

Towards a Second Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion

Rendez-vous de la solidarité 2009

Québec acting against poverty

Consultation workbook

Message from the Minister

Dear Partners,

Québec needs every segment of civil society in continuing the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Hence this call to be part of a gathering of socioeconomic players—the Rendez-vous de la solidarité 2009—in order to engage in constructive dialogue on two major challenges, the well-being and the inclusion of people in vulnerable situations.

Combating poverty and social exclusion means working together to bring out the best in our society so that these men, women and children all have the right to develop their full potential. This consultation is an ideal opportunity for putting our spirit of solidarity to use by pooling the expertise and will deployed to achieve greater social justice and respect for human dignity.

In recent years, Québec has made great strides and a name for itself on the international scene for the dynamism of its action. We owe this progress to those who have pressed their determination into service for their fellow citizens and to the humanity displayed daily by our institutions and our partners so that all Quebecers can realize their dreams and show what they can do.

Since the first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, which has nearly run its course, there have been a number of advances. But to make Québec one of the industrialized societies with the least number of persons in situations of poverty, we must continue to move ahead and to work as one towards reaching this common goal. My hope is that the Rendez-vous de la solidarité 2009 will enable Québec to further marshal the forces against poverty.

Using this consultation workbook as a starting point, you are being asked to share your knowledge, tell us about your experiences, and suggest innovative solutions. This is the basis on which we wish to create a forum for positive and enriching discussion. Thanks to your contribution, we will be better equipped to improve our public policies and ways of proceeding so that our society, unique in the Americas, continues to progress.

We want to work with you to develop the solidarity that propels us forward. Our society, with the regions and communities that compose it, must prepare for entering a new phase in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. We want to act alongside you. This is why your contribution to this consultation is crucial.

SAM HAMAD

Minister of Employment and Social Solidarity and Minister responsible for the Capitale-Nationale region

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Background

Social inclusion: A core value of Québec society

At the beginning of 2000, Québec established an anti-poverty law, the *Act to combat poverty and social exclusion*, given unanimous assent by the National Assembly. This statute was the first of its kind in Canada. In 2004, the government released a first action plan that improved government cohesion in the fight against poverty and that came with investments of more than \$4.5 billion over six years in anti-poverty measures. These investments complemented a suite of measures, programs and initiatives that had already been implemented by the State and by a set of partners in response to the vast array of needs in our society.

Québec's commitment to Quebecers who have the least is emblematic of the collective values that underpin our society—solidarity, tolerance, social justice, human rights, generational equity, and generosity. These values are also the basis for the contribution of numerous socioeconomic players from different spheres who are determined to reduce social disparities as much as possible.

The war against social and economic exclusion is a huge issue because the effects of poverty are not limited to insufficient income. They also spawn a great number of social and health problems that can be so acute as to reduce life expectancy. It is a fact that decreased poverty in Western societies has produced positive effects such as higher graduation rates, less crime, better health, and social unity. Efforts on this front also empower more citizens to find a place for themselves within society and to contribute to creating common wealth which, in turn, fosters a better socioeconomic climate and generates greater prosperity.

Today, the action undertaken to promote society-wide economic self-sufficiency and social inclusion is part of a sustainable approach to development and is aimed at long-term and inter-generational effects. The fight against poverty and inequality is as critical a component of the Government Sustainable Development Strategy as economic development and environmental protection.

Diverse needs

A number of factors are behind the situations of poverty or exclusion experienced by individuals, families and, at times, communities. These factors stem in part from individual characteristics such as knowing how to enter the workforce and having the qualifications for a specific job, or the presence of a social or family network, or the lack thereof. Then there are environmental factors such as the economic context, service accessibility and even natural disasters.

The result is that poverty has many faces. Some, such as homelessness, are more obvious, and others, such as low income, mental illness, drug addiction, and lives marked by broken relationships, violence, isolation and exclusion, are not as readily visible.

The needs of persons in situations of poverty are not the same across the board. They vary according to age, sex, region, and cultural affiliation. Certain determinants make it possible to establish the causes of poverty and target action based on the needs of each individual.

Matching needs with means of action

The goals that Québec has chosen with regard to equity and wealth sharing must be weighted against its ability to respond to the diversity of its needs. Our efforts are paying off. While Québec is not one of the richest provinces in Canada, its low-income rate is among the country's lowest.

However, there is full awareness that our means are finite. This means that, first, society must be ready to show solidarity with the people who need it most, and, second, that it must be able to determine its action priorities. The best results will be obtained if we have the same objectives and join forces in order to attain them.

Collective wealth: A joint response adapted to needs

Given the multi-faceted nature of poverty and exclusion, the task is enormous. Action must occur with individuals and communities and span from the grassroots level to the government level, and current problems and prevention of further problems must be attacked simultaneously. Given the size of this challenge, the government cannot act alone. We are already witnessing the involvement of more and more of Québec's social and economic stakeholders—businesses, unions, local communities, community organizations, advocacy groups, and persons in situations of poverty. In recent years, the latter have shown that they want to take control of their lives and take steps towards financial self-sufficiency. Clearly, their courage cannot help but inspire admiration and spur all economic and social players to give them even stronger support as they strive towards fulfilment and self-reliance. We have also seen the will of the various parts of the community to invest in its development and to support its citizens. Initiatives to counter

poverty and social exclusion in Québec, some of which have yielded remarkable results, have proliferated in recent years.

Recognition of the need for multi-dimensional action and shared responsibility necessarily entails the ability of all instances to work in unison so that the action that occurs is harmonized and aimed at a common goal. This situation makes action organization and logistics a key subject that must be addressed. Consequently, one of the main challenges is to coordinate all the action undertaken by a multitude of players who may not be working in tandem. Therein lies the primary role the government is called upon to play and in which a set of partners are asked to become involved. An inter-departmental committee is tasked to coordinate action to combat poverty and social exclusion, but a better fit among all the partners concerned seems necessary nonetheless.

A few issues and numerous challenges

The extent and the diversity of the needs of individuals, families and their communities are relatively well known and documented, and the importance of acting collectively and in keeping with our capacities is becoming more and more of an accepted fact. As a society, Québec faces numerous challenges in terms of the action it will undertake and the choices it will make in the next few years. By looking at the progress made thus far, at needs, and at the necessity for better joint action and coordination, a picture emerges of the major issues of the near future:

- The necessity to work together to clearly define the needs of individuals, families and communities;
- Consideration of the daily lives of seniors in situations of poverty and social exclusion;
- The commitment of all Quebecers in order to foster inclusion and reduce poverty;
- Prioritizing action based on the resources available to Québec society;
- Better coordination of action by the government, its partners and all the players concerned;
- Deployment of policies and action in the regions.

Consultation: A far-reaching phased process

The first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion has produced positive results and has already improved the situation of Québec's most impoverished families. We have reason to be proud of what has been achieved. However, much remains to be done, and the second action plan provides the opportunity to, together, re-align our aims and objectives.

The government cannot act alone to improve the living conditions of individuals and communities and to support the latter in their many initiatives. An entire nexus of stakeholders cutting across all of Québec society, such as unions, management, community organizations, volunteers and charities, must be enlisted.

The phased consultations organized by the government are designed to glean the viewpoints of the various players and to foster reflection and constructive dialogue on their respective roles.

The Rendez-vous de la solidarité nationale, to which you are convened today, invites the above instances to give their opinion on the best ways of promoting social inclusion and reducing poverty. Public on-line consultations are also planned to enable all interested parties to contribute to the deliberations on this collective challenge. Given the specificity of Native peoples, the government will also meet with the organizations that represent these groups.

Lastly, given the importance of local and regional action to combat poverty and social exclusion, every region will be an integral part of the consultative process. The Rendez-vous de la solidarité régionaux will be held in the autumn to enable players to describe the situation in their region and to discuss ways of ensuring better synergy among the various stakeholders.

You are therefore summoned to think about what each of you can do to help Québec move towards greater inclusion for all and to assess how we can work together to maximize our efforts to make Québec one of the industrialized societies with the least number of people in situations of poverty.

Objectives of the Rendez-vous

The Rendez-vous de la solidarité national are ideal forums for examining the inroads made to date in terms of combating poverty and social exclusion and for together determining the priority issues for the next few years.

The *Act to combat poverty and social exclusion* is clear on the conditions for achieving greater social justice and for improving equal opportunity in Québec—to ensure the development and prosperity of all Quebecers, everyone must roll up his or her sleeves and must unite in eradicating poverty and social exclusion.

This Québec-wide consultation is aimed at:

- bringing together all the players concerned—government bodies, employer associations, unions, umbrella community organization and advocacy groups, social economy enterprises, charities, citizen representatives and representatives of people in situations of poverty;
- establishing constructive dialogue and creating consensus around certain thrusts for action;
- gathering opinions on the best ways of continuing to fight poverty and social exclusion.

