare office loses the income statement which a client has faxed them, the client can get cut off. In Sudbury, temporary suspensions of welfare were described as “deadly”.

It should be noted that the problems listed above are not restricted to the social assistance or welfare system. In Lethbridge, participants spoke of the cutting off of Employment Insurance benefits without appropriate notice. Injured workers at the Thunder Bay Forum raised concerns about the injury compensation system in Ontario. They indicated that the stigmatizing and punitive practices of the Workplace Safety & Insurance Board in Ontario contribute to the deterioration of injured workers’ mental health, destroy families, and even lead to suicides. Disabled workers were described as being “held hostage”, waiting for monetary benefits to be approved. It was felt that too much burden is placed on the individual sick worker, who is responsible for everyone else’s follow up (e.g., doctor’s reports, physiotherapist forms). If the doctor is not available, then the sick worker is cut off benefits. WSIB adjudicators may not even read an individual’s claim file (because of workload issues), and then the sick worker is cut off benefits.

Article 10. Protection of the Family

One of the most common concerns raised in relation to families was the importance of access to affordable, high quality early learning and child care. This was considered to be a key prerequisite to healthy child development.

In Regina, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Melville, participants stressed that the current Child Care support system is inadequate. In Edmonton, it was mentioned that single parents with kids are finding there is not enough affordable day care. In Melville, there is only one daycare in town, so access to child care is almost non-existent.

There was concern that the current patchwork of child care supports will become even more inadequate under the new federal governments’ hands-off, tax incentive-based child care model. There was concern that quality of care cannot be assured without national standards.

There was also concern that the proposed Child Care Allowance of \$100 per month per child is both inadequate, and may be clawed back from people on Social Assistance.

Many Melville participants did not feel aware of programs that support and assist them in parenting. Some reported that they did attend some of these programs offered in their community, but that their support workers downplayed the relevance of these programs to them. People's experience was that Family Services were quick to apprehend their children, and that the family service workers were sneaky and underhanded, and that there was very little support to help keep families together.

Article 11. Right to an Adequate Standard of Living

Participants from across Canada felt strongly that rates of social assistance, employment insurance, disability benefits and work-related injury compensation are inadequate to maintain a decent standard of living and a dignified livelihood. This problem of inadequacy is compounded by the lack of accessible and affordable housing in many communities, and the lack of accessible, affordable and healthy food. Participants spoke of a range of impacts of inadequate income: for example, homelessness, malnutrition, mental illness and depression, suicide, and violence.

a) Inadequacy of social assistance rates

In Winnipeg, participants spoke of welfare rates and shelter allowances being dismally low, noting that provincial social services funding is still at 1980s funding levels. People are forced to use more of their small food budgets to pay for inadequate housing.

In Lethbridge, a participant spoke of the \$59/month food allowance under social assistance, as being inadequate to feed three children. Concern was also raised about levels of support under AISH. Living on the money given to AISH recipients creates very poor living conditions. Recipients often have to skip a month of household bills to put food on the table and pay rent. The government is causing families to create a cycle of poverty for children of low income families. There is a big difference between "adequate" living and "acceptable" living.

"I live in Lethbridge Housing, [and] have gone from an unstable to a regular income. Lethbridge Housing takes 30% off Gross income as compared to Social Services, [which] takes it off Net [income]. For \$2,400 gross [income], \$1,800 is taken home, of which \$750.00 is charged for rent, leaving \$1,050 for utilities, bills and expenses for a family of three. This system is putting me into further poverty, as I can not save enough to move out on my own, and I can't afford child care." – Lethbridge participant.

In Saskatchewan, participants in workshops stressed that the income security system does not even come close to meeting people's needs. Assistance rates have not been raised since a \$10.00 per week increase in the 1980s. One group member with a family of two children stated that the \$205.00 basic allowance allotted for food, clothing, personal, transportation and household needs is barely enough to cover groceries (\$205.00/month breaks down to

\$6.83, an amount not even equal to one hour's minimum wage in Saskatchewan - \$7.55/hour).

Aboriginal participants in Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, learned that the basic allowance people received on reserves varies. While in some cases the basic allowance for welfare is the same as in urban centres (\$205.00/month), some reported that they only received \$195.00/month. Neither amount was considered to be enough to meet the needs of the individuals and their families.

