



## **Response of the Canadian Poverty Institute to the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy**

June 2022

**Canadian Poverty Institute**

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### Summary of Recommendations

The Canadian Poverty Institute applauds the Government of Canada for moving forward with its commitments to sustainability as expressed through the proposed Federal Sustainable Development Strategy. At the same time, the Canadian Poverty Institute provides the following recommendations for possible additional federal responses related to important aspects to sustainability with respect to relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

#### **SDG1 – No Poverty**

- Ensure that emergency response plans include specific provision for addressing the health and safety needs of homeless and / or vulnerable persons during and following natural disasters and emergencies.
- Ensure that emergency response plans address the financial impacts of natural disasters and emergencies for low-income households including income disruptions and loss of property.
- Work to address barriers to insurance coverage for low-income households to increase access to appropriate insurance for all.
- Commit to funding the retrofit of Canada's social housing stock to address deteriorating quality and energy efficiency.
- Commit to funding efficient and affordable public transportation, including inter-city transportation to and between rural and remote communities.

#### **SDG2 – Zero Hunger**

- Ensure an adequate income to enable people to purchase food with dignity. This will require, first, policies and initiatives that incent the creation of decent work to ensure that those with employment have sufficient income to afford healthy food. Secondly, provincial Social Assistance benefits must be increased to ensure that those relying on income support are able to afford healthy food. To achieve this, conditionality must be restored to Canada Social Transfer (CST) payments to establish minimum national standards for Social Assistance provision.
- Support the transition of Canada's agricultural system from an industrial to a more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable model. The Canadian Poverty Institute supports the recommendation of the National Farmers Union to "*Reimagin(e) Canadian agriculture: rejecting current policies focused on maximizing exports and production, maximizing inputs, and minimizing the number of farmers; and substituting a new approach focused on sustainability, reducing*

*inputs and attendant emissions, raising farm incomes, and increasing the number of farms and farmers.”*

- Address the issue of food waste through policy and legislation that also minimizes the “*over-processing and de-nutritionalization of food.*”
- Support the development of urban agriculture, community supported agriculture and other community-based food initiatives to improve access to healthy, locally produced food and contribute to local economic development.
- Recognizing that people who experience food insecurity have important perspectives and insights, ensure that they are meaningfully included in decision-making processes with respect to food insecurity.

### **SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy**

- Invest in low or no cost programs and initiatives that support lower-income households to upgrade the efficiency of their homes, with the specific goal of reducing their energy consumption and improving affordability.
- Consider a Federal strategy to address the gaps across the country in the support of lower income households (for instance Alberta is the only Province without a low income program).
- Collaborate with experts in the sector with on the ground experience and an understanding of the social impact an energy poverty program can have.

### **SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth**

- Include environmental and social performance standards in all federal procurement contracts, giving priority to contractors that provide decent work according to the ILO definition.
- Provide preferential Social Finance to emerging and established enterprises that meet federal environmental and social performance standards in alignment with those applicable to federal procurement contracts.
- Establish Benefit Corporations (B-Corps) as a recognized official type of Corporation and provide preferential treatment for B-Corps in the federal contractors program.
- Negotiate Community Benefit Agreements that contribute to enhanced local environmental, social and economic well-being for all federal projects.

- Recoup the public cost of low-wage and precarious employment as well as poor environmental performance through the adoption of a variable tax structure that gives preferential tax treatment to those organizations with higher environmental and social performance.
- Recognizing the investment of time and resources required for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop policies and procedures for social performance and apply for certifications, create a program to support SMEs in these activities including:
  - Resources that provide guidance to organizations seeking to develop such policies and procedures or pursue certification;
  - Consulting support or grants to procure such support;
  - Favourable tax incentives to offset the cost of such development for SMEs.

**SDG 10 –  
Reduced  
Inequalities**

- Amend the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to include “social condition” as a prohibited grounds of discrimination in Canada.
- Establish the economic, social and cultural rights guaranteed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights in Canadian law, with appropriate remedies and enforcement mechanisms.

## **Background**

There are important shifts happening economically, socially, and environmentally across the globe. These macro forces are interwoven and impact the ability of people to meet their basic needs, especially those most vulnerable. The work of the Canadian Poverty Institute (CPI) revolves around linking evidence-based research to practice. We take a multi-dimensional approach to understanding poverty and how we might, collectively work for its eradication.

Through this brief, it is our intention to shed light on the intersection of environmental concerns and poverty. While The Government of Canada is working to prioritize and strategize Canada's plan for addressing environmental issues, the Canadian Poverty Institute asks the federal government to consider strategies that would inform equitable policy, speak to the interconnected nature of environment and poverty, and plan for long-term sustainability for all Canadians.