To this end, the Minister of Employment and Social Solidarity is asking provincial-level partners to discuss four themes related to the fight against poverty and social exclusion:

- Employment, income, education and training;
- Living conditions for people of all ages;
- Social inclusion and citizen participation;
- Territorial action to combat poverty and social exclusion.

Poverty in Québec: Clear gains

Poverty is multi-faceted, and the indicators used to understand it or keep track of trends are equally numerous. One of these indicators is the Market Basket Measure (MBM), recommended by the Centre d'étude sur la pauvreté et l'exclusion (CEPE) as a reference measure for monitoring situations of poverty in terms of the coverage of basic needs.¹ The purpose of the MBM is not to establish a measurement for basic needs, but rather, to compare provincial low-income rates. The measure corresponds to the value of a basket of goods and services that enable proper nutrition according to Health Canada standards, and the purchase of basic commodities (clothing, housing as a tenant, transportation, personal care and household cleaning items, furniture, telephone, recreation and school supplies). A household is considered as having a low income if its disposable income, after mandatory deductions and other amounts such as child support, non-refundable childcare costs, and recommended but uncovered healthcare, is below the MBM calculated for a reference family in a region similar in size to that of the reference region. The MBM varies according to household size and region. From 2000 to 2006, there was a general decrease in Québec, meaning that fewer people were below the low-income cut-off level.

Low-income rate: A downward trend

MBM-based low-income measure figures were down overall from 2000 to 2006.² Were it not for the Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, which made it possible to improve the disposable incomes of individuals on low incomes, the MBM-based low-income rate in Québec would have been in the vicinity of 11.6% in 2005 and 11% in 2006, compared with 9.7% and 9.8% respectively. Put differently, were it not for the measures written into the last action plan, slightly over 147,000 more people would have had low incomes in 2005 and a little more than 119,000 in 2006.

Despite these general decreases from 2000 and 2006 (*see Chart 1*), a closer look at low-income rates shows that there are remaining disparities between different segments of the population:

- Children (persons under age 18) in low-income families: Their low-income rate dropped from 15.8% to 9.4% between 2000 and 2006;
- Unattached individuals: Their low-income rate continued highest (23.2% in 2006 compared with that of families composed of at least two persons, which was 7% in 2006). Unattached individuals also accounted for the bulk of low-income earners according to MBM thresholds (more than 32% in 2005) and unattached elderly females, who are twice as likely as elderly males to experience poverty, were particularly affected. Currently, 43% of women aged 55 to 64 earn less than \$10,000;
- Single-parent families: This group's low-income rate enjoyed a significant decrease (from 37.9% to 21.6%) from 2000 to 2006, a trend repeated in single-parent families headed by a woman (from 41.6% to 25.9% during the same period). However, this rate was still three times higher than that of single-parent families headed by a man (8.3% in 2006).

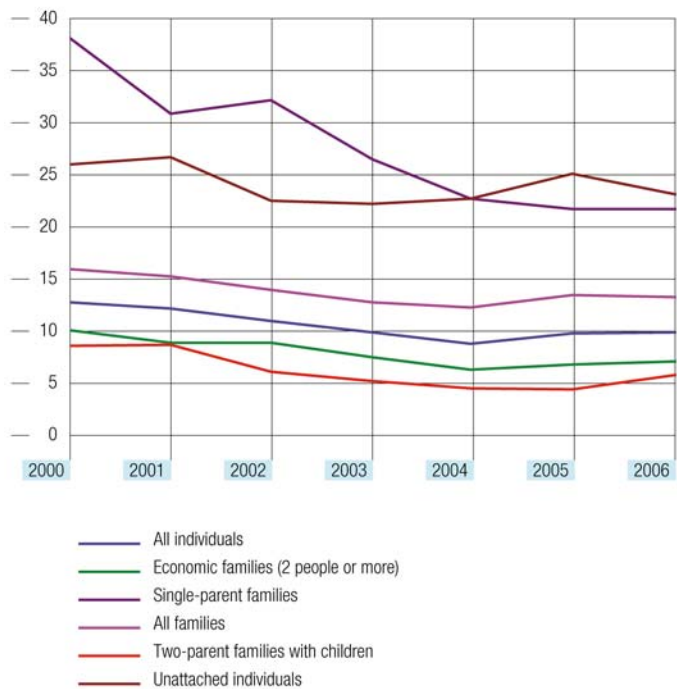
Between 2000 and 2006, public policies to reduce low-income rates had a bigger effect on families with children than on other household categories, especially unattached individuals (*Chart 1*). However, the low-income rate of single mothers remained very high.

¹ One of the reasons why the government chose the MBM is because it takes government household-income support programs into account and because it can be broken down by region and can be gender-differentiated.

² The slight MBM decrease in 2005 and 2006 was due in part to a greater increase in MBM thresholds than the income increase of low-income households in 2005 and 2006. This threshold increase was greater in Québec City and Montréal than in other Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) because of the rising cost of housing, which occurred more rapidly in these two cities. However, this increase has no statistical significance.

Chart 1

Low-income rate according to the Market Basket Measure (MBM), by family unit type, Québec, 2000-2006¹



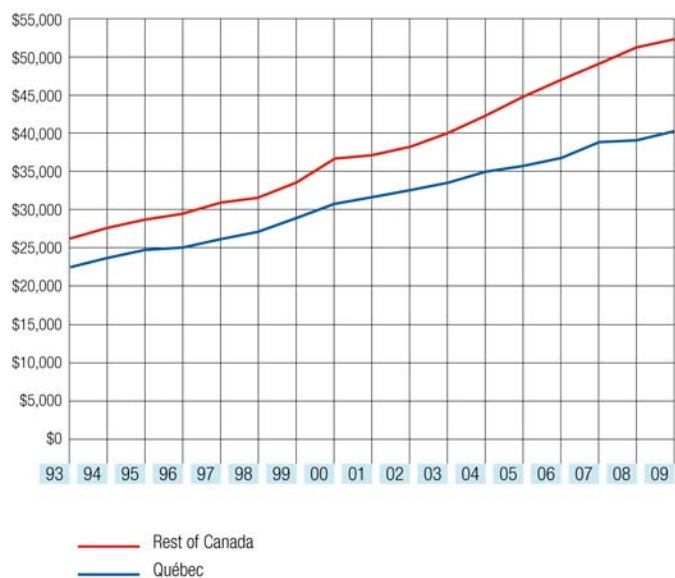
¹ According to data from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

MBM-based interprovincial comparisons

Québec, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) below the Canadian average (*Chart 2*), is not among the richest provinces in Canada. Despite this, the low-income rate of its citizens is one of the best in the country. Québec's efforts to improve the living conditions of people in situations of poverty are seen as particularly effective viewed from a Canadian vantage point.

Chart 2

GDP trends at market price per capita²

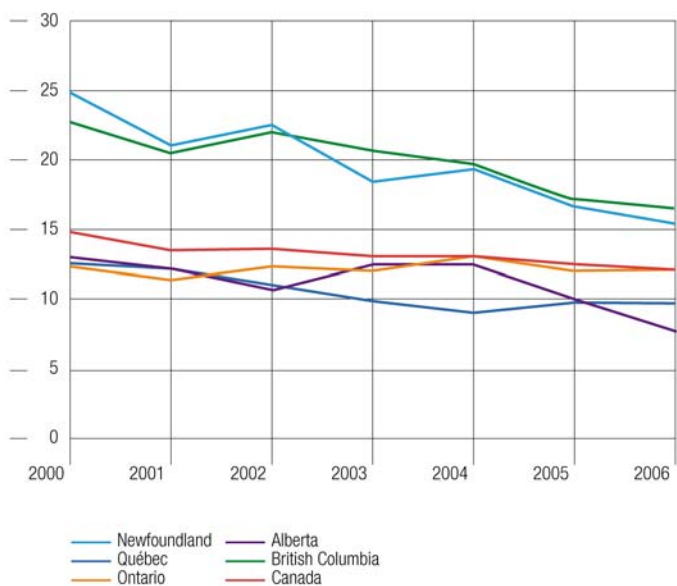


² Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Tableau statistique canadien*, January 2009, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 23.

Québec fares well compared with the other provinces (*Chart 3*) in MBM terms. The more dramatic drop in the low-income rate in Québec than in Canada as a whole between 2000 and 2006 occurred for individuals and families alike. Note, however, that in recent years there has been an upward trend overall, with Alberta and Québec leading.