In Regina, participants stated that neither the new TEA nor the former Welfare program provide people with enough to cover the costs of living in their communities. In many cases people are short \$100-\$200/month for rent alone, and do not have enough to cover their basic needs for food, clothing, personal, household, and travel. On welfare the actual costs of utilities (power, energy and water) were covered but on the new TEA program these amounts are capped – at insufficient levels. For example, two people who live in a low-income area of Regina in a renovated house spend \$270.00/month on power, gas, and water, while TEA is capped at \$201/month for two people.

In Melville, a man, with disabilities, took exception to being considered one of the “deserving poor.” He pointed out that no one deserves to be poor, especially people with disabilities. During 2005 he received \$9,212 to cover his shelter needs, basic needs, utilities, and repairs to his mobility devices. This was \$8,303 short of the Statistics Canada Low- Income Cut Off.

In Ottawa, participants also stressed the inadequacy of social assistance rates. It was noted that Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) levels haven't been raised in 10 years. People without housing (those on “walking welfare”) receive only \$190 per month. The special food diet supplement (\$250/month) for those with doctor's permission is currently being reassessed by the Ontario government. It is very difficult to eat properly on social assistance, participants reported, let alone procure a special, medically-recommended diet.

In Sudbury, participants called welfare (ODSP and Ontario Works) levels “deplorable, shameful, inadequate and keeping people in poverty”. They agreed that people on Ontario Works or ODSP do not receive enough to afford healthy, adequate amounts of culturally-appropriate food. Participants indicated that welfare levels are set at *less* than half the LICO, even for families trying to raise children.

“I receive a little over \$8,000.00 per year to live on and I'm one of the lucky ones because I have a slight disability. Once rent is subtracted, I have a little over \$200.00 left per month for food.”

“I receive only \$342.00 per month on Social Assistance. I can't live on it.”

— Woodvale participants

b) Inadequacy of Employment Insurance

While Employment Insurance (EI) rates are significantly higher than welfare rates, Forum participants indicated that they are still inadequate for families and mothers. Also, given

increases in non-standard work arrangements (part-time, contracts, temporary work etc), fewer and fewer workers even qualify for EI.

In Winnipeg, participants indicated that the EI program discriminates against low income families, since low-wage earners cannot possibly live on half of the minimum wage (the rate of support under EI), so they cannot take advantage of these programs. People in low income jobs, or in precarious employment who do not qualify for EI, therefore have to rely on inadequate provincial social assistance until they get back into the job market. EI is also not sufficient to support families who access it as a Parental or Caregiver Leave program.

In Sudbury, participants concurred that EI support for maternity leave is inadequate. According to one participant: “You are now two people and you must survive on less money. How is that healthy for mother and child?”

In Woodvale, participants stressed that policy changes are making it harder to access EI. “It takes 2 or 3 jobs to qualify for EI.”

c) Lack of Affordable Housing

In Winnipeg, it was stated that there is hardly any accessible or affordable housing. The vacancy rate is only 1.7%. Even “affordable” housing may be beyond the reach of people living on social assistance. The need to pay rent means people do not have access to proper food and other necessities of life.

One Winnipeg participant is a recovering addict with Hepatitis C (which was not contracted from the addiction), who was never advised regarding benefits, dietary needs, etc. The only housing available to this person from provincial social services is in hotels or rooming houses with other addicts. There is no safety or food. The rooming house costs \$271/month, while the disability allowance is \$285/month, no matter what the disability. This person is using [disability] allowance money to pay the rent.

Housing is built improperly or is in decay. Safety is a problem, especially for single women, with gangs taking over neighbourhoods and carrying out pre-meditated assaults.

In Edmonton, there are long waiting lists for affordable housing and few subsidies available. People are stuck on waiting lists. Some agencies are able to build a few affordable units, but not enough to meet the growing demand. Capital Regional Housing Corporation has a waiting list of between six months and three years.

As in Winnipeg, participants in Edmonton indicated that “affordable” is a relative term. It depends on your income. For example, \$400/month rent when you are receiving \$420/month on welfare is *not* affordable.