The effects of climate change and other environmental problems such as industrial pollution, air quality and adverse weather, disproportionately impact those who are low income or living in poverty.<sup>i</sup> This process is called Environmental Injustice (EI) and it exists when a certain minority of the population is forced, through their lack of access to decision-making and policy making processes, to live with a disproportionate share of environmental 'bads' and suffer the related public health problems and quality of life burdens.<sup>ii</sup>

Environmental injustice is also manifested in environmental racism. Along with those who have lower income, racialized communities are exposed to greater amounts of pollution, degraded natural environments, and harm.<sup>iii</sup> In many urban centres, for example, poorer neighborhoods have fewer trees, creating urban heat islands and areas that lack the wind break protection trees provide. Another example is where lower-income areas tend to have higher speed limits, making these areas less suitable for alternative modes of transit. This situation is rooted in a long and enduring pattern of decision-making shaped by colonialism and racism. Being marginalized and excluded from planning processes has resulted in what can be termed environmental segregation.<sup>iv</sup> This occurs, for example, where lower income neighbourhoods have or are adjacent to concentrations of industrial use and major traffic routes.

The Canadian Poverty Institute is advocating for the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy to be based on the principles of Environmental and Economic Justice. Environmental justice occurs when all people, regardless of gender, age, race or socioeconomic status, are entitled to equal protection under environmental laws and to participate in environmental decision making in their community.<sup>v</sup> Economic justice results when wealth and economic opportunity are equitably shared and all people are part of the decision-making process. Environmental justice cannot be divorced from considerations of economic justice as economic decisions have environmental impacts and environmental issues have economic costs and benefits. A Sustainable Development Strategy grounded in principles of justice will effectively address issues at the intersection of poverty and the environment, and increase equity in Canada overall.

## **Poverty, the Environment and Human Rights**

As a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Canada has an obligation to uphold the economic, social and cultural rights of all Canadians. This includes the right to work and fair wages; social security; food, clothing and housing; physical and mental health; education; and to participate in cultural life. These rights are compromised by environmental and economic injustice. Human rights are based on the following principles:

- **Universality** – human rights are inalienable.
- **Non-Discrimination and Equality** – human rights apply to everyone, everywhere and under any circumstance.
- **Indivisibility** – human rights are indivisible and should be taken in a holistic way.
- **Interdependence** – all human rights closely inter-related and affect one another.
- **Participation** – participation in the decision-making process by all, especially those most affected by the decision, is an essential right.
- **The Rule of Law** – rights must be protected in legislation.
- **Accountability** – there is an obligation to monitor and report on progress.

Under the prevailing international human rights framework, the Government has a duty to:

- **Respect** rights by refraining from carrying out or tolerating any practice, policy or measure that violates human rights.
- **Protect** rights by preventing the violation of rights by others.
- **Fulfill** rights by taking all reasonable measures to guarantee access to entitlements and ensuring non-regression for current entitlements.

The Canadian Poverty Institute urges the federal government to respect the economic, social and cultural rights of Canadians by applying the human rights principles and fulfilling its duties as stated above with respect to the proposed Sustainable Development Strategy. Canada has already taken a large step forward in this regard with respect to the National Poverty Strategy and National Housing Strategy, both of which affirm the economic rights of Canadians.

## **Assessment and Recommendations**

The Canadian Poverty Institute applauds the Government of Canada for moving forward with its commitments to sustainability as expressed through the proposed Federal Sustainable Development Strategy. At the same time, the Canadian Poverty Institute provides the following assessment and recommendations of important aspects to sustainability and recommended possible additional federal responses for relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

### **SDG 1: No Poverty**

Poverty remains a stark reality in Canada. In 2020, an estimated 2,357,000 Canadians were living in households with incomes below the federal poverty line.<sup>vi</sup> The National Poverty Strategy defines poverty as “*The condition of a person who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain a basic level of living standards and to facilitate integration and participation in society.*”<sup>vii</sup> The strategy is based on the following principles:

- *Dignity* – Lifting Canadians out of poverty by ensuring everyone's basic needs are met;
- *Opportunity and Inclusion* – Helping Canadians join the middle class by promoting full participation in society and equality of opportunity; and
- *Resilience and Security* – Supporting the middle class by protecting Canadians from falling into poverty and by supporting income security and resilience.

Consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG1), the strategy further commits Canada to Reduce poverty rate by 50% from its 2015 level by 2030. Accordingly, the Canadian Poverty Institute urges the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy to consider the inter-connections between poverty and the environment and align the Sustainable Development Strategy with overall government poverty reduction efforts and targets.

As stated above, poverty and the environment are inter-connected. Sustainable incomes, access to food and shelter, and good physical and mental health all affect and are affected by the quality of the environment. Specific relationships that bear consideration in the Sustainable Development Strategy include:

- *Natural Disasters and Emergencies*

Low income and vulnerable households have increased risk of exposure to environmental hazards and the impacts of climate change. Increased risk and exposure is due to the location and quality of lower-income or affordable housing, income disruptions as a result of disasters and emergencies, and the fact that many lower income Canadians are un or under-insured for environmental risks. Of particular concern are the risks posed to the health and well-being of homeless persons and persons with disabilities during natural disasters and emergencies.

- *Housing*

The poorer quality of many lower-income homes results in poor energy efficiency. This results in an increased financial burden due to higher utility costs as well as compromised health and safety due to inadequate heating / cooling, cooking, and exposure to hazards such as mold. Of particular concern is the deteriorating condition of Canada's social housing stock which also involves poor energy efficiency.

- *Transportation*

Transportation is essential for social and economic participation. Current and historical patterns of urban and rural development have been auto-centric. Not only does this have negative environmental consequences, it also imposes a financial burden on lower-income Canadians due to the cost of owning, maintaining and ensuring a vehicle. For many, public transportation is unreliable due to frequency and limitations on service that substantially increase time and cost. The recent loss of inter-city bus service, coupled with poor or non-existent rail service, in large parts of the country has imposed a particular barrier for rural and remote communities.

### Recommendations

In order to address the issues identified above, the Canadian Poverty Institute recommends that the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy include the following:

- Ensure that emergency response plans include specific provision for addressing the health and safety needs of homeless and / or vulnerable persons during and following natural disasters and emergencies.
- Ensure that emergency response plans address the financial impacts of natural disasters and emergencies for low-income households including income disruptions and loss of property.
- Work to address barriers to insurance coverage for low-income households to increase access to appropriate insurance for all.
- Commit to funding the retrofit of Canada’s social housing stock to address deteriorating quality and energy efficiency.
- Commit to funding efficient and affordable public transportation, including inter-city transportation to and between rural and remote communities.

## **SDG 2 – Zero Hunger**

Article 11 of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights identifies food as a fundamental human right. The United Nations defines food security as when “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life”.<sup>viii</sup> Conversely, household food *in*security is the inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.<sup>ix</sup>

Food insecurity remains a harsh reality for many Canadians. In 2019, 15.6% of people living in the provinces experienced marginal, moderate, or severe food insecurity in 2019.<sup>x</sup> Food insecurity is highest in the Territories. In 2017/18, almost half (49%) of all households in Nunavut experienced some level of food insecurity, followed by the Northwest Territories (15.9%) and the Yukon (12.6%). At the same time, it is estimated that \$27B of food is wasted annually across Canada.<sup>xi</sup>

Food insecurity and poverty are closely linked. While the causes of food insecurity are complex, however, food insecurity essentially stems from the ability of people to afford the food that they need.<sup>xii</sup> Income levels therefore significantly impact food insecurity, including low-wage jobs and precarious work conditions. Insufficient social assistance benefits also render households, especially single-person households, at a high risk for being food insecure. In fact, one in five households that rely on government benefits are severely food insecure.<sup>xiii</sup>

The ability to afford nutritious food is also affected by the cost of other basic needs, such as housing, where trade-offs may be made between purchasing food and paying rent or utility bills. Food insecurity can also arise due to transportation challenges where lack of transportation to grocery stores creates “food deserts” in some urban areas. Finally, the cost of food itself can also pose a barrier, and recent increases in the price of food may affect lower-income households more severely.<sup>xiv</sup>

The root causes of these challenges can be found in pre-existing patterns of socio-economic inequality and exclusion. Those most at risk of food insecurity include female lone-parents, recent immigrants, racialized persons, Indigenous persons and persons with disabilities. The

underlying systems that make some people more or less vulnerable must be addressed, such as the legacy of colonization, poverty, and systemic racism.

The issue of food insecurity can also not be detached from the current system of agricultural production. Canada's industrial agricultural regime that relies on high-inputs and high-outputs not only contributes to environmental degradation and GHG emissions, it is also exacerbating the farm income crisis and rural poverty. As noted by the National Farmers Union "*a focus on high-output, high-input agriculture is the primary cause of the farm crisis and the primary cause of the increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from our farms and food-production systems.*"<sup>xv</sup> This works against smaller, locally based producers who can produce local food more sustainably and thereby contribute to local economic development and environmental quality.

