

---

# SIA POVERTY FORUM Nov 2008

---

Verbatim record

---

David Forbes, MLA  
Saskatoon Centre,  
July, 2011

---

## **Introduction**

Despite popular belief, racial discrimination, widespread violence, and severe poverty persist not only globally, but right here in Canada. Poverty is an epidemic that affects many Canadian families and individuals. It exists in every province and there is not one urban centre or rural community that does not experience some form of this global disaster.

The Canadian Council for Social Development suggests that visible minority persons in Canada, particularly recent immigrants, experience unacceptably high rates of poverty. Poverty amongst women and children is also at an unacceptable level in Canada.<sup>i</sup> According to Statistics Canada, in 2004, 872 000 children under the age of 18 (13 percent of all Canadian children) lived in low-income families. Out of these low-income children, almost half lived in a state that could be considered severe.<sup>ii</sup>

Although there are many factors that contribute, racism is a significant cause of poverty among these groups. Racism, therefore, must be considered when creating a plan to eliminate poverty in our society.

## **Community Event for the Eradication of Racism and Poverty**

The Saskatchewan Intercultural Association demonstrated this link between racism and poverty in a community event held in November, 2008. The project was created in support and in partnership with the United Nation's international efforts for the Eradication of Poverty. The event focused on the international human rights code and demonstrated how poverty and racism is in violation of this agreement.

The event consisted of a tribunal that displayed how poverty and racism violate human rights. Individuals living with substantially low-incomes shared experiences of racism, discrimination, and the difficulties associated with poverty. Law professionals analyzed the statements made, and discoveries were made about how these experiences and events violate the human rights code. The tribunal also gave a sense to how serious this global problem is and the obstacles that people must overcome when faced with these issues. The community then participated in focus groups that uncovered truths about racism and poverty and the steps that can be taken globally, nationally, and locally to help eradicate the problem.

The participants were asked eight specific questions, each relating to different aspects of racism and poverty. The questions, ranging from issues of HIV/AIDS to the major contributing factors to poverty, engaged participants from many different age groups and ethnic backgrounds. Input was received from individuals who have devoted their life's work to alleviating racism and poverty, to those who have just recently become aware of these issues. This document will go through each of the eight questions separately and explain the information and insights that was gained from the community. Recommendations will then be made on the actions that are needed to alleviate racism and poverty in our society.

## **1. WHAT ARE THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO POVERTY?**

Racism contributes to and strongly shapes poverty, especially in North America. Unfortunately, racism is still common in our society and it can create many problems and obstacles for those who suffer from it. For one, racism can make it very difficult for people of color to find and maintain careers. During the tribunal that was held during the event held by SIA, many of the presenters spoke out about instances where they were discriminated against during job interviews based on their race. It was also discovered that many land and homeowners are hesitant to rent property to ethnic individuals. Racism, in this sense, makes it incredibly difficult for many families to bring in a sufficient income and maintain suitable housing.

In the past, Statistics Canada has consistently reported that poverty rates among visible minority persons are unacceptably high. For some groups, such as recent black immigrants, the poverty rate can be higher than fifty percent.<sup>iii</sup> Although these high percentages are somewhat linked to racism, as was discussed prior, there are still other factors that may account for this. The participants of the event felt there is not enough information given to recent immigrants on programs to make the transition to Canada less difficult. More emphasis and funding should be given to programs, such as English as a Second Language, that will enable immigrants to get the training they require to be qualified for higher paying positions. The speakers of the tribunal all held higher education and had the experience needed to hold these careers, however, among other things they were unable to attain work based on their “insufficient” English skills. The group felt that other training programs, such as financial management education might also be useful for recent immigrants. Many recent immigrants do not have the knowledge required to be economically successful in a country that is new and foreign to them.