It was indicated at the Winnipeg forum that young people and aboriginal people coming out of jail find it hard to secure housing. “Couch-surfing” is observed (sleeping from friend’s place to friend’s place). Participants spoke of 10 people living in two bedroom housing, with people sleeping on the floor and on couches.

Many homeless people cannot get into the shelters, and when they do, what property they have may get stolen, and their privacy is invaded.

In Regina participants also spoke of poor living conditions. On reservations, housing is often in disrepair, with cold drafts and black mould. Housing standards are not enforced. Tuberculosis and Multiple Sclerosis are realities in Saskatchewan poor communities.

Participants in Fort Qu'Appelle living on reserve indicated that their housing was free, but those living off reserve raised concern about the high cost of housing, and stated that they couldn't find good housing. They said that both on and off reserve, housing was often too small for the number of people living it. People shared stories of how landlords did not make necessary repairs, and if tenants complained, they were threatened with eviction (at least one participant actually lost their housing in this way). A couple of participants were homeless - they slept outside when there was no place to stay. Many single men have no place to stay because there are no hostels in this community.

“I know a man in Tignish who lives in a car”
“There is a man who lives in a Laundromat”
“There is a guy in our neighbourhood who lives in an old van.” – Woodvale participants.

d) Lack of Food

Participants from a number of workshops spoke of problems in accessing adequate food.

In Edmonton, participants spoke of being forced to rely on their neighbours and the food bank to provide enough food for their families. Participants felt that food banks are band-aid solutions that undermine human rights by letting governments skirt their responsibility for citizen basic needs. Food distributed at food banks is often below the nutrition standards for a healthy diet.

In Regina too, participants spoke of lack of adequate income to obtain food on a sustainable basis. They also felt that government agencies were offloading their responsibility to the community (i.e. feeding programs, food banks). A high percentage of people in Regina have no grocery store within walking distance.

In Fort Qu'Appelle people shared that they do go hungry, not because they have done anything wrong, but because they do not receive enough money to buy food.

Article 12. Right to Health

Various barriers to accessing health services were discussed by Forum participants.

Concern was raised about limited access to health services in northern and rural areas by participants at the Sudbury, Ottawa and Regina. In Sudbury, it was indicated that people are consistently forced to wait long periods for services, or else be sent to southern facilities.

Sudbury participants indicated that travel grants are not equitable in Northern Ontario. Companions are not covered. It is not conducive to health when an elderly woman has to travel alone because her husband cannot afford to come with her. Language barriers are faced by First Nations patients. Concern was raised over the Ontario Health tax premium, which costs people between \$300-\$900. Finally, it was indicated that private insurance is costing more and providing less in the way of services.

In Thunder Bay, serious concerns were raised about medical treatment received through the Workers' Safety & Insurance Board. Participants indicated that the WSIB Board doctor informed other Thunder Bay doctors through the Medical Association that workers exposed to environmental toxins were simply going through "mass anxiety." The WSIB chooses whether or not they will pay for medications.

Ottawa participants raised concern about inadequate nutrition, about the lack of attention to occupational dangers and workplace safety, and about health problems resulting from unsafe housing. They also spoke of a lack of health services for chronic, as opposed to acute, health problems (e.g. the provision of only one shower a week through home care.) They suggested that there is discrimination in the health care system: professionals do not treat people who are poor or elderly the same way as they treat middle class people.

In Regina, the group reported that the health care system is failing First Nations people, and is deteriorating day by day. The lack of coverage of prescription drugs was given as an example. The group reported that people with disabilities are not receiving adequate health services. One group member with disabilities has been fighting for massage and physiotherapy coverage to help deal with pain and muscle spasms.

In Fort Qu'Appelle, Aboriginal participants did not believe they had equal access to health services due to their poverty and their heritage. All the people taking part in the consultation felt the physical and social environment was toxic to their health and well-being. Most people said their health was not good, though did not go so far as saying their health was bad.

Article 13. Right to Education

Barriers to education included lack of resources and qualified staffing, unaffordable fees and tuition, and bullying.

In Winnipeg only 25% of Aboriginal youth graduate from high school after moving off reserve (at which point they can no longer access supports for education due to jurisdictional issues). There is a long waiting list for Aboriginal youth waiting for access to post-secondary education.

