



2nd ONTARIO POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY – RACIAL JUSTICE ANALYSIS September 2014

Introduction

Colour of Poverty - Colour of Change (COP-COC) commends the Ontario Government for its ongoing commitment to poverty reduction, expressed through the release of its second Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), *Realizing Our Potential – Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy (2014-2019)* on September 3, 2014. In it the Government reaffirmed its commitment to “reducing poverty among children and youth through targeted investments and supports”, and adds a new focus on ending homelessness while moving towards employment and income security, particularly for “vulnerable populations”. COP-COC commends the government for broadening its focus beyond children and youth to certain vulnerable populations.

The PRS puts forward a number of positive measures which can help lift more individual Ontarians as well as families out of poverty and prevent others from falling into poverty.

As a coalition dedicated to advancing racial justice and racial equity, COP-COC offers this racial justice analysis of the PRS. We urge the Government to incorporate these perspectives in the implementation phase so as to ensure all Ontarians, including members of racialized communities – both First Peoples and peoples of colour – will have the opportunities to realize their full potentials.

The Need for a Racial Equity Framework

The persistence of the racialization of poverty in Ontario has been solidly confirmed by numerous socio-economic studies and Statistics Canada reports. Racialized communities experience higher levels of homelessness and near-homelessness; racialized youth experience higher unemployment rates and push-out rates from schools; and members of racialized communities of all educational levels, both men and women, experience much higher rates of poverty and face real barriers in accessing employment.

The *Poverty Reduction Act (2009)* recognizes that not all groups of people share the same level of risk of poverty and that the poverty reduction strategy must recognize the heightened risk amongst some, such as racialized groups. The *Act* mandates the elimination of barriers to full participation by all people in Ontario – including persons who face discrimination on the grounds of their race, ancestry, place of origin, colour and ethnic origin, etc.

Thankfully the PRS rightfully acknowledges First Peoples’ realities and attempts to respond to their needs, but it is silent on the similarly high rates of poverty as experienced by communities of colour, contrary to the government’s legislated commitment.

Vulnerable Populations

The Government acknowledges in the PRS that some groups are more vulnerable to poverty than others, and commits to closely track their poverty rates and to measure the policies’ impact on those most affected by poverty. The definition of “vulnerable populations” lists Aboriginal peoples, newcomers, persons with disabilities, unattached individuals aged 45 to 64 and lone parents, but does not include peoples of colour despite extensive evidence that they experience deep and persistent levels of poverty and are very over-represented among the poor. Thus communities of colour have no guarantee that their experiences will be tracked when it comes time to measure poverty and the impact of the PRS on poverty rates in Ontario.

Immigration Status as a Proxy for Race

Instead of identifying communities of colour as a group, the PRS would appear to be substituting “race” with “immigrant” or “newcomer” as one of the “vulnerable populations” that deserve targeted attention. While there is no question that immigrants are also more prone to poverty, even among immigrants or newcomers the disparity is racialized, as it is the immigrants of colour who are far more likely to experience poverty than those who are not.

More importantly, by using immigration status as a proxy for “race”, the PRS has completely excluded Ontarians of colour who are born in Canada and who are facing barriers to socio-economic participation due to ethno-racially based systemic discrimination.

This sanitized approach to “race” will have an even greater impact on youth of colour. For instance, second to Japanese Canadians, youth of African descent in Ontario have the highest proportion of those Canadian-born among all communities of colour. And as with Indigenous youth, youth of colour are at least twice as likely to be unemployed as their non-racialized peers. The PRS adopts an explicit “youth equity lens” to reflect the needs of youth who are at risk of poverty. However the equity lens excludes and invisibilizes youth of colour, rendering the PRS youth initiatives ineffective when it comes to youth from these racialized communities.

Evidence-Based Social Policy and Measuring Success

The Government states in the PRS that it is committed to supporting programs that are based on real evidence and that it is looking to measure poverty rates of “vulnerable populations”. Since the PRS does not include communities of colour among the “vulnerable populations”, any “evidence” that the Government may gather under this strategy will by definition exclude critically needed learnings with respect to poverty within these communities.

Employment and Income Security

Members of racialized communities across all levels of skills and experience face higher unemployment rates as well as systemic discrimination in the labour market. The PRS notes that the Government is resourcing integrated employment and training services to support those who need them the most to enter the workforce. Again, communities of colour are not listed among those who need support, and are not included in any of these measures. While these initiatives are helpful for those who are listed, the PRS does not provide specific measures to reduce if not eliminate systemic discrimination in order to “clear the way for individuals to enter the workforce, to feel engaged in the life of their communities and to benefit equitably from Ontario’s prosperity”. The only measure specifically geared towards workplace discrimination is limited to supporting persons with disabilities, by “helping employers overcome misconceptions about the capabilities of persons with disabilities”, so even this welcome effort would appear to not speak to or address the discrimination as faced by racialized persons with disabilities.

Education, Housing and Health

Apart from the much-needed commitment to close learning gaps for Indigenous learners and enhance after school programs for six to 12-year-olds, the second PRS offers little to address the persistent learning gaps facing certain communities of colour and those who continue to experience higher push-out rates from secondary school.

Similarly, other proposed measures to address homelessness, housing and health inequities, etc. all lack specific measures that target communities of colour. As such, the racial inequities and disparities that already exist for these groups and communities will likely remain unaddressed, and continue to deepen over time.

Moving Forward

As the Honourable Minister Deb Matthews has rightly noted, “when someone living in poverty envisions a better life ahead, we need to remove the barriers that keep them from fulfilling their potential”. **This can only be achieved if the Poverty Reduction Strategy addresses the barriers as faced by all vulnerable groups, **which then must necessarily include communities of colour !!****

To that end, we need the Government to:

- *Name and identify communities of colour as among the “vulnerable populations”;*
- *Track and measure poverty rates for all racialized groups – First Peoples and peoples of colour – through the use and collection of appropriately disaggregated data;*
- *Introduce employment equity measures requiring employers to remove barriers to employment as confronted by all under-represented groups – including First Peoples and peoples of colour;*
- *Commit to adopting a racial equity lens in tracking and measuring all aspects of the implementation of the 2nd PRS and beyond; and*
- *Publicize a regularly updated list of groups, organizations, associations, initiatives, etc. that are consulted in the implementation of the PRS*

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