The focus groups of the event also had concerns about housing. The lack of affordable housing in urban areas is one of the main contributing factors to poverty. High housing costs make it difficult for families and individuals to escape the cycle of poverty and many are in a state where they are constantly being forced to choose between food and shelter. The housing that a low-income family may be able to afford will likely be in a ghettoized community with insufficient resources and a high crime rate, making it a dangerous place to raise a family. These communities may be a long distance from places of work, making commuting expensive and time consuming. Ultimately this may force many to quit their jobs and rely on social assistance thus making it difficult to escape impoverishment.

One last major factor the participants were concerned about is the lack of childcare that is available for families and single parent households. For low-income workers, childcare can be burdensome because it is extremely expensive and often difficult to find. For every 100 Canadian children, there are only 12 childcare spaces available leaving many families with no choice but to quit their jobs to stay at home with their children.<sup>iv</sup> This puts pressure on household income and makes it difficult for families to meet their needs.

## **II. HAS ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION DECREASED/INCREASED POVERTY?**

The focus groups found this question to be quite difficult as there is a lack of concrete evidence for either argument. The participants were of the opinion that in some ways, globalization does indeed increase poverty, but in other ways, it can be seen as helping to combat it. The focus groups were concerned that globalization may be moving many jobs to other countries, leaving numerous individuals here in North America without work. Globalization leads developed nations to outsource manufacturing and often white collar jobs to developing nations where the cost of manufacturing goods is substantially lower. Jobs such as accountants, engineers, scientists, and editors are beginning to be outsourced and many people, here in Canada, are losing their jobs. This concern was strictly one of North American poverty, not of the global epidemic. Some participants, who argued in favour of globalization, suggested that outsourcing to countries like India, give workers of developing nations many opportunities of employment that they may not have had before. Outsourcing also allows developing countries access to the latest technology that allows them to compete on an international level. In this sense, globalization is actually decreasing poverty.

The participants also expressed concern that globalization may be contributing to lower job security. In the past, many people had permanent, stable positions, however, the global world has altered this sense of stability. Now people are constantly worried about losing their careers due to increased job competition. This high competition leads to lower wages and a lower standard of living. Companies that experience higher competition, however, are also forced to lower their prices. This may, in turn, benefit the low-income earner because large companies are forced to charge less for the same goods. Impoverished people may now have access to goods and services they may not have had pre-globalization.

Globalization may also help to decrease poverty by way of the media. Global media coverage can draw attention to world events and the human rights violations that occur daily. Because countries are beginning to rely more on each other for economic benefits, they are conscious of how they appear on the international stage. Globalization might lead to improved human rights, thus positively affecting racism and poverty.

### **III. FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS HAVE BEEN ON THE INCREASE AND, ACCORDING TO THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION (ILO), ONE THIRD OF ALL HOUSEHOLDS ARE NOW HEADED BY WOMEN. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE TRENDS?**

Participants of the event believed female headed households, in general, have a negative effect on poverty. Concern was expressed over the fact that single mothers are at a greater risk of falling into poverty than single fathers. This may be due to factors such as the wage gap between women and men. Women are still not earning as much income as men and this puts them at greater risk to becoming impoverished. Single women seem to have a more difficult time finding work than their male counterparts. Single mothers rarely find permanent, full-time work at an adequate wage where they can support their family.

Often, if women are fortunate to find adequate work, daycare costs make it incredibly difficult for the family to be sustained. As discussed in question one, the lack of affordable childcare that is available to families is one of the leading causes of poverty. This lack of childcare is an even more severe problem to single parent homes. If childcare can not be provided, the parent is unable to go to work and thus support her family. Raising a child can be quite expensive, and without proper childcare, the family is in danger of falling under the poverty line.

The groups also expressed concern over the fact that children living in female headed households are more than twice as likely than other children to live in poverty. They, therefore, will have less access to education, recreational activities, and proper healthcare. Growing up in a home with only one parent can also lead to behavioural issues that may damage the child's future. Children that grow up in impoverished homes are statistically more likely to become poor themselves, and a cycle of poverty will continue for generations to come.