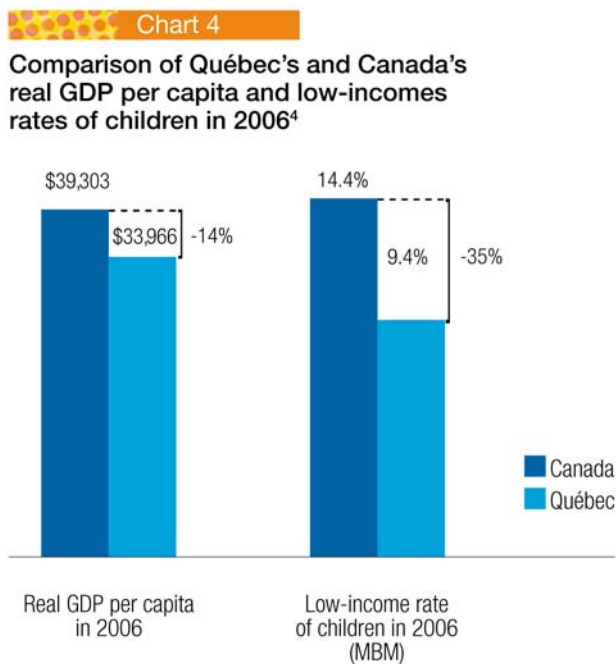
Québec's position ahead of several other provinces and all of Canada and the positive trend in terms of low income is due at least in part to interprovincial differences in work income supplements, more targeted social investments for persons in situations of poverty, families with children in particular, and Québec's progressive tax system.

Chart 3
Low-income rate of individuals based on the Market Basket Measure (MBM), Canada and selected provinces, 2000-2006³



³ Source: *Low Income in Canada: 2000-2006 Using the Market Basket Measure*, HRSDC, December 2008; DGARES compilations, March 2009.

The situation of Québec children is also better than that of Canadian children as a whole. Québec’s family policy is proving to be very effective because the low-income MBM-based rate of children is markedly lower than that of Canadian children overall (*Chart 4*), even if Québec’s real GDP per capita was below the Canadian average in 2006. Efforts to improve the situation of families and children are working and will also generate positive long-term effects.



⁴ Source: *2009-2010 Budget. Status Report on Québec’s Family Policy*, Government of Québec, 2009, p.19.

Social assistance

Available data on the number of social assistance recipients confirms the progress made in the fight against poverty. From March 2003 to March 2008, the rate of recipients (adults and children) went from 8.4% to 7.5% of the total population under 65 years old.

For the same period, the number of social assistance recipients by sex, program and type of limitation, along with the social assistance rate of individuals aged 18 to 64, also posted a steady decrease. By 2008, the rate of female recipients, slightly higher than that of men early in the reference period, was slightly below that of men.

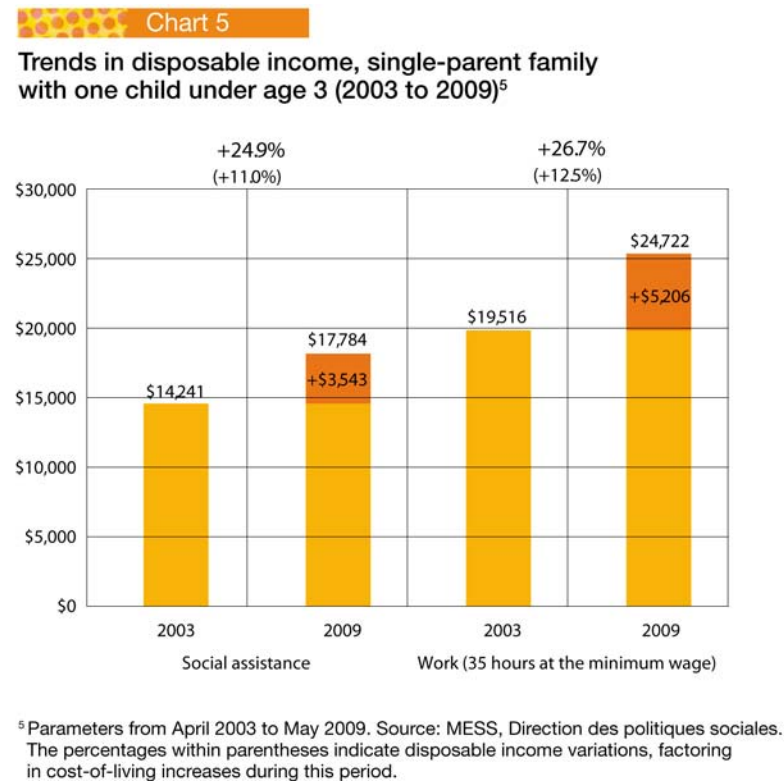
Unemployment rate

Labour market trends are often directly correlated with reduced poverty. Like the prevailing patterns in

social assistance, the trend in the unemployment rate by administrative region, Census Metropolitan Area, and Québec as a whole was favourable between 1998 and 2008, before the first signs of the economic downturn. While some gains were recorded, the resource regions continued to be where the highest rates occurred, for example, 17.3% in 2008 in the Gaspésie and Îles-de-la-Madeleine region and 11.2% in the Côte-Nord and Nord-du-Québec region, compared with the Québec average of 7.2%. Greater Montréal's unemployment rate decreased from 9.7% in 1998 to 7.4% in 2008.

Trends in household income in Québec

The suite of measures introduced since 2004 meant improved disposable incomes for numbers of households. A case in point is last-resort assistance single-parent families with a child under age 5. Their disposable income rose 11% between 2003 and 2009, a 24.9% gain in current dollars. The real disposable income of single-parent families with a child under age 5 in which the adult had a full-time minimum-wage job increased by 12.5%,³ for a difference of 26.7% in current dollars (*Chart 5*).



Despite sizable gains for certain households, our work is far from over. Take, for example, the results of the first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, which point to the vulnerability of unattached individuals. Income support measures were good for families, but unattached individuals did not do nearly as well (*see Chart 6*). Between 2003 and 2009, the income of single adults who were social assistance recipients rose by 7.7%, for a 4.4% decrease, taking into account cost-of-living increases. In contrast, unattached individuals with jobs saw their real income rise by 10.4% between 2003 and 2009, for a 24.2% gain in current dollars.⁴

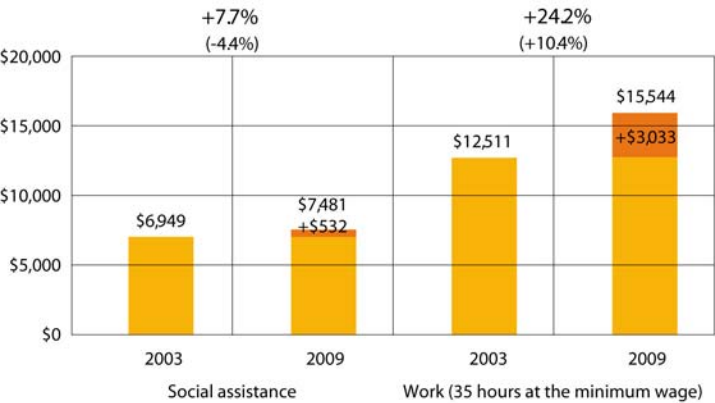
Another finding is that unattached individuals account for the majority of last-resort financial assistance recipients. Solutions to the problems of unattached individuals are not simple because the category encompasses so many different forms of poverty, one of the extreme ones being homelessness.

The Commitment for Employment, launched in March 2008, and the additions announced under the 2009-2010 Budget, provide unattached Social Assistance Program recipients the opportunity to increase their disposable income by more than 30% through employment assistance allowances that support their efforts.

³ According to a simulation based on a 35-hour work week at the minimum wage in effect as of May 1, 2009 (\$9 an hour).
⁴ According to a simulation based on a 35-hour work week at the minimum wage in effect as of May 1, 2009 (\$9 an hour).

Chart 6

Trends in disposable income, unattached individual (2003 to 2009)⁶



⁶ Parameters from April 2003 to May 2009. Source: MESS, Direction des politiques sociales. The percentages within parentheses indicate disposable income variations, factoring in cost-of-living increases during this period.

Report on the first Government Action Plan: Heartening results

The data presented in the above sections indicate that the set of measures in the first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, stemming from a stature assented to by the National Assembly in December 2002, contributed to putting Québec significantly closer to achieving its goal of being one of the industrialized societies with the least number of persons in situations of poverty by 2013. The measures contained in this first action plan made it possible to improve life for thousands of Quebecers in situations of poverty.⁵

These results are a powerful argument in favour of continued efforts by all players in Québec in order to maintain the foothold acquired in recent years and to put achievement of the goal of a poverty-free Québec within nearer reach. This was the rationale for the inter-departmental work leading up to drafting of a second action plan. However, the government action thus undertaken is only one element of Québec’s strategy to combat poverty, and the support of all players is needed. The Rendez-vous de la solidarité national is an expression of the will of the government to bring together all of Québec society in implementing action aimed at improving the living conditions of persons in situations of poverty and at fostering their social inclusion.

