



*“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice.  
It is the protection of fundamental human rights.”*

*-Nelson Mandela, 2006*

December 10, 2006

At this time of year, the contrast between abundance and deprivation in our world is glaring. In our own country, the disparity between the wealthy and the poor is disturbing and the gap appears to be widening.

The 2006 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty recently released by Campaign 2000 observed that, despite strong economic growth and job creation, Canada has seen a steady increase in the number of children living in working families that are unable to lift themselves out of poverty. One in four children in First Nations communities and forty percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children live in poverty. Earlier this year, a U.N. Committee called Canada’s housing and homelessness record a “national emergency.”

Although not often thought of as a human rights issue, poverty can be a cause and a consequence of human rights violations. Since December 1966, economic, social and cultural rights have been recognized by the United Nations as fundamental, universal human rights. Canada and Saskatchewan have international treaty obligations with respect to their protection. Yet, the enforcement of those rights remains inadequate.

There is a need for greater human rights protection for the poor. Like other disadvantaged groups currently protected by human rights legislation, poor Canadians live with negative stereotypes and social stigma, and routinely experience prejudice. Differences in social and economic status are as much a source of inequality as ancestry, gender and disability. The poor are marginalized through unequal access to resources and subject to widespread systemic discrimination in their dealings with public and private institutions.

In Saskatchewan, human rights legislation protects individuals who experience discrimination because they are in receipt of provincial social assistance. Unfortunately, this protection is too narrow to address discrimination experienced by the working poor or individuals receiving other kinds of public assistance. Some jurisdictions in Canada have gone further by prohibiting discrimination based upon “social condition.” This ground serves to challenge stereotypes about the poor and to protect the destitute from discrimination.

Our primary goal should be to eradicate poverty but, until we do, we need to ensure that our human rights protections are broad enough to include those most vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination and prejudice because of their social and economic situation.

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