#### **IV. HOW HAS HIV/AIDS AND OTHER HEALTH RELATED PROBLEMS IMPACTED ON WOMEN'S LIVES AND COMPOUNDED THEIR POVERTY?**

Women all over the world are becoming more and more at risk to developing HIV/AIDS. The focus groups faulted inequality to be the main cause of this trend. They argued that gender inequality increases not only poverty, but also the risk of this infectious disease. In some countries, women are subject to unfair legal standards, and often do not have the power to control their sexual activities. This lack of control may leave them vulnerable to STI's and many of these women may not be in the position to practice safer sex.

Women also are more likely to come into contact with HIV when working in the sex trade. Because women around the world find it more difficult than men to find sustaining permanent jobs, sex work might be the only possible alternative. Often these women are subject to violence and discrimination, making it nearly impossible for them to escape the trade. In some countries, women who participate in these acts do not have access to proper healthcare and never receive treatment.

AIDS also affects women who may not be infected themselves. In cases where the father figure is HIV positive, paying for treatment can be a heavy burden. Medication for AIDS is incredibly expensive and many families are left in a state of poverty due strictly to medical bills. AIDS widows, who are usually young and with children are left with substantial debts but with no income. Because they are the sole caregivers of their children, they may not have the ability to contribute to the family farm or business and thus are unable to make a living. This makes it difficult for women to care for their children, sustain suitable accommodations, and receive proper healthcare. Ultimately, these factors may lead women to sex work, where they, themselves are at an increased risk for HIV/AIDS. This infectious disease often leaves children orphaned and in a severe state of poverty.

## **V. WHAT STRUCTURAL/SYSTEMIC BARRIERS CURRENTLY EXIST THAT EXACERBATE INTERGENERATIONAL CYCLES OF POVERTY AND RACISM?**

The cycle of poverty refers to the situation where an individual is born into poverty, and does not have, or cannot acquire the resources, needed to improve their situation. They thus remain poor throughout their lifetime and eventually pass their economic condition onto future generations. The participants discussed the possibly underlying causes of the cycle of poverty and found education to be one of the main factors. A degree from a post-secondary institution drastically increases one's income, which makes for a higher standard of living. However, post-secondary education can be incredibly expensive and many young people do not have the resources available to allow them to continue with their studies. Student loans are available, however, leaving university with a large debt may not be an acceptable option forcing many young people to end their education after high school. Without a post-secondary degree, they are less likely to maintain a high paying career and more likely to fall into a state of poverty.

The focus groups also felt that high school education was a factor in the cycle of poverty. Youth who grow up in low-income homes, are less likely to receive a high school diploma than those who come from high-income families. Those who have not completed high school are at a high risk to live in poverty. There are many reasons why youth from low-income families might not complete high school. One reason that was expressed by the participants was the need for children to get a job at a young age so they can help their family economically. Many children do not have the option of completing secondary school because their family relies on them for a steady income. Impoverished youth may also have behavioural problems and turn to crime, which would also make it difficult for them to complete high school.

Children growing up in low-income families find themselves at a disadvantage based on the location of their home. If a child grows up in a ghettoized community, they are likely to be faced with many horrifying circumstances and situations. Drugs and crime are prevalent in these communities, leaving children vulnerable to corruption. Often caregivers will work, leaving the child to fend for themselves in their crime filled neighborhood. A lack of positive role models for youth will make it difficult for young people to escape the economic situation of the generation before them.

The participants of the event also felt that recreational activities were a very important part in childhood development and many of these children simply do not have access to these programs. Organized sports can be very expensive and many parents may not be able to afford certain activities. If children and youth are not involved in extra-curricular activities, they will keep themselves amused with other options that may not provide them with positive role models.

## **VI. WHAT TYPES OF EDUCATION/AWARENESS RAISING STRATEGIES ARE NEEDED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

The participants of the event were all very strong advocates for increased education for both the victim and the general public. People suffering from racism and poverty often do not know that there are programs and services provided for them to help them cope with the situation they may be in. The Saskatchewan Intercultural Association, for example, is a non-profit group that offers services to immigrants and refugees to help make the transition to Canada a little easier. Many people, however, are not aware of such programs and thus cannot receive the benefits that may be available to them. More comprehensive advertising and awareness campaigns may be necessary for individuals to take advantage of certain services and become active in community groups.