⁵ Appendices 1 and 2 present the main measures implemented under the first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Discussions

The preceding pages provided a clearer picture of the phenomenon of poverty in Québec and described the progress made in recent years, thanks notably to the measures included in the first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion. The participation of provincial-level players in action to improve the living conditions and the social inclusion of the most disadvantaged Quebecers is crucial to achieving our common objective of moving towards a poverty-free and more inclusive Québec.

The four themes proposed and the action priorities subsumed under them will serve as guidelines enabling each of the players to take stock of the first phase of the National Strategy to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, which will end in March 2010, to share ideas about the action to be taken, and to come to a common understanding as to the direction of the next action plan. Participation in the forums is also intended as a way of crafting and stimulating more active collaboration and coordination in deploying our common efforts.

Each of the themes comes with a section that draws attention to the main issues looming on the horizon and with questions to fuel discussion by the participants.

Theme 1: Income, employment, education and training

1.1 Income

As pointed out in a recent Advisory Opinion by the Comité consultatif de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale (CCLP),⁶ one of the most important levers in preventing and combating poverty, especially that of groups at risk for persistent poverty, is improved family and personal income.

For numbers of Quebecers, seeing to their basic needs, such as housing, food, clothing, and hygiene, is daunting. The fight against poverty must consist of but not be limited to the improvement of disposable income. This can be done in a number of ways. Some, such as measures to enhance income, act directly on the economic situation of individuals and families. Others, such as employability and training measures, are aimed at helping individuals work towards self-sufficiency.

1.2 Income improvement via employment

In Québec, income is closely related to training and employment, which, to a large extent, are interdependent. Generally, a person's income is determined by his or her job, which, in turn, is often related to the person's level of education. These three elements—education, employment and income—are among the main thrusts of action in improving the living conditions of underprivileged Quebecers.

The Government of Québec sees education, training and employment as central to the main solutions to the economic woes of many people in situations of poverty. This is consistent with the thinking of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which maintains that the best way of reconciling economic progress and social progress is to give jobs to the unemployed and to help persons in situations of disadvantage acquire the qualifications required for them to be better paid.⁷

Disposable income models speak volumes about the advantages of having a job, even at the minimum wage. For example, simulations for a single-parent family in 2009 with a three-year-old child show an annual income of \$24,722 if the adult has a full-time minimum-wage job, compared with \$17,784 if the same family receives social assistance.⁸ Work income, even from a minimum-wage job, is better at procuring decent living conditions for Québec households. This is precisely why the government has made employment a key weapon in its war against poverty. This is also why the Commitment for Employment, unveiled in March 2008, was created. Announcement of implementation of the Commitment for Employment last March corroborated this pledge.

The government goal of stepping up participation in the labour market remains valid even if labour market conditions stand to deteriorate in the coming months. Labour market slumps will impinge only slightly on the market's long-term prospects, characterized by greying of the population and a foreseeable decline in the pool of working-age Quebecers, which could lead to workforce shortages. This configuration is an opportunity for Québec to increase job participation as much as possible, notably that of older workers who do not want to retire. Since, within the next 20 years, the percentage of Quebecers 65 years old and over will increase from 12% to 24%, Québec should follow the lead of a number of other societies by extending the work life of retired seniors who are available in that capacity. The benefits are reduced isolation, better self-esteem, ongoing achievement, and improved economic circumstances.

⁶ CCLP, *Prevention of Persistent Poverty. Rethinking our Approach: A Wise and Human Choice*, March 2009. This Advisory Opinion was produced at the request of the Minister.

⁷ OECD, *Extending Opportunities: How Active Social Policy Can Benefit Us All*, OCDE Publications, 2005.

⁸ According to a simulation based on a 35-hour work week at the minimum wage in effect as of May 1, 2009 (\$9 an hour). These projections take tax measures and income-support transfers from various sources into account. See Chart 5 on page xxx.

In conclusion, medium-term workforce prospects, combined with the imperative to combat poverty and social exclusion, are a call to act vigorously on the job front.

1.2.1 Support on the road to employment

The government’s idea of acting to improve income via employment necessarily involves better support for last-resort financial assistance recipients. Since the adoption in 2005 of a more incentive-based approach, new support measures have been introduced and implemented, notably through financial rewards. The purpose of this approach, which is based on our confidence in the potential of these recipients, is to stimulate their voluntary efforts because they are the ones most able to turn their and their family’s situation around.

For some recipients, entering or re-entering the labour market is not all that difficult. In such cases, encouragement to join the workforce occurs through a set of instruments such as active employment measures ⁹ and tax measures.

Others however, even without a severely limited capacity for employment, have a distance to go before they can enter or re-enter the workforce. The Social Assistance and Support Program, designed to respond to the special needs of these people, provides assistance and support to enable them to overcome the obstacles to their social and occupational development and their social inclusion.

Adoption of a more incentive-based approach has meant a new way of considering the support given on the road to employment. Bear in mind that since 2005 Québec has been one of the few societies that has an approach of this kind. However, the rate of participation in active employment measures does not always meet expectations.

This means that there must be a better balance as regards the groups targeted by incentives. In recent years, the pace at which reliance on last-resort financial assistance has decreased has not been uniform, with the number of recipient households with children contracting more quickly than that of unattached individuals. Participation in work incentive measures, coupled with an increase in the net gains afforded by employment, even at the minimum wage, has helped to trigger a mass exodus from assistance programs of certain groups in particular. The Work Premium and the Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB) are important work incentives. The outcome of the improvements made in the past few years and the agreement entered into with the federal government is that the Work Premium now provides greater work incentives for couples without children and for unattached individuals. We would nonetheless like to tackle the question of how to better encourage all households that receive last-resort financial assistance to re-enter the labour market.

Lastly, all of us must cope with the current recession that is causing cyclical unemployment. Current circumstances warrant the inclusion of other groups for support on the track to employment. In 2007, the employment rate of the 55-64 year-old segment of the Québec population was 50%, an average 10 points below that of comparable societies. Prejudices and the climate in the workplace make it difficult for these people to re-enter the labour pool. An IPSOS Reid poll in 2005 showed that one out of three senior citizens would like to go back to work because his or her retirement income is insufficient.

1.2.2 Foster access to employment through training

Employment is the single most effective way of countering economic exclusion. Training and education are decisive factors in getting a stable and well-paid job. Data from the *Labour Force Historical Review. Chronological Index* for 2007 draw a clear line from education level to employment rate for men and women alike (see Table 1). A sound basic education is a major asset in entering the workforce.

Table 1: Unemployment rate, participation rate and employment rate by level of education, 2007, persons 15 years old and over, Québec¹⁰

The share of jobs that call for the highest skill levels has been on the rise since the 1990s.¹¹ In fact, in every job category requirements have been notched up. Some jobs classified at the elementary skill level, which, in the 1990s, required little in the way of qualifications, now require more advanced training. In some cases, a diploma (DVS, ACS, etc.) is a prerequisite.

As social measures go, action directed towards education and training is a powerful tool that has an impact on the determinants of poverty.¹² This action is crucial to sustainable gains in terms of the financial security and social inclusion of individuals in need.

⁹ Active employment measures include instruments such as job readiness activities, training, and assistance in seeking employment.

¹⁰ Adapted from Statistics Canada, *Labour Force Historical Review. Chronological Index 2007*, 2008.

¹¹ MESS, *Les obstacles à l'intégration des jeunes en emploi*, 1998, p. 4. MELS, *Education Indicators, 2008 Edition*, p. 123.

¹² De Broucker, Patrice and Laval Lavallée (1998b). "Intergenerational Aspects of Education and Literacy Skills Acquisition," in Miles Corak (ed.). *Labour Markets, Social Institutions, and the Future of Canada's Children*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Catalogue No. 89-553-XPB. November, pp. 129-43.

Consequently, dropping out of school, whose incidence is distinctly higher for boys than for girls,¹³ is one of the leading challenges of the future because it is often the trigger for the downward spiral towards social exclusion and poverty. Since young drop-outs are under-qualified for the job market, some of them come to rely on financial assistance benefits from the government, which impinges directly on their potential income and their quality of life. Recent studies to assess the cost of dropping out indicate that the effects on individuals and society as a whole are staggering.¹⁴

This is why in recent years the Government of Québec has invested substantially in initiatives such as homework assistance, adding of an extra hour of class time for physical education, hiring 1,800 professionals to help students in difficulty, and reducing class size in underprivileged communities. Education, Recreation and Sports Minister Michelle Courchesne has said that the government wants to increase the pre-20-year-old graduation rate from 70% to 80% by 2020.

Other government measures are also aimed at supporting young people so that they can go back to school or to enter the job market. A case in point is the Alternative jeunesse program, designed to encourage adults under age 25 who are eligible for a last-resort financial assistance program to acquire or regain social and occupational self-sufficiency. In return for their commitment, they are granted an allowance. The program is part of the government goal of giving young people alternatives to last-resort financial assistance. Alternative jeunesse does this by providing more sustained support, by implementing joint action, and by making the program voluntary. In January 2009, there were more than 6,500 participants.