Participants in Sudbury spoke of the high costs of post secondary education. Even at the primary and secondary level, schools are asking more and more family funds for trips, books etc. Low income people and people on Ontario Works cannot afford these extra costs. There is the use of photocopied materials instead of real textbooks. Smaller schools

with smaller classes are seen to be penalized the most for funding cuts. Concern was raised about the rise in private schools, which most cannot afford.

Participants also were concerned about the lack of bilingual resources teachers, lack of opportunities for educational assessments, and unequal access to technology.

Concern was raised in the Woodvale Forum about bullying in schools. It was felt that the school board and administration are indifferent to bullying. A member of the provincial legislature was quoted as saying “That’s your problem.” One parent of a victim of bullying lamented: “I know that I will be burying my daughter.”

In Sudbury, concern was raised about unequal access to computers. Educational opportunities related to technology are based on money.

In Lethbridge, participants raised concern about the lack of acceptance of different learning styles, which led to dropping out from high school. They felt there were not enough experienced and qualified staff at colleges, and that there was a lack of accessibility to housing, adequate funding and transportation for students attending university. There was concern about cost of education and student debt. Finally there was concern about lack of recognition of educational credentials of newcomers.

3. Summary of Recommendations

Participants at sessions made the following recommendations for policy changes.

Articles 2 and 3. Enjoyment of Rights Without Discrimination

Regina participants called for the implementation of pay equity legislation. Participants in Thunder Bay urged the WSIB to acknowledge discrimination due to age, sex, and colour.

In Lethbridge, participants called on governments to recognize that there is a problem with discrimination, and to encourage outreach and awareness building in consultation with a broad representation of people. They called for action to address Aboriginal treaty rights.

Woodvale participants also emphasized the importance of education and awareness raising in order to address discrimination.

Article 7. Right to Just and Favourable Working conditions

Participants in many of the Forums called for increases to the minimum wage, to at least \$10/hour. Participants in Sudbury said minimum wages were unlikely to be effective, on their own, in ensuring adequate incomes since they do not take into consideration the number of dependents in a person's family nor regional differences in cost of living.

Those at the Woodvale Forum stressed the need for better working conditions, including breaks, holidays, safety, and the right to choose work. They also called for an Ombudsperson to advocate for workers, and the implementation of stronger whistle-blower legislation. As well, participants recommended a change in legislation to make accessing EI easier.

Participants in Thunder Bay called for legislative change to force zero tolerance for pollution (e.g. water, heat, fumes). Also, they stressed the need for service providers to ensure proper workplace accommodations, and for government to take more responsibility in promoting the employment of people with disabilities and injured workers. They called for incentives such as rebates to employers who hire Injured Workers and provide accommodations.

Article 9. Right to Social Security

Woodvale participants emphasized the importance of equal access to services for all. They called for an Ombudsperson to help ensure this.

Participants in Lethbridge called for a simplified process of applying for services and assistance, and the education of front line workers so they know where to refer clients. They proposed "one stop shopping" for access to services, such as in the City of Calgary, where bus tokens, recreation tokens, and free library card are provided based on one intake. Social service workers need to understand and show compassion for those who need help ("walk a day in our shoes"). They proposed greater access to financial and other resources through less restrictive qualification criteria.

In Regina, participants called for the elimination of Call Centre intake, and the elimination of the Transitional Employment Allowance program.

In Sudbury, participants recommended that all temporary bans on income should be eliminated, and that the adversarial and punitive mind set of the social welfare system be done away with. All deductions taken from social assistance recipients for gifts they receive should be eliminated.

Article 10. Protection of the Family

In Woodvale, calls were made to raise age of consent to 18 years, to provide stronger incentives to finish school (i.e., social support under specific circumstances), and to increase supports available to single fathers.

Article 11 Right to an Adequate Standard of Living

Adequate income

In Sudbury and elsewhere, the idea of a Guaranteed Annual Income was put forward. Participants in Sudbury felt that social assistance must be immediately increased to meet the LICO. Governments need to start acting on the fact that *income* as the *top* determinant of health and stop blaming individuals for ill-health, as though health is simply a “lifestyle” issue.