There also appears to be a substantial need for teaching and encouraging cultural pride to young Aboriginals and immigrants, beginning in the elementary school system. The focus groups determined it was important for young people to feel pride in their culture and celebrate their historical identity. Being immersed in a foreign culture can be incredibly difficult but if children can grow up with a sense of belonging to their individual culture, they will have a stronger self esteem and feel more comfortable building a life surrounded by unfamiliar traditions. Young people should be encouraged to participate in their own cultural events, while others learn to appreciate ways of life other than their own.

The mass media can also do its part to help educate the general public on these issues. They can report on issues and obstacles that impoverished people must face and help stir up public support for more financial and educational aid. The media can also make an effort to report on positive

stories of individual success, rather than simply reporting negative news. Once people are aware that it is possible to escape poverty, they may regain the motivation that is needed to become self-sustaining.

In order to help alleviate racism and poverty, there needs to be increased interaction in the form of cultural events, workshops, and strategy forums. These events are beneficial in bringing together different groups of people to share their ideas, experiences, and various projects. They create an opportunity for discussion and they educate the community on all the different issues that people living with poverty and racism must face. Influential members of government and the media, who later share this information to a wider audience, often attend these cultural events, which help to stir up greater public interest and involvement. Community events, such as the one held by SIA for the eradication of racism and poverty, are an uncomplicated way to raise public awareness and attract important attention.

## **VII. WHAT CAN WE DO AS A COMMUNITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN TERMS OF ALLEVIATING POVERTY?**

When dealing with large-scale issues such as racism and poverty, it is often easy to become overwhelmed and many begin to feel helpless when there are no immediate results. The participants felt that goals will be more easily attainable if these large issues were broken down into smaller, more realistic targets. For example, instead of combating global racism, we can indirectly make a difference by promoting fair and equal hiring practices. The community can work on smaller projects, such as the creation of community centers or education programs that offer assistance to low-income earners and allow them to receive the training they require to become economically stable. By attaining one small goal at a time, progress will eventually be made in combating these global epidemics.

Communities can help to alleviate poverty by working within their jurisdiction and creating coalitions aiming to achieve certain goals. These community groups can develop strategies, participate in public outreach, and work with government and other influential members of society to help make poverty a priority. These groups are very effective in creating conversations

about social injustices and they can motivate and assist individuals to contribute to the cause. Community groups can give support and empower individuals to help alleviate poverty with grass roots actions, social advocacy, and public events.

The community can also contribute to alleviating poverty with awareness and education. The participants emphasized the importance of education, especially at the elementary level, to teach young people about the wrongs of poverty and the actions that can be taken to eradicate it. Communities could educate their children on human rights and how poverty and racism are in violation of these laws. Youth should also be encouraged to go out into the community and experience poverty first hand. This would help young people put aside certain prejudices they may have towards others who live in impoverished communities. Experiencing these injustices might also motivate them to become involved in coalitions and other community groups aimed at eradicating poverty. The community as a whole can make an effort to teach the future generation of the wrongness of poverty.

## **VIII. WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ALLEVIATE OR COMBAT UNDERLYING CAUSES OF POVERTY AND RACISM?**

The participants had many ideas of what we can do to alleviate racism and poverty, most of which deal with government action. Programs and services for those suffering from poverty and racism often come out of community initiatives and non-profit organizations that do not have proper funding. It was suggested by the groups that municipal, provincial, and federal government take a leadership role and create infrastructure and institutions that are government run to help alleviate poverty. Government run initiatives will be more stable and often will have access to resources and expertise that community groups do not. This will allow the community to work more closely with government and create other initiatives, that otherwise would not exist.