Adult education and training must also be considered because they play an important role in getting people into the job market. However, they must be thought of in terms different from those of general education in the youth sector because adults' circumstances impose constraints that must be taken into account (distinct learning pace, greater financial needs, etc.).

In the same vein, measures having to do with training for more vulnerable workers have been established by the government in response to labour market trends. The *Stratégie d'intervention à l'intention des travailleuses et des travailleurs de 45 ans et plus* was adopted in 2003 to counter the deepening potential for poverty and social exclusion of workers in the 45-and-older age bracket. One of the goals of this strategy is to increase the awareness of labour market players in order to prevent workforce shortages and combat the exclusion of older workers. Another goal is to develop and enhance the employability of older workers in order to help them keep their jobs, re-enter the job market, or get jobs in a different field. Improving the living conditions of people 45 years of age and over hinges on their having measures that make them more market-ready. Efforts by government partners must therefore include action to prevent the de-qualification of aging workers and to establishing mindsets and work environments that foster their retention, ongoing development of their skills, and recognition of their experience.

1.2.3 Fostering job entry and retention for groups that are more vulnerable

The labour market integration of groups with particular difficulties is a significant issue for Québec.

Immigrants

Recent data from Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey (LFS) show that immigrants, especially newly arrived ones, have more trouble entering the workforce than other groups, despite the fact that, in general, their levels of education and qualifications are higher than those of Quebec-born citizens. In 2007, immigrants accounted for a mere 12% of the labour force in Québec, but made up 18% of the unemployed population. In addition, many of them must resort to the Employment Assistance Program. There are many causes for these problems, including cultural differences (notably language), discriminatory hiring practices, and inadequate skills recognition.

Persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities also encounter substantial obstacles in attempting to enter the job market, due to their limitations and to the social environment alike. The Comité consultatif de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale places them among the groups at risk for persistent poverty.¹⁵ Yet, many of these people would gladly join the workforce in order to improve their living conditions. In the past few years, measures have been introduced to support them in their efforts to enter the job market, some directed at them and others, at employers. The National Strategy for Labour Market Integration and Maintenance of Handicapped Persons, launched in May 2008, opens up opportunities for them.

¹³ MELS, *Education Indicators, 2008 Edition*, 2008, p. 63. Note that dropping out rates have plummeted since the 1970s.

¹⁴ Olena Hankivsky, *Cost Estimates of Dropping Out of High School in Canada. Executive Summary*, Simon Fraser University, 2008. Groupe d'action sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires au Québec, *Savoir pour pouvoir : un chantier national pour la persévérance scolaire*, 2009, pp. 9-15.

¹⁵ CCLP, *Prevention of Persistent Poverty – Rethinking our Approach: A Wise and Human Choice*, March 2009. This Advisory Opinion was produced at the request of the Minister.

Workers in unstable sectors

Holding on to a job is difficult for low-income workers and workers in unstable sectors, and for groups with specific problems, entering the workforce is a genuine challenge. These people have precarious jobs, some of them seasonal, that are limited in terms of the number of hours or weeks and that do not provide salaries that enable them to cover their basic needs. The shakiness of these jobs and the low level of education of many of these individuals, which brings us back to the question of education, hinder their ability to keep a job, to easily find a job after being laid off, or to move up the ladder. Repeated failures may drive them away from the job market and into a position of reliance on government benefits.

Innovative solutions were proposed under the first action plan. Take, for example, the funding measure for the Réseau québécois du crédit communautaire, which operates outside traditional financing structures and which provides loans to client groups whose financial profile is weak.¹⁶ This measure has enabled a number of small businesses to be created and many people to become employed.

These few examples give us pause to reflect on how to give persons with low incomes, especially unattached individuals and couples without children, effective support in entering and remaining within the workforce.

In conclusion, the door is open to any novel suggestions regarding the involvement of partners from all sectors and the direction that must be given to government measures pertaining to employment, income and education with an overall view to more effective support for persons in need in their efforts to improve their economic circumstances.

1.3 The income of last-resort financial assistance recipients

Measures to combat poverty and social exclusion are geared more towards developing and strengthening the financial independence of individuals, but the income security of people excluded from the workforce is a priority issue nonetheless. Currently, there are nearly 328,500 Québec households¹⁷ whose income is either fully or partly derived from last-resort financial assistance program benefits.

With the first action plan, a special income support system via the Social Solidarity Program was established for people with severe limitations to their capacity for employment. The program makes it possible to offer benefits that are better tailored to the nearly 130,000 households that would require considerable help to enter the labour market because of these severe limitations.

Since January 2009, Social Assistance Program benefits for individuals without a limited capacity for employment are indexed annually, as the benefits for recipients with a severely limited capacity for employment have been for some time now.

The Comité consultatif de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale proposal of baseline financial support is another possibility that the government will be asked to consider.

¹⁶ The loans range from \$500 and \$20,000, depending on the proposals.

¹⁷ December 2008 data.

Questions regarding income

- As a society, what should our action priorities be when it comes to improving income?
- Given the results obtained in improving income, should the next action plan focus on certain groups in particular?
- Do you think we should assume that all last-resort assistance recipients are active in improving their living conditions, self-sufficiency and fulfilment, and should we adjust our support based on the extent of their commitment to this improvement?
- How can we improve the slate of services to young adults in order to help them achieve social and economic independence and to steer them away from social assistance programs and possible long-term reliance on them?
- To help young people in difficulty and to prevent chronic reliance on last-resort assistance, should we consider a program in which ongoing personal commitment to training or learning activities with a view to entering the workforce would be mandatory?
- What roles could employers and unions play to reduce unemployment and exclusion with certain groups at risk? How can we mount a better response to the needs of persons from these groups so that they do not feel as if they have been put aside? How can we foster greater cultural diversity in the workplace and put a halt to discrimination?

Questions regarding employment

- What kind of commitment could we make towards better labour market integration for the poorest members of our society?
- How can we improve the coordination of action by the government, community, and social and economic partners aimed at occupational integration?
- What can we do to promote more diversity in the workplace and to make it easier for immigrants and members of visible minorities to fit in at work?
- How can we create workplaces that are better at maintaining older workers or that make it easier for retirees to go back to work?
- Do you think that the current recession will have an impact on the labour market entry or re-entry of employment insurance claimants or employment assistance recipients? Can anything be done to cushion these effects?

Questions regarding education and training

- How do you envision your involvement in terms of education and training?
- How can access to training be improved, especially for people who are highly unprepared for the labour market?
- How can we ensure a better fit between training needs and available resources?

Theme 2: Living conditions of people of all ages—health, food security, housing, justice, access to services

Québec's efforts to improve the situation of have-not households do not consist solely in ways of improving income, which, granted, do have a direct effect on the living conditions of people in situations of poverty. Other factors can play a role as well, notably, the set of social measures offered by the government and a range of partners. While government investments in areas such as affordable housing, set childcare rates, and public transit do not affect the disposable income of individuals and families per se, they provide support of another kind and must be seen as one of the most promising ways of improving the living conditions of individuals.

2.1 Health and food security

Poverty and social exclusion in all their permutations are among the determinants of health and well-being. Numerous studies have shown that adverse economic and social conditions are often associated with a

higher prevalence of behaviours that are harmful to health, the worsening of physical and mental health problems, and lower life expectancy. Other studies have found that persons in situations of poverty and exclusion are less likely to use health services and similar services than other citizens, one reason being lack of transportation and information.

Certain problems involving health generate a negative ripple effect that calls for joint action by all players, such as drug addiction, a multi-dimensional problem with serious consequences for the physical and psychological health of individuals. However, its fallout reaches beyond ill health and includes reduced quality of life, poverty, crime, higher unemployment, spousal violence, parental negligence, and social exclusion. In addition, drug addiction has multiple causes. This is why action on this front requires approaches aimed at improving a number of aspects of persons' lives at the same time. These interventions are important not only for the individual but for society as a whole because certain drug-related problems have social consequences for us all.

The first action plan tackled the issue of food security, which necessarily touches on health. Poverty is often behind malnutrition, which affects physical health and child development, and arguably, psychological health, and which can also lead to bad consumer habits. The promotion of healthy eating habits is an effective way of more long-term improvement of the health of Quebecers in situations of poverty.

Inadequate access to medication can also hinder people's ability to maintain or better their living conditions. Coverage of persons in situations of poverty has improved considerably in recent years with the inclusion of new groups in Québec's free prescription drug plan.

With a view to prevention, integrated perinatal and early childhood services were established to impede the intergenerational transmission of health and social problems. Early childhood development, pregnancy support, and parenting support are the centrepieces of these services.

