

An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion (R.S.Q., chapter L-7)

History

June 2009

Today, the links between poverty and health are well-established (Phipps, 2003) and the resulting inequalities in health have proven to be persistent (Whitehead & Dahlgren, 2007). Indeed, the population groups with the worst health status are materially underprivileged and socially excluded (De Koninck et al., 2008), leading many analysts to single out poverty as one of the primary determinants of health.

In 2002, the Government of Québec passed *An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* (R.S.Q., c. L-7). This legislation has received interest from the public health community because it is an example of healthy public policy.

This series of background papers presents the history that preceded this legislation, and highlights main elements of its application. In this background document, we address the following question:

- What are the events that led to the adoption of *An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*?

Introduction

The first legislation of its kind in North America, *An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* is the culmination of a series of events taking place over slightly more than a decade. These events mainly occurred in the province of Québec, but also on the international stage.

Although this Act was adopted unanimously by all parties in Québec's National Assembly (Québec's provincial legislature), its existence is largely due to social movements, notably the women's movement, as well as to the actions of community organizations and citizens' groups. These social actors mobilized in a structured fashion to influence the government's political agenda and to participate in developing public policy.

Timeline of key events

MARCH 1995

During the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen, governments and heads of State meet at the behest of the United Nations. The goal of the meeting is to "recognize the significance of social development and well-being for all and to give these goals the highest priority" (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1995). Eliminating poverty is one of the primary questions discussed during this event.

In Québec, the Government commits itself to putting concrete measures into operation over a ten-year period for each of the six themes adopted by the Summit. This includes the elimination of poverty (Ninacs, Béliveau & Gareau, 2003).

JUNE 1995

Organized by the *Fédération des Femmes du Québec* – FFQ (Québec Women's Federation) the *marche « Du pain et des roses »* (Bread and Roses March) brings together hundreds of women. Starting from Montréal and Rivière-du-Loup, these women march to Québec City to present their demands to the government: reduced poverty and violence against women.

This event receives widespread media coverage and is generally recognized as a pivotal moment in the history of the Act (W. Ninacs, personal communication, January 29, 2009). Indeed, during the march the women's movement asserts its demands for better social infrastructure and social programs (W. Ninacs, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

1996

In 1996, the Government of Québec organizes the *Sommet sur l'économie et l'emploi* (Summit Conference on the Economy and Employment). For the very first time, social and



community groups are invited to participate actively in a large-scale event, along with employers' organizations and unions.

It is during these meetings that the women's movement and community groups assert their "zero poverty" campaign, in response to the announcement of the government's "zero deficit" program. They demand that the elimination of the deficit "should not be allowed to worsen the situation of the poorest fifth of the population" (Ninacs et al., 2003, p.4).

1997

For one month, simultaneously to the reforms to social security that were under way, the Pastoral outreach to the Working Class Group (*Carrefour de pastorale en monde ouvrier – CAPMO*) sets up a street parliament called *Parlement de la rue*, camped in front of Québec's National Assembly. Their goal is to create a public space for debating and demanding concrete measures for fighting poverty. Representatives from community and citizens' groups participate in this event.

During these debates, the CAPMO launches the idea of creating an enabling bill to eliminate poverty in Québec, presenting protection from poverty as a basic human right (W. Ninacs, personal communication, January 29, 2009). The first draft of a document is written, and this draft document travels throughout the province, gathering over 1,200 supporters (*Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, 2000a).

1998

The discontent over the Government's adoption of Bill 186 – *An Act Respecting Income Security* (R.S.Q., c.S-3.1.1), considered by its critics to further impoverish those in situations of poverty (Noël, 1998), as well as support for legislation to eliminate poverty lead popular and community groups to come together to form a vast coalition: the *Collectif pour une loi sur l'élimination de la pauvreté* (Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty).

COLLECTIVE FOR A LAW ON THE ELIMINATION OF POVERTY

In the beginning, the Collective is mainly comprised of feminist, union, religious and anti-poverty organizations. Over time, many other kinds of groups join: professional and students' federations; popular,

community and cooperative groups; and international development, local economic development and human rights advocacy organizations (*Collectif...*, 2000b).