Woodvale participants called for increases in transportation, food and rent allowances for persons on social assistance, and an increase wage exemption for EI and social assistance. They also spoke of the need for a guaranteed adequate annual income.

In Lethbridge, participants called for increased social assistance rates to accommodate basic standards of living. Under a certain wage level, people should pay no tax. The income brackets for eligibility for Social Services and AISH should be raised.

Edmonton participants also called for a guaranteed income that would cover the “basics” – food, clothing and shelter – with incentives and support for people to increase their incomes *beyond* the guaranteed level. Participants also proposed a tax review to ensure the tax system contributes to a fair distribution of income.

Updating the poverty line was felt to be important in Winnipeg. Participants also called for the establishment of a “decent” living wage.

Participants in Regina called for the creation of adequate Universal Parental Benefits, an end to the clawback of National Child Benefit, and a basic income program that is adequate and indexed.

Access to housing

Sudbury participants called for the creating of safe and affordable housing. In Winnipeg, participants called for a National housing strategy for affordable, adequate housing. Edmonton participants also emphasized the need for better access to affordable housing, and reduction in the percentage of gross income families need to pay for social housing, from 30% to 17-25%. They also recommended that rent controls be re-introduced in Alberta.

Access to food

In Regina, participants called for the return of corner stores (family run businesses where family values are maintained), increased availability and access to food banks, and the support of community projects to ensure food sustainability within walking or bussing distance.

Access to child care

Regina, Edmonton and Sudbury participants called for the implementation of a National Childcare Plan that is Universal and Affordable.

Article 12. Right to Health

In Sudbury, there was consensus on the need for publicly funded Universal Health Care. Also put forth was the need for Universal Dental Care and Drug plan.

In Sudbury and elsewhere it was stressed that provinces should be made to follow the Canada Health Care Act. Health care for the rich, or private health care, erodes the fabric of our health care system.

Participants in various locations also emphasized the need for more resources for the prevention to poor health, led by Public Health units.

Participants in Sudbury spoke of the need for appropriate travel grants for patient and attendant/companion.

In Regina, participants called for the prevention and halt to the erosion of our First Nations health care programs. They also felt that more attention needs to be paid to the social determinants of health, and how low-income people are more likely to be negatively affected by environmental damage to health. They supported the idea of nationalized pharmaceutical programs.

Article 13. Right to Education

In Sudbury, participants wondered whether school tuition could be put on a sliding scale, and whether university education could be free, as it is in other countries. Other options proposed included a better grant system, free programs to help kids improve grades, and workplace supports for people with learning disabilities.

Lethbridge participants called for increased provincial, federal, university, and business funding for students. They also recommended that more information be provided to the public about how and where to access funding support.

Participants in Edmonton also called for fully-funded education.

General recommendations

In Ottawa, participants called for parliamentary hearings subsequent to the upcoming report on Canada by the UN Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights. Participants from various Forums felt that the public should become more engaged in the UN review process. It was also recommended that people advocate for the Covenant to be put into Canadian law. Many participants indicated their interest in participating in follow-up Forums once the UN Committee has issued its concluding remarks.

APPENDIX A. Forum Information

Date	Location	Local Sponsor	Number of Participants
January 17, 2006	Thunder Bay, Ontario	Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers Support Group	33
February 8, 2006	Lethbridge, Alberta	South West Alberta Coalition on Poverty	27
February 14, 2006	Edmonton, Alberta	Edmonton Native Healing Centre	22
February 16, 2006	Regina, Saskatchewan	Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry	16
February 21, 2006	Woodvale, PEI	McKillop Center for Social Justice	29
February 23, 2006	Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan	Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry	19
February 23, 2006	Greater Sudbury, Ontario	Grassroots Economic Opportunity, Development and Evaluation (GEODE)	31
February 23, 2006	Winnipeg, Manitoba	West Broadway Community Ministry	Approx. 60
February 25, 2006	Melville, Saskatchewan	Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry	6
February 27, 2006	Ottawa, Ontario	KAIROS	25
*March 21, 2006	Vancouver, BC	First United Church	12
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS			290

*- input from this meeting is not included in the current version of the report