2.2 Housing

Housing was a core issue in the first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion. Finding decent and affordable housing is particularly difficult for persons in situations of poverty, and more so in big cities, where the cost of housing is even more prohibitive than in outlying regions.

Affordability is not the only problem involved here. Other factors come into play too—physical and psychosocial impairment, family problems, and discrimination based on social status or cultural affiliation. In many cases, the households grappling with these obstacles need customized programs in order to overcome them. Housing measures not only put a roof over the head of those in situations of poverty, but they also enable prevention of other factors that lead to poverty, thereby creating a vital point of convergence for public and community action.

Even though the situation has improved with implementation of the 2004-2010 action plan, for many households, finding housing that meets their needs and that is within their means is not any easy task. This is exacerbated by the fact that current vacancy rates are very low (Montréal, 2.4%; Québec City, 0.6%; Trois-Rivières, Saguenay and Gatineau-Ottawa, below 2%¹⁸).

Since 2003, the Government of Québec has injected \$1.3 billion in the AccèsLogis Québec and the Affordable Housing Québec programs for the construction of 24,000 social and community housing units for low- and moderate-income households. The last government budget earmarked \$200 million for constructing 3,000 new units under the AccèsLogis Québec program.

Other than these programs, there are other government measures for housing, such as the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP), that provides funding for renovations to adapt housing to the needs of persons with disabilities, and the Home Adaptations for Seniors' Independence (HASI) program, that offers financial assistance for minor home adaptations that will help low-income seniors to perform daily activities in their home independently.

In addition, there are persons who need special community support services in order to continue living at home. This additional assistance may consist of accompaniment in accessing public services, full-time supervision, crisis intervention, housework, and anything related to the social support of individuals or groups.

In conclusion, it is crucial that there be services that have a real impact on the lives of the tenants in low-rental housing or subsidized housing (housing cooperatives or non-profit organizations), and that these services be designed to take into account the fact that nearly 50% of these tenants are seniors, among other features. All players will have to be innovative and creative in order to step up efforts in this area.

¹⁸ CMHC data published on December 11, 2008. Supply catches up with demand at a vacancy rate of about 3%. The vacancy rates in October 2002 were 0.7% in Montréal and 0.3% in Québec City according to CMHC figures (December 21, 2004).

2.3 Justice

Improvement of the living conditions of persons in situations of poverty also hinges on respect for their rights. Access to justice is more difficult for persons who are destitute. The government recently raised the cut-off levels for access to legal aid, which makes affordable legal assistance more available to unattached individuals, couples without children, and families.

The difficulty in getting legal information means that people do not know their rights and cannot defend them when they have suffered an injustice. For example, the elderly, men and women alike, often are unable to stand up for rights as fundamental as the right to housing.

Homeless persons are frequently in vulnerable situations as well, and they too lack ready access to information, and to make matters worse, they may not have a social network that can advise them. When recurrent mental health issues are added to this mix, the result is often an inability to defend one's rights in every area, including health.

2.4 Access to services

Access to services was discussed indirectly under the previous themes. The philosophy of proximity gradually adopted by the government over the course of the past few years seems to be yielding worthwhile results. The goal is to facilitate access to government services by making them part of the community. This is an active way of fighting poverty. An example of this approach is the *Cadre de référence sur le soutien communautaire en logement social*, which proposes the pooling of social housing and health and social services.¹⁹

Development of other services, such as those related to public transit, is another weapon in the anti-poverty arsenal because these services can curb the isolation and social exclusion that arise from poverty. In outlying regions in particular, insufficient public transit has sizable consequences, which include the difficulty in obtaining health services or social services, exclusion from the labour market for people who cannot afford an automobile, and reduced access to cultural services such as libraries. We must act to improve the ability of persons in situations of poverty to get from point A to point B. What is at stake to a large extent is their participation in social life and their ability to have greater economic independence. There have been a number of success stories in this area, some of which are described in an Advisory Opinion by the CCLP.²⁰ Inclusion of the cost of transportation in calculating MBM thresholds is another indication that transportation costs are a budget item that can affect the situation of Québec households.

We must also bear in mind that participation in employment assistance or job readiness measures depends on whether transportation is available. The people who participate in these measures may be required to travel daily to get training or to be more effective within a community organization. This becomes a problem for people who live far outside the city or who do not have an automobile. Consequently, public transit could be something that warrants exploring as part of the initiatives to foster access to employment, especially in rural areas.

Access to information about services may also prove to be a problem, in particular for seniors, who need adapted services that address their specific situation.

The access of persons in situations of poverty to all forms of culture is another important issue. Culture fosters greater social inclusion and is an excellent purveyor of learning and education. This is a vast area where community action can occur.

As you can see, improving the living conditions of those living in poverty comes with a host of questions and provides opportunities for a multitude of initiatives by a vast array of players.

Questions concerning health and food security

- What kinds of practices would secure better health and food security for the less privileged members of our society?
- How can we contribute to better management of the food security of those in need?

¹⁹ Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux and Société d'habitation du Québec, *Cadre de référence sur le soutien communautaire en logement social : une intervention intersectorielle des réseaux de la santé et des services sociaux et de l'habitation*, 2007.

²⁰ CCLP, *The Impact of Public Rate Increases on the Living Conditions of Low-Income Groups*, 2008, pp. 19-22 (on-line version).

Questions concerning housing

- Other than the construction of new social housing, what do you think can be done to improve the housing conditions of persons in situations of poverty?
- What role(s) can we play in action aimed at the issue of housing?

Questions concerning public services

- What should we be looking at in order to improve access to public services by persons living in poverty?
- How can a better fit be achieved between the needs of persons in situations of poverty and social exclusion and the means at our disposal?
- What are the most promising solutions in terms of regional transportation and how can we support the implementation of initiatives of this kind?

Theme 3: Social inclusion and citizen participation

Social inclusion and citizen participations are prerequisites for a more just society where there is greater respect for individual and collective rights. A number of factors—illness, physical or intellectual disabilities, discrimination, stigmatization and, of course, poverty itself—increase the likelihood of social exclusion. Certain groups are therefore more at risk than others for situations of exclusion.

Social exclusion has many forms and its tentacles extend beyond homelessness or pockets of concentrated poverty. Social exclusion is an organic process in which formal groups, institutions, living environments, and the quality of interaction between individuals and society are determinative. Social expectations, the standards in effect, and the values of a given society at a given time can influence the extent of and potential for exclusion.

3.1 Working at the grassroots level

A cluster of conditions conducive to social inclusion exist within local communities. A number of local projects have produced tangible results, such as drop-in centres for young people and for seniors, day centres for people whose autonomy is reduced, respite services, focus groups, social activities organized by community agencies, the determination of action priorities by the communities themselves, and integrated perinatal services and early childhood education services. Community action is a component of the social inclusion continuum. Citizens have always responded to the needs of their community through the services offered by community organizations, which are democratic bodies created by and for citizens who identify the problems that they wish to tackle and who chose the means for solving them. These initiatives bring together numbers of players, promote citizen participation, and foster social inclusion.

All of these actions acknowledge the sheer diversity of needs and the importance of helping individuals and communities to develop their abilities. By using adapted measures that empower people and communities to develop their potential, the inclusive approach promotes values such as equality, sharing, socialization and learning. This approach is particularly effective in supporting persons grappling with complex problems such as homelessness and mental health issues.

3.2 Mental health

A number of factors related to mental health can either play in favour or against social inclusion. These factors can stem from the personal characteristics of individuals or from the environment in which they live. Under the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) mental health action plan (*Plan d'action en santé mentale 2005-2010 – La force des liens*), support is provided for action to improve the social integration of people with mental health problems, notably through measures for better labour market access and adequate support for education, for developing and strengthening certain social integration services, for housing services (including support for remaining within the home environment, which brings us back to the idea of service proximity) or for information to help remove the stigma attached to mental health problems.

Community support services are the best adapted and most effective response to the complex and wide-ranging needs of persons with mental problems and, more specifically, to the issue of social exclusion and homelessness.

3.3 Homelessness

One of the definitions of homelessness, inarguably the most visible form of social exclusion, is that it is a process set in motion by a series of events conducive to the degradation and rupture of social ties that, in

their most extreme form, lead to life in the streets.²¹ But no matter how homelessness is defined, the means for countering the social exclusion of these people on the periphery of society must take into account their ability to act in changing their situation. In the coming months, the work of the parliamentary committee on homelessness will provide food for thought on the measures that need to be implemented. The result will be the adoption of an action plan for the inclusion of homeless Quebecers that will include pilot projects aimed at their re-entry into the mainstream of society.