Actors from the health sector also join the Collective: the Québec Nurses Federation (*Fédération des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec – FIIQ*)¹, the Québec Coalition of Mental Health Resources (*Regroupement des ressources alternatives en santé mentale du Québec – RRASMQ*), and the Québec Coalition of Community Organizers in Local Community Services Centres and Residential and Long-term Care Centres (*Regroupement québécois des intervenantes et intervenants en action communautaire en CLSC et en centre de santé*).

The Collective opts "for a strategy involving action based on citizenship and popular education" (Ninacs et al., 2003, p.6), bringing the debate to the citizens of Québec so that it won't be monopolized by pressure groups. The goal is to unite as many people as possible behind one bill and, above all, to ensure that impoverished people can participate directly in its formulation. After two years, the Collective had "conducted one of the largest operations involving consultation and promotion in the annals of social action in Québec" (Ninacs et al., 2003, p.6).

A fund to fight poverty and social exclusion is granted from the government and various other contributions provide the necessary financing for a small, five-member work team that is charged with the mission of facilitating the consultation and compiling the results (Labrie, 2008, p.12). Specific tools are also developed to deal with the multitude of comments, opinions and proposals gathered, allowing for the organization and summarizing. One of these tools is a database nicknamed "the Cauldron": an innovative tool that helps synthesise thousands of opinions into a framework, allowing the Collective to draft the legislation according to the viewpoints expressed by citizens (W. Ninacs, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

1999-2000

In December 1999, the proposal for a bill to eliminate poverty is drafted. It is then launched by the Collective in front of the Montréal Stock Exchange,

¹ Now called the *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec* (FIQ).

and goes on to become the subject of consultation throughout Québec. For three months, 200 popular parliamentary sessions are organized so that citizens, social and community groups and people living in poverty may learn about the proposed bill and discuss it (Ninacs et al., 2003).

This process of participative democracy results in the drafting and adoption of a Proposal for a Bill on the Elimination of Poverty, written in the form of a conventional government bill.

MARCH 8, 2000 – OCTOBER 17, 2000

Thousands of women from all over the world participate in the *World March of Women against poverty and violence*. The idea of this march emerged in Québec, two years earlier (FFQ, n/a).

SEPTEMBER 2000

The United Nations General Assembly adopts the Millennium Goals, the primary objective being the fight against extreme poverty and hunger (Noël, 2006).

NOVEMBER 2000

In November of 2000, the Collective tables a petition that had been launched in 1998 and had since been signed by 215,307 people. The petition demands that legislation be passed to eliminate poverty and proposes principles that could be applied to achieve this goal. This initiative obtains the support of over 1,800 organizations of all kinds, throughout the province of Québec (Ninacs et al., 2003).

The same day that the petition is tabled, members of the National Assembly of Québec (MNAs) vote in a resolution demanding that Government adopts a global strategy for fighting poverty. The resolution uses some of the principles stipulated in the proposal from the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty (Poitras, 2007).

MARCH 2001

In March of 2001, Lucien Bouchard, the Premier of Québec, steps down and Bernard Landry, the provincial Finance Minister replaces him. Upon taking up his position, the new premier announces that he will make the fight against poverty a priority for Government. He appoints a minister delegated to the fight against poverty and makes the Government's strategy public in a document entitled,

“Don't Leave Anyone Out!” (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale [MESS]), 2001).

A consultation process is then initiated by the Government in all 17 regions of Québec, with over 1,000 organizations province wide (Michaud, Gagnon & Gauthier, 2006).

An inter-ministerial committee is created to bring ministries and organizations with an anti-poverty focus to the table, and a research program is launched to support the Government in its initiatives (MESS, 2006).

JUNE 2002

In June of 2002, the Government unveils its *Provincial strategy to fight poverty and social exclusion* (MESS, 2002) and announces that a Parliamentary Commission will be held from October 1 to November 19, 2002.

Over the course of the Commission, some 135 people, groups and organizations, including the members of the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty, are heard and 166 memoirs are tabled vis-à-vis the bill.

During this time, the Collective multiplies its efforts to amend the government's proposal. Notably, it uses its usual method of “writing MNAs as often as possible, updating them, confronting them, meeting them when possible, always adopting a non-partisan approach in which everything may be said and nothing is negotiated” (Labrie, 2008, p.17). The Collective also organizes a one-week citizen's forum in front of the National Assembly while the Parliamentary Commission is taking place.

DECEMBER 2002

On December 13, 2002, the National Assembly unanimously passes Bill 112, *An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*.

