

Towards Social and Economic Inclusion: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty in Atlantic Canada*

Previous work done for and by Health Canada, Atlantic Region, has conceptualized poverty as “social and economic exclusion”, and has identified promoting social and economic inclusion as a strategy for building individual, family and community capacity and resiliency.

This conceptualization of poverty as social and economic exclusion is an outgrowth of investigations into child poverty which supported the understanding that child poverty is a function of family poverty; that is, children are poor because their families are poor. This research also indicated that families headed by women have lower incomes and are therefore more likely to be poorer than families headed by men. In this sense, child poverty is a function of women's poverty.

Poverty means more than a low income – it means lack of education, poor health, powerlessness, voicelessness, vulnerability and fear.

– World Bank

“Towards Social and Economic Inclusion: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty in Atlantic Canada” was established to develop an understanding of the impacts of social and economic exclusion of women and children and how inclusive public policy at the federal, provincial and community levels can lead to social inclusion. Since November 2000, the project's work has continued through a project called “A Just Society”.

The ‘Inclusion Project’, as this continuing work has come to be called, seeks to enhance the health of Atlantic Canadian children, women and families through knowledge synthesis, social action, and policy “uptake” reform. The Project seeks to develop a policy

model to address social and economic exclusion in Atlantic Canada. The Project fosters links, networks and partnerships across research community sectors and includes the public sector, communities, businesses, and non-governmental organizations.

During the first phase of the Inclusion Project, three reference groups were created in the four Atlantic Provinces. Each of the groups consist of key government and community-based representatives with experience and interests in public policy development.

Objectives for Development and Synthesis of Knowledge

Each reference group works towards the following objectives for development and synthesis of knowledge.

Objective 1: To test a consultation model to identify topics for a series of synthesis papers.

Objective 2: To sponsor preliminary work (research, synthesis and position papers) with the four provinces that generates new knowledge and insight on social and economic exclusion.

Objective 3: To develop and disseminate tools to facilitate public understanding and discussion of the key issues addressed by this project: barriers to participation; the impact of exclusion; and what policy is, how it is developed, and how it can be influenced.

***The ‘Inclusion Project’ is a partnership project facilitated by the MCEWH and funded by the Population and Public Health Branch of Health Canada, Atlantic Regional Office.**

Objective 4: To disseminate, in readable, usable and accessible form, research, synthesis and position papers, to community and public sector networks and contacts.

Objective 5: To provide opportunities for policy makers to work across sectors, assess theory, and practice and share knowledge.

Objective 6: To broaden networks of policymakers from all sectors who promote social and economic inclusion.

Social and Economic Inclusion in Practice

The **Reference Group in Newfoundland and Labrador** worked together to stimulate thinking not only for *Social Inclusion: On the Path to Social Development in Newfoundland and Labrador*, but also for the development of the Strategic Social Plan for their province. The Plan is a policy framework for integrating social and economic development by building on regional and community strengths and investing in people. Social Inclusion identifies examples of methods used in Newfoundland and around the world to achieve greater citizen participation in economic and social life at the community level.

The **Reference Group in New Brunswick** brought together many people involved with the 1998/99 Social Policy Renewal Process. The Reference Group recognized that by working together to develop *Social Investment: It's Time to Invest in New Brunswick's Children, Families and Communities*, they could also attempt to influence the thinking of their new government. The Reference Group also developed a volume of case studies from New Brunswick that show how government, communities and the private sector can work together to enhance social inclusion.

The **Reference Group in Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia** brought together community leaders and government representatives from the two provinces to learn from one another about the challenges of community-government collaboration. Their conclusions are published in *Health and Social Policy Are Everyone's Business: Collaboration and Social Inclusion in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island*.

Collectively, the reference groups have developed an education kit entitled *Basic Information about Social and Economic Inclusion*. In addition, MCEWH has published the Women's Health in Atlantic Canada Trilogy which includes Volume 2, *Inclusion: Will Our Social and Economic Strategies Take Us There?*.

The reference groups and other individuals have met periodically in a series of regional and provincial workshops since March 1999. A major workshop is planned for November 2001 to summarize all progress and learnings to date.

We know that "exclusion" is costly to society across the board – e.g., higher costs for health care, justice, social service and special education, lost economic productivity. Through the Inclusion Project, networks of policymakers from the Atlantic region have benefitted from opportunities to meet with each other, develop working relationships, and practice the application of inclusiveness in public policy. Their vision and proposed strategies will help us move towards a truly healthy civic society in which all citizens share a state of physical, mental, spiritual and social well being.

Materials and contacts related to social and economic exclusion and inclusion are available on the MCEWH website:

<http://www.medicine.dal.ca/mcewh/>

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