3.4 Active aging

Poverty and social exclusion are major impediments to the active social participation and contribution of senior citizens and can trigger other problems such as a sedentary lifestyle, bad eating habits, depression and even suicide. Exclusion, a corollary of a weak social network, makes poverty that much harder to bear. Social networks tend to shrink as people get older, and government housing is one way of preventing social exclusion. The development of social housing, which, to a great extent, benefits low-income seniors, is therefore important in enhancing the social inclusion of elderly Quebecers.

In the same vein, the social exclusion that can be the daily lot of Québec seniors spawns other problems, one of them being elder abuse, which is multifaceted and therefore requires multiple solutions. Action aimed at better social inclusion is important in this respect. Québec needs its senior citizens and must be actively engaged in improving their circumstances.

Hefty investments have already been made in the well-being of seniors, with further investments of \$2.3 billion over five years (2007-2008 to 2012-2013) for existing or future measures enabling seniors to live at home and within their social community and to improve their disposable income, and for providing better support for their natural caregivers.

3.5 Immigrant Quebecers and Quebecers from cultural communities

The social exclusion of immigrants of both sexes occurs frequently and is of concern, but women immigrants or female members of cultural communities face more obstacles than their male counterparts.

The main way envisaged for facilitating the social inclusion of these women is to do a better job of making them aware of measures that would smooth the way for them to participate fully in Québec society. These measures are available to all female newcomers. All that is required is to adapt these measures so that more women use them. Access to French language classes is a must for women whose French is not good enough to enable them to use services and to break their isolation. There are many long-established community organizations that work with female immigrants and make it easier for them to participate as citizens in the economic and social life of the community at large. The contribution of these organizations would improve the prevailing situation.

The members of some cultural communities or visible minorities also face a number of barriers that hinder their participation in the workforce and the exercise of their citizenship. For example, in 2006, the unemployment rate of all members of visible minorities in Québec between 25 and 54 years of age was 12.7%, compared with 5.4% for people in the same age category who were not part of a visible minority. Even Québec-born members of visible minorities had higher rates of unemployment (7.9%) than other Québec-born citizens who are not part of a visible minority (5.2%).

Many young people from visible minorities experience poverty and social exclusion due to a number of factors, including dropping out of school, failure in school, and discrimination of all kinds. This situation may fuel social tensions and create a cycle of persistent poverty in some groups. This observation is a call for groups of partners to undertake effective joint action to bridge the gap between cultures.

Questions concerning ways of fostering social inclusion and citizen participation

- What are the musts of a strategy to foster social inclusion that would make everyone accountable for achieving its goals?
- How do the elderly fit into this strategy?
- What can be done so that people can easily find their way through the maze of program and services?
- What society-wide means could be considered in order to spur greater citizen participation in action aimed at reducing social exclusion, among other goals?
- What are the pressing issues surrounding homelessness and which players are best equipped to help persons in situations of homelessness?

Theme 4: A territorial approach to fighting poverty and social exclusion

To gradually make Québec one of the industrialized societies with the least number of persons living in poverty, partnership and integrated and decentralized action must occur to better respond to the needs of regions and local communities. Implementation of an approach that involves the government and the private and the community sector could provide genuine support for mobilization and for development projects for communities at grips with poverty and for improving the living conditions of the people in these communities.

It is therefore time to start thinking about an approach that goes beyond government measures and programs for specific sectors or client groups. This approach consists of action to empower geographical areas beset by poverty to mount projects against poverty and social exclusion customized to regional and local specificities and based on knowledge of the needs expressed by the citizens who inhabit those areas and of the means at their disposal. The findings further to implementation of the territorial approach proposed in the first action plan indicate unequivocally that if needs are to be met, we must go further in terms of inter-departmental action, partnership and decentralization.

The Rendez-vous de la solidarité régionaux that will be held after the Québec-wide consultation will deal primarily with the best ways of implementing a territorial approach against poverty and social exclusion.

4.1 The principles underlying a territorial approach to combating poverty and social exclusion

Implementation of such an approach is rooted in confidence in the ability of communities and individuals to take charge of themselves. This fundamental principle is perfectly in keeping with the letter and the spirit of the *Act to combat poverty and social exclusion*. The Preamble to the Act indicates that persons living in poverty and social exclusion are the first to act to improve their situation and that of their families, and that such improvement is linked to the social, cultural and economic development of the entire community. The statement of goals later in the Act includes the idea of encouraging persons and families living in poverty to participate in community life and social development, promoting work and making it a more attractive option, and facilitating labour market participation. The Act instructs the government to accomplish this by favouring an approach centred on community-based intervention and integration of social and economic development.

Territorially based action to combat poverty and social exclusion involves greater empowerment of communities, implementation of approaches that call for partnership and inter-sector initiatives, and achievement of quantifiable results through pooled action by the various players, whether government, private or community instances.

The territorial approach is aimed at ensuring that existing projects within a community are consistent and coherent, and that any new projects stemming from them are as well. In short, the added value of the approach lies in its ability to rally government, institutional, private and community resources around targets determined by working in tandem with citizens.

Using European and American experiences as a template, the territorial approach:

- is applied to combat poverty;
- is based on a comprehensive and shared vision of the situation of a designated territory;
- is aimed at local communities and is the responsibility of the players within the grouping of communities;
- calls upon the government and civil society to act;
- does not overlap with similar initiatives (Rural Pact; rural laboratories; *Plan d'action gouvernemental à l'intention des municipalités dévitalisées*; Québec Public Health Program – Community Development; Québec Children, *Québec en forme*; Québec's public transit policy; mobilization to counter dropping out; Assistance Fund for Single-industry Municipalities; Sustainable Development Strategy) but is designed instead to dovetail with them with a view to more concentrated, coordinated and customized action to combat poverty and social exclusion by all players (government, community and private players and charities);
- involves local appropriation of the process to identify problems, determine and plan joint courses of action, and implement and monitor the action undertaken;
- targets the causes of poverty and social exclusion;
- aims for long-term solutions.

However, in order to accurately determine the action to carry out and the solutions to apply, in-depth knowledge of the needs of individuals, of real life within the local communities concerned, and of available and accessible means, is essential.

4.2 The first action plan and the integrated regional (territorial) approach

The first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion advocated the development of an integrated regional approach, also called a territorial approach, and involvement of the Conférences régionales des élus (CRÉ) in the process. Regional County Municipalities (RCMs) were also called upon to play an active role in crafting local action plans. Deployment of the approach is tailored to the territory in question but is based on the same tools for identifying the most vulnerable territories and for funding.

It was suggested that the approach be applied in the 50 territories served by local employment centres (CLEs) where there is the highest incidence of poverty. The deprivation index developed by Pampalon and Raymond was used to pinpoint these territories.

The Fonds québécois d'initiatives sociales (FQIS) was tasked to provide funding for deployment of a territorial approach to fighting poverty. Currently, 53 CLE territories have agreements aimed at social development and the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

In addition, administrative agreements between MESS and the Ville de Montréal concerning social development and the war on poverty and social exclusion have made it possible for the city to use its version of a territorial approach in its boroughs and local communities. This approach is called "integrated urban renewal."

Even at this early stage, the territorial approach has laid the groundwork for mobilization and partnership around a shared vision of poverty and for planning local projects to improve the living conditions of the citizens in the geographical area concerned.

4.3 Observations concerning regional and local action

Despite the lack of extensive results thus far, preliminary assessments by MESS and the opinions gleaned from the players directly concerned in implementing a territorial approach indicate that:

- deployment of a territorial approach to fighting poverty and social exclusion must be based, on the one hand, on in-depth knowledge of the needs of regions, local communities and persons in situations of poverty and, on the other, of available and accessible means for meeting these needs;
- territorial action must be aimed at a better fit between needs and the means of satisfying these needs;
- territorial action is by definition multi-dimensional, integrated and joint;
- genuine inter-departmental action directed mainly at coordinating the numerous programs, initiatives, policies and projects that affect regional and local action must be established;
- inter-departmental action of this kind must occur at the regional and local levels;
- inter-departmental cooperation would benefit from more extensive partnership with the private and the community sector;
- government departments must commit to decentralization and coordination of their various programs and funds so that the needs of local communities are better met;
- joint sector-based action is crucial to achievement of significant outcomes in fighting poverty and social exclusion at the local and the regional level;
- joint sector-based action must be promoted and applied at the provincial level;
- government partners and the people experiencing poverty first-hand must work together to determine priorities in terms of action;
- we would be well advised to review, loosen the restrictions on and decentralize funding for mobilization and projects;
- existing formats for joint action and partnership on the local and the regional level must not be usurped, and new instances must not be created alongside existing instances when the territorial approach to fighting poverty and social exclusion is applied;
- the central government must be the liaison for those responsible for territorial action and must ensure that they have what they need to fulfil their role;
- regional leadership for a territorial approach to action to combat poverty and social exclusion must be shared and CRÉs must have a major role in this respect.