### Recommendations

In order to address the issues identified above, the Canadian Poverty Institute recommends that the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy include the following:

- Ensure an adequate income to enable people to purchase food with dignity. This will require, first, policies and initiatives that incent the creation of decent work to ensure that those with employment have sufficient income to afford healthy food. Secondly, provincial Social Assistance benefits must be increased to ensure that those relying on income support are able to afford healthy food. To achieve this, conditionality must be restored to Canada Social Transfer (CST) payments to establish minimum national standards for Social Assistance provision.
- Support the transition of Canada's agricultural system from an industrial to a more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable model. The Canadian Poverty Institute supports the recommendation of the National Farmers Union to "*Reimagin(e) Canadian agriculture: rejecting current policies focused on maximizing exports and production, maximizing inputs, and minimizing the number of farmers; and substituting a new approach focused on sustainability, reducing inputs and attendant emissions, raising farm incomes, and increasing the number of farms and farmers.*"<sup>xvi</sup>
- Address the issue of food waste through policy and legislation that also minimizes the "*over-processing and de-nutritionalization of food.*"<sup>xvii</sup>
- Support the development of urban agriculture, community supported agriculture and other community-based food initiatives to improve access to healthy, locally produced food and contribute to local economic development.
- Recognizing that people who experience food insecurity have important perspectives and insights, ensure that they are meaningfully included in decision-making processes with respect to food insecurity.

## **SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy**

Providing affordable and clean energy is critical for addressing climate change and moving towards a more sustainable future. Yet, people living on a low income are often caught in a bind. They often live in the least energy efficient housing leading to higher than average energy and utility costs, yet they are also least able to afford the increased cost of utilities or make the renovations necessary to improve their energy efficiency and reduce their costs. Low-income or energy poor households are also least likely to be able to afford the cost of clean energy options.

These households are sometimes referred to as being in “energy poverty”. Energy poverty is when people spend a disproportionate amount of their income on home energy costs. This is due to the combined impact of low incomes, increasing prices and poor home energy efficiency. One benchmark for energy poverty is when a household spends more than double the national average of its income on home energy. It is estimated that between 6 – 19% of the population of Canada experiences energy poverty.<sup>xviii</sup>

Energy poverty can have significant impacts on our health and well-being. Poorly heated homes can affect our health due to cold and the presence of mold that can exacerbate chronic conditions like asthma. There are also financial impacts when people take on debt or forgo other expenses to pay their bills, or they fall behind in their utility payments, which can affect their credit rating. Safety is another risk when people sometimes resort to unsafe cooking and heating methods, like using barbecues indoors. Energy poverty even affects our social lives as people are less likely to have visitors as a result.

Addressing energy poverty has multiple benefits. Increasing the energy efficiency of housing stock contributes to Canada’s efforts to reduce GHG emissions and reduce climate change. Reducing the energy costs of low-income households provides economic benefits and contributes to Canada’s poverty reduction goals. Lastly, increasing the health and well-being of low-income households has social benefits by improving the overall health and well-being of Canadians, as well as supporting their increased social participation.

### Recommendations

In order to address the issues identified above, the Canadian Poverty Institute recommends that the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy include the following:

- Invest in low or no cost programs and initiatives that support lower-income households to upgrade the efficiency of their homes with the specific goal of reducing their energy consumption and improving affordability.
- Consider a Federal strategy to address the gaps across the country in the support of lower income households (for instance Alberta is the only Province without a low income program).
- Collaborate with experts in the sector with on the ground experience and an understanding of the social impact an energy poverty program can have.

## SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth

The ability of low-income households to meet their needs for dignified and appropriate food and housing and social participation, consistent with economic, social and cultural rights, requires a commitment to decent work. The International Labour Organization defines decent work as *“work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.”*<sup>xix</sup>

Over the past several decades, the quality of employment in Canada has deteriorated. Demographic, social, political and technological shifts are driving changes in the global, national and regional economy. These changes are having important impacts on sectors and firms, on the labour force, on workers and on our society and communities. The economic impact of these changes includes shifting patterns of production and consumption along with growing inequality arising from a global rebalancing of wages. Associated with these changes is a rise in precarious employment with significant implications for the health and well-being of workers.

Precarious employment comes with a cost. Those engaged in precarious work report poorer mental and physical health, are less able to accumulate assets and also less able to participate in family and community life. This translates into increased health and social service costs. It has been estimated that the cost of poverty is between \$72 and 84B annually.

Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Canada has an obligation to the progressive realization of workers' rights. This includes the right to work and fair wages that guarantee a decent living, as well as the right to safe and healthy working conditions; equal opportunity for everyone to be promoted in their employment to an appropriate higher level; to rest, leisure and reasonable limitation of working hours; the right to form or join trade unions; and the right to social protection.

While business profitability was often historically seen as contrary to decent work and environmental sustainability, the connection between economic, social and environmental sustainability is increasingly being recognized. In fact, business has enormous potential to contribute to social progress through their normal business operations. As stated by the FSG Consulting Group:

*“... the most advanced companies have begun to look at social engagement through a different lens. Rather than seeing business and society in opposition, they recognize the enormous potential of business to contribute to social progress.”*<sup>xx</sup>

This is sometimes referred to as an “inclusive growth” or “shared value” approach to business. The promotion of such approaches provide opportunities to achieve environmental, economic and social objectives simultaneously.

Currently, new business models are emerging that embrace environment, social and economic principles and goals. This includes B-Corporations, social purpose businesses, social enterprises and cooperatives. Other traditional businesses are also embracing policies and practices that generate social and environmental as well as economic value. This includes

commitment to ESG targets as well as practices such as sustainable procurement, commitments to diversity and the payment of a living wage. This developing sustainable economic ecosystem requires support to thrive and grow.

What is required is a strong policy agenda that can incent and support the adoption of sustainable inclusive business practices. A weak policy and regulatory environment in the region where an organization is working can be a significant barrier. In a survey of Ontario business leaders, 31% of respondents cited “regulatory environment / government mandates” as a key barrier to the adoption of inclusive business strategies.<sup>xxi</sup> Providing a supportive and holistic policy and regulatory environment can enable the Government to achieve multiple environmental, social and economic objectives, often through existing government processes and investments.

### Recommendations

In order to address the issues identified above, the Canadian Poverty Institute recommends that the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy create a holistic enabling policy environment that incents inclusive growth by:

- Including environmental and social performance standards in all federal procurement contracts, giving priority to contractors that provide decent work according to the ILO definition.
- Providing preferential Social Finance to emerging and established enterprises that meet federal environmental and social performance standards in alignment with those applicable to federal procurement contracts.
- Establish Benefit Corporations (B-Corps) as a recognized official type of Corporation and provide preferential treatment for B-Corps in the federal contractors program.
- Negotiating Community Benefit Agreements that contribute to enhanced local environmental, social and economic well-being for all federal projects.
- Recouping the public cost of low-wage and precarious employment as well as poor environmental performance through the adoption of a variable tax structure that gives preferential tax treatment to those organizations with higher environmental and social performance.
- Recognizing the investment of time and resources required for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop policies and procedures for social performance and apply for certifications, create a program to support SMEs in these activities including:
  - Resources that provide guidance to organizations seeking to develop such policies and procedures or pursue certification;
  - Consulting support or grants to procure such support;
  - Favourable tax incentives to offset the cost of such development for SMEs.

## **SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities**

Environmental inequalities reflect deeper social and economic inequalities based on intersecting factors such as gender, race and class. Achieving Canada’s environmental sustainability targets must consider the ways in which deeper structural socio-economic conditions are contributing to a compromised ecological environment and the disproportionate impact such a compromised environment is having on the health and well-being of historically marginalized peoples. At the same time, efforts to achieve environment sustainability must take account of the potential impact of remediation strategies on such populations. Efforts to achieve sustainability must therefore take a holistic approach, addressing the underlying structural causes of environmental, social and economic inequality, with a goal of achieving overall equity in Canadian society. Adopting a human rights framework through full domestic implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights would be an important step towards reducing inequality, meeting our human rights commitments and advancing progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

### Recommendations

In order to address the systemic conditions that contribute to environmental, social and economic inequality, the Canadian Poverty Institute recommends that the federal government:

- Amend the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to include “social condition” as a prohibited grounds of discrimination in Canada.
- Establish the economic, social and cultural rights guaranteed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights in Canadian law, with appropriate remedies and enforcement mechanisms.

### The Canadian Poverty Institute

This brief has been prepared by the Canadian Poverty Institute in consultation with key stakeholders, particularly members of our Energy Poverty Roundtable and New Economy Roundtable. The Canadian Poverty Institute is a pan-Canadian and interdisciplinary institute housed at Ambrose University with a mission to advance the eradication of poverty in Canada through teaching, research and action that promotes systems change.

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