The Collective applauds the Act, but with the following caveat:

“The Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty salutes the unanimous and historic adoption by the National Assembly of an improved Bill 112, which introduces the perspective of permanent and concerted action towards a poverty-free Québec. The Collective is still awaiting the concrete measures that will increase the income of the poorest members

of society and repair, in the short term, the deficit in terms of coverage of the most basic needs that affects hundreds of thousands of people in Québec. To this end, the Collective insists that the action plan, which must quickly follow this legislation, seriously attack this problem. The Collective requests that the government immediately prepare budgetary forecasts in consequence of this law and that the sums required for the application of this Bill be allocated as a matter of priority” (Collectif...,2002, in Ninacs et al., 2003, p.9).

Most sections of the Act come into effect in March of 2003.

In 2003, after the Act is passed, the Collective for the Elimination of Poverty in Québec is renamed the *Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté* (Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec).

From that time on, the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec defines itself as “a movement and a space for citizens to generate the conditions necessary to lay the permanent groundwork for a poverty-free Québec. It sets out to work in a pluralist, non-partisan fashion with people living in poverty and any person or organization wishing to achieve this common goal” (Collectif..., 2004, editor’s translation).

MARCH 2003

A provincial election is called by Premier Bernard Landry. His party, the *Parti québécois*, loses to the Québec Liberal Party, which forms a majority government in the National Assembly. Jean Charest becomes provincial premier.

MARCH 2004

On March 30 of the following year, the 2004-2005 provincial budget is released. It allocates 2.5 billion dollars over five years (2004-2009) to the fight against poverty and contains concrete measures that support key elements of the *Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*, which is launched a few days later (W. Ninacs, personal communication, January 29, 2004).

APRIL 2004

The final version of the action plan, entitled *Reconciling Freedom and Social Justice: Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* (*Ministère de l’Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille*, 2004) is made

public on April 2, 2004 by the *Ministère de l’Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille* (now the *Ministère de l’Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale*). This Action Plan focuses on two objectives: to create an incentive for as many low-income citizens as possible to enter the work force, and to provide the poorest people in the province with an income that will, in principle, cover their basic needs (Ninacs et al., 2003, p.9).

2005

The Government implements the *Comité consultatif de lutte contre la pauvreté et l’exclusion sociale* (Advisory Committee on the Prevention of Poverty and Social Exclusion). In the spring of the same year, the *Ministère de l’Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale* creates the *Centre d’étude sur la pauvreté et l’exclusion* (CEPE) (Centre for studies on poverty and exclusion).

2005 – PRESENT: APPLICATION OF THE ACT TO COMBAT POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Up to the present day, the application of *An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* has led to gains, particularly for families (Fortin, 2008), but also to deception (Labrie, 2008). Indeed, the Government has been accused of inaction with regards to the social and fiscal measures needed to eliminate poverty, and criticised for the adoption of policies that, some say, contradict the principles of this law (W. Ninacs, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

The Collective continues to carry out its awareness-raising activities.

For more information about the Application of the Act, please see NCCHPP’s Background Document: *An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion (R.S.Q., chapter L-7): Highlights of the Act and Its Application*.

Conclusion

The events leading up to the adoption of the Act, as well as the fact that it has endured despite the changing of the guard in government, indicate that many groups in Québec share the goal of a society with less poverty. Still, despite the gains made, poverty remains an ongoing reality for 11.5% of the population who live below the Statistics Canada

poverty line (Fortin, 2008). Consequently, the struggle against poverty and social exclusion continues to drive initiatives from social movements and citizens' groups in Québec.

It is too early to draw any conclusions regarding the Act's effectiveness on either poverty or health. However, because poverty is a principle determinant of health, public health actors have a role to play in promoting and monitoring the application of this anti-poverty legislation. In addition, the participative methods used to involve citizens living in poverty in the policy-making process are original and could potentially be adapted to other healthy public policy situations.

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Web Sites

- Centre d'étude sur la pauvreté et l'exclusion: <http://www.cepe.gouv.qc.ca/>.
- Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec: <http://www.pauvrete.qc.ca>.
- Comité consultatif de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale: http://www.cclp.gouv.qc.ca/index_en.asp.
- Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale: http://www.mess.gouv.qc.ca/Index_en.asp.

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