4.4 Towards a stronger territorial approach to combating poverty and social exclusion

Based on what has been learned thus far from experiments in the territorial approach and on the comments and findings of the organizations and individuals involved in these initiatives, the following subjects have been proposed for participants in the Québec-wide consultation:

- Knowledge of the needs of people and communities grappling with poverty and of the means at their disposal;
- Governance;
- Inter-departmental action;
- Greater partnership among the public, private and community sectors;
- Joint sector-based action;
- Funding for mobilization and for projects.

Questions concerning a territorial approach to action to combat poverty and social exclusion

- Since effective territory-based action requires knowledge about the needs and means involved, how can this knowledge be obtained?
- How can regional deployment of policies and action plans aimed at inclusion and solidarity be carried out?
- How can better inter-departmental coordination be achieved?
- What organizations are in the best position to lead the deployment of territory-based action at the local and regional level? Which body is best placed to coordinate a territorial approach from the provincial platform?
- What can provincial players do to provide better support for regional and community efforts?
- In real terms, how can inter-sector action be better promoted and carried out from the provincial and regional levels?
- What means can be employed to more closely involve economic players, community organizations, charities, and social economy enterprises in the fight against poverty and social exclusion?
- What place and role would citizens have in applying a territorial approach to action against poverty and social exclusion?
- Can we come up with innovative funding formulas so that action in territories with acute poverty and social exclusion is effective?
- Should the territorial approach proposed as the instrument for government action at the regional level have a broader scope so as to make it easier for coordinated government action to occur?
- Should each region have its own action plan against poverty and social exclusion that involves pooling of the efforts of all the partners concerned around the specific needs of the people in situations of poverty and exclusion in that region?
- Could regional targets for reducing poverty and social exclusion be set?

Conclusion

There will always be people who say we are either doing too much or too little about poverty and social exclusion. To move ahead as a society, we have to eradicate prejudices and foster and achieve the greatest unity possible in striving for greater social justice and in finding that fine point of convergence where the best society-wide commitment possible is made to support the commitment of every individual in his or her own pursuit of independence and fulfilment.

The involvement of society as a whole is fundamental in acting to improve the living conditions of those living in poverty and foster their social inclusion. That is why we are asking for your input for the next Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion and your participation in implementing it.

The work of the MESS and the Comité interministériel de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale will be informed by the priority issues and the solutions proposed during the Rendez-vous de la solidarité national. Naturally, Québec's expectations regarding equity and the sharing of wealth must be commensurate with its ability to satisfy its diverse needs.

Under the *Act to combat poverty and social exclusion*, in October 2010, the Minister of Employment and Social Solidarity must table a status report in the National Assembly on the action carried out by the government and all stakeholders in the first six years of the National Strategy to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Your participation in the Rendez-vous brings us one step closer to achieving the common objective of making Québec one of the societies that has the least number of persons living in poverty. It also is proof of your commitment to a more inclusive Québec that cares about the common good.

Your collaboration is greatly appreciated. Thank you so much.

Appendix 1: Five years of action to improve the living conditions of persons in situations of poverty

Since 2004, the Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, with the invaluable contribution of social, community and government instances, has put Québec significantly closer to achieving its goal of making Québec one of the industrialized societies with the least number of persons living in poverty by 2013. The measures contained in the first action plan made it possible to improve life for thousands of Quebecers in situations of poverty.

The principle of a basic penalty-free benefit except in cases of fraud was implemented, and the former coercive approach was replaced by an approach more focused on assistance and support. Acknowledgement of the will and ability of persons living in poverty created momentum for a change in how the State and citizens who are destitute and marginalized interacted.

One of the thrusts of the plan was action geared to the income of persons with low incomes and in situations of poverty. Consequently, several measures were designed specifically to improve personal income. These included the Work Premium, Child Assistance and full indexation of all last-resort financial assistance benefits. The sizable increase in the minimum wage, which rose from \$7.30 to \$9.00 between May 2003 and May 2009, also contributed to supporting low-income workers.

In the same vein, we are still witnessing a downward trend in the number of last-resort financial assistance recipients. Between March 2003 and March 2008, there was a 16.9% decrease in the number of children whose parents received government assistance, an 8% in the number of adults, and a 17.8% drop in the number of heads of single families on assistance. In addition, according to March 2008 figures, there are now fewer women (48.8%) than men (51.2%) who are last-resort financial assistance recipients.

Since 2004, other measures have been introduced whose positive effects for people living in poverty or social exclusion are more difficult to quantify. A case in point is the construction of social housing and affordable housing units, which has proven to be an excellent way of improving the lives of the less fortunate members of our society. With a view to giving a greater number of households in underprivileged neighbourhoods access to decent housing at affordable cost, the first action plan featured measures that made it possible to create 27,000 new social, community or affordable housing units under the AccèsLogis Québec and Affordable Housing Québec programs. As at January 31, 2009, there were nearly 16,000 new apartments.

The cut-off line for legal aid has been raised three times since 2006, the last of which occurred on January 1, 2008. The 2006 increase was the first since 1982 for unattached individuals and since 1996 for families. This has meant that persons in situations of poverty have more equitable access to justice in order to defend their rights.

The first action plan also set in motion an approach to support and foster territory-based action from the grassroots level. The purpose of this action, supported in various ways by the government and provincial partners, is to improve the living conditions of individuals based on the particular needs that prevail in their expanded community. Appropriation of the fight against poverty and social exclusion provincially, regionally and locally must continue in order to encourage the emergence of grassroots initiatives in the geographical areas where there is a high concentration of poverty.

Work in tandem with Québec agencies at every level engaged in action to eradicate social and economic disparities is already underway through programs such as the Assistance Program for Community Housing Organizations, which provides funding for instances that stimulate the development of and joint action by the community housing sector or that give citizens control over their living environment. The Community and Social Initiatives in Low Rental Housing Program provides one-off funding for community action projects to empower low-income housing residents to take charge of their own environment and to create family, community and social living environments that are adapted to the needs of the people who live there and that promote inter-generational and inter-cultural ties.

Alongside these investments are those that support community action on the food security front. The idea here is to have communities explore alternatives to food handouts, while addressing emergency needs. In 2007-2008, under the first Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, \$3.2 million went towards food security in 2007-2008, 75% of it spent on action to foster individual food self-sufficiency, and 25% on food banks, community kitchens, and other food emergency resources. Some regions invested additional amounts in food security. Furthermore, an amount of \$200,000 made it possible for the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux to provide support for the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec and the Association québécoise des banques alimentaires et des Moissons .

The first government action plan also contains a number of other measures.

Appendix 2: Main achievements under the first government action plan

The Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, unveiled in 2004, had four major thrusts:

- Improve the lives of people in situations of poverty;
- Prevent poverty and social exclusion by fostering development of personal potential;
- Involve society as a whole;
- Ensure consistent, coherent action.

The following list presents the main achievements arising from the first government action plan that played and continue to play a particularly important role in combating poverty and social exclusion:

- Full indexation of last-resort financial assistance benefits for all recipients as of January 1, 2009;
- Increase in the minimum wage, which was \$9 an hour as of May 1, 2009;
- Establishment of Child Assistance, which benefited more than 870,000 families in 2007;
- Introduction of the Work Premium. In 2006, nearly 569,000 used this tax credit;
- Establishment of the Social Assistance and Support Program;
- Commitment to build 27,000 social, community or affordable housing units;
- Annual food security investment of \$3.4 million;
- Since July 1, 2007, Québec's program of free prescription medication has been extended to include people 65 years of age and older who are receiving 95% or more of the full Guaranteed Income Supplement and to Social Assistance Program recipients;
- Raising of the cut-off line for eligibility for legal aid;
- Implementation and continuation of programs such as those to prevent dropping out;
- Fonds québécois d'initiatives sociales (FQIS) investments to implement local and regional strategies against poverty and social exclusion. So far, some 50 local employment centre (CLE) territories have entered into agreements as part of the integrated regional (territorial) approach;
- Introduction in March 2008 of the Commitment for Employment, which consists of a set of measures to get more Quebecers into the workplace. With the inception of the Employment Pact Plus in March 2009, total investments in supporting persons as they strive to enter the labour market, notably through support and training, reached \$1.5 billion;
- Establishment of the Comité consultatif de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale, tasked to advise the government on the action to be undertaken;
- Formation of the Comité interministériel de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale, which sees to the coherence of government action;
- Creation of the Centre d'étude sur la pauvreté et l'exclusion (CEPE), mandated to conduct research and provide poverty measurement tools that enable informed decisions to be made.

Coordination and drafting

Direction des politiques de sécurité du income
Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale

Publication

Direction des communications
Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale

You can access this document at the Department Web site at www.mess.gouv.qc.ca.

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Legal deposit – 2009

Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec
ISBN (print version):
ISBN (on-line version):

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