The focus groups also felt that more funding was needed for social programs. Community groups often struggle with budget constraints and they are unable to initiate services and offer different means of education to raise awareness on the issues. Generally, social programs and initiatives begin within communities that are living in poverty, therefore, funding can be incredibly hard to

come by. With increased government support, organizations, such as the Saskatchewan Intercultural Association, will be able to help more families achieve success.

Education is also an area that can be improved upon to combat poverty and racism. As discussed earlier, access to post-secondary education is limited, mostly because of the high price of tuition fees. Increased government funding to post-secondary institutions will help alleviate the burden of student debt and more young people will be able to break the cycle of poverty and attain a post-secondary degree or certificate. Programs in high schools to help emphasize the benefit of attaining some form of higher learning are also important. School groups and social clubs that provide academic assistance and positive role models will help make young people realize their full potential so they can achieve long-term economic stability.

The participants also discussed programs for recent immigrants that will help make the transition to a new country less difficult. Services, such as those offered by SIA, should be explained to each and every immigrant so they understand where they can go if they require support. Assistance should be given to these individuals to help them find long-term jobs and if they are not qualified, education should be provided. Strict rules should also be placed on employers so they are required to follow equal hiring practices.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Although poverty and racism are incredibly large global issues, the participants of the event held by SIA were able to discuss some very difficult questions. Although there is no right or wrong answer and not one of the contributors was an expert, some very useful information arose that will aid in the fight against these social injustices. Throughout the discussions, many common themes arose that shape the following recommendations:

1. Greater emphasis on education for young people, and awareness for the broader community.
2. Increased government funding and more government involvement in programs and services that aim to help alleviate poverty and racism.
3. More adequate and affordable housing and daycare.
4. Greater emphasis and strict enforcement of gender equality.

## **About Saskatchewan Intercultural Association (SIA)**

SIA is a Saskatoon non-profit organization that provides services for immigrants and refugees. SIA is dedicated to the promotion of equal opportunities and fair treatment of all people in our culturally diverse society.

Established in 1964, Saskatchewan Intercultural Association is one of the oldest multicultural councils in Canada. It is built on a network of over 70 ethno-cultural groups representing approximately 10 000 people. SIA works to promote and provide programs and services in the areas of multilingual education, equity and anti-racism, and performing arts throughout Saskatchewan.

SIA seeks to eliminate discrimination and racism by working towards the promotion of intercultural relations, understanding and acceptance, and fostering changes in policies, programs, and legislation that will result in a fair and equitable society where all individuals can participate fully. The Association aims to recognize and support the right of every cultural group and individual to retain and develop their distinctive cultural identity, language and arts without political or social impediment.

### **SIA Broad Objectives:**

1. To promote co-operation and intercultural understanding among all ethnocultural groups within the community.
2. To promote and retain language and cultural traditions as essential components of multiculturalism.
3. To promote equality amongst all ethnocultural groups and individuals within the community.
4. To provide information and advisory services to ethnocultural groups and other interested organizations.

5. To enrich the common Canadian heritage through preservation, development, and promotion of the cultures and folk arts of all ethnocultural groups.
6. To develop and promote the traditional arts of member groups through the organization of cultural events and festivities.
7. To encourage individuals and groups to increase the opportunities available to explore their culture and to learn about that or other ethnocultural groups in the community.

SIA works in partnership with the community and immigrant-serving agencies, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, and a wide network of private government funders.<sup>v</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> Andrew Jackson. "Poverty and Racism". *Perception*. V. 24, 4. Canadian Council on Social Development. 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> Statistics Canada. 2006. *Low Income Cut-Offs for 2005 and Low Income Measures for 2004*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75F0002MIE – No. 004. Income Research Paper Series. Ottawa. 37 p.

<sup>iii</sup> Andrew Jackson. "Poverty and Racism". *Perception*. V. 24, 4. Canadian Council on Social Development. 2001.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Saskatchewan Intercultural Association. 2009. <<http://www.siassoc.sk.ca/>>