



Alternatives North

January 11, 2013

Hon. Glen Abernethy
Lead Minister
NWT Anti-Poverty Strategy
Government of the Northwest Territories
Box 1320
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9

Also forwarded to: povertyfreenwt@gov.nt.ca

Dear Minister Abernathy,

Feedback on draft Anti-Poverty Strategy

The members of Alternatives North would like to thank everyone involved in the development of the-draft Anti-Poverty Strategy for the NWT. The document distributed for public comment in December contains approaches that, if implemented, would go a long way toward alleviating poverty and improving the lives of northerners.

The draft strategy is a good basis for moving forward. We understand that time and resource constraints resulted in some gaps, a lack of coherence, the need for a more thoughtful analysis, and more thoroughly researched rationale for the objectives. We trust that these issues will be addressed in the final strategy. We offer the following comments and suggestions which we believe will improve the final product. We hope that you find them constructive.

1. Introductory and contextual sections

We did not spend a great deal of time reviewing these sections of the draft. We expect that these will be strengthened in a final strategy. The socio-economic context, for instance, should be expanded to give at least a brief picture of poverty, such as the difference in employment and income rates between small communities and Yellowknife and regional

centers, core housing need, the number of families with income below \$30,000 per year etc. We suggest that the indicators used in this section should go beyond income and consider related issues such as employment and education level.

This section must make the economic case for NWT action on poverty. There is research that can be drawn on to show the costs of *not* taking action against poverty. This context is important to refute concerns about the cost of taking action. We suggest looking to the Alberta cost of poverty report, the National Council of Welfare report on this subject and the Senate's 2009 "In From the Margins" report on housing, homelessness and poverty. We also suggest that this is a place to highlight initiatives that are working as areas to be built on.

The strategy should be linked closely to other strategies and initiatives, particularly within the GNWT. For example, which objectives are similar or related to those in the Family Violence Action Plan, the Aboriginal Student Achievement Initiative, etc.? Will the new Economic Opportunities Strategy be considering the objectives and actions of the Anti-Poverty strategy, for example, diversifying the economy and reducing the employment inequalities between regional centers and small communities? There should be a clear discussion about linkages between all GNWT policies, programs and services, and how these linkages will be maintained as part of the strategy implementation.

In terms of research, background documents should be referenced. We recommend that a glossary providing working definitions of various terms be provided.

On a more specific point, we are not familiar with nor could we find the report *Action on the Ground* referenced on page 5 of the draft strategy and wish to clarify that this is not an Alternatives North report.

2. Vision and Guiding Principles

We are fine with these. The second last bullet needs punctuation or rewriting. We understand that its meaning is: *The traditional, wage and mixed economies are equally respected.*

It would probably be helpful to have fewer principles.

3. General Comments on Pillars, Goals and Objectives

- Each objective should include specific, measurable targets. This is a recognized best practice found in other anti-poverty strategies. For example, the Québec strategy

plans to adapt the dwellings of 6,010 people with disabilities and the Ontario strategy plans to reduce child poverty by 25% within five years.

- The document would be strengthened if the objectives were numbered and presented with consistent wording and formatting.
- The objectives should be measurable and more specific.
- Generally the rationales offered need strengthening. They do not systematically address each objective and would benefit from references to evidence and research.
- The final document should have the associated actions appear in the text alongside the objectives. Some objectives appear meaningless without the actions to explain what is being suggested.

4. Children and Family Support

- To help address some of the unevenness in the document, consider combining the two goals under this pillar and combining objectives and rationales. For example, the food-related objectives are similar for each goal.
- Our subgroup of six reviewers could not agree on what “community-based” and “adult caregivers” means, again highlighting the need for definitions within the text or in a glossary.
- Page 8, 2nd bullet: We believe people can get the wrong idea about the term “mental health”. Research shows that single parents may be anxious not so much because of mental health issues but because of financial stress. Perhaps financial help, advice or knowledge is needed by some people more than or in addition to mental health supports. Broaden this objective to: ***Parents and caregivers of children and youth have the supports they need to reduce their stress and better support the children and youth in their care.*** The second part of this sentence could form the basis of the rationale, identifying research that points to stress as a barrier to healthy child development.
- Page 8, 5th bullet: Our objective should be that children are safe in their community as well as their homes. Reword to say: **All children in the NWT are safe in their homes and community.**
- The tone of the rationale should be more positive and less blaming and guilt-inducing for parents and caregivers. It could be strengthened by reference to research and evidence, such as that produced by the NWT Literacy Council and Alternatives North.
- Page 9, 1st bullet: Under the goal related to school-age children and adolescents, consider deleting “mental development” and rewording to: **All NWT communities have effective youth programs and services that result in physical, cognitive, emotional, social, cultural and spiritual development.**
- Replace the fifth bullet that references graduation rates, since we know that graduation rates do not accurately measure the learning that has taken place; many

students in small communities now have limited learning opportunities and many Grade 12 graduates are not prepared to enter higher education. Change to: **All NWT students have access to quality education that meets individual student needs and ensures the best learning outcomes possible.**

- We must point out that in terms of ensuring healthy development for northern children, free dental care would be an important development.

5. Healthy Living and Self-Sufficiency

- We have significant problems with the terms ‘self-sufficient’ and ‘self-reliant’. There are few (if any) people who actually experience this – certainly none of the people we know! As individuals, communities and societies, we are interdependent to varying degrees. We would prefer a title such as: **Healthy Living and Reaching our Potential** or **Healthy Living and Contributing to our Community**.
- Change the term “self-sufficiency” in the goal. **Youth and adults throughout the NWT have the supports they need to live healthy lives and reach their potential (or be contributing members of their community).**
- Page 10, 2nd bullet: The wording suggests communities are the only ones responsible for enhancing and promoting healthy living. We believe this is in part a GNWT responsibility. Change wording to: **Support communities that enhance and promote healthy living.**
- Page 10, 4th bullet: There are other types of disabilities that could be included in this objective. We suggest that “**persons with disabilities**” is more inclusive and wiser than trying to name types of disabilities.
- A major cause of poverty for adults is illness and disability; for themselves, or a spouse or other dependent. People without jobs that provide extended health benefits and disability insurance are at particularly high risk of poverty. We believe an additional objective should be added to address the need for a continuum of care and support for people with illness and disability.
- Page 10, 6th bullet: This objective does not address the need for financial supports for those who are not transitioning to work, i.e., some people with disabilities or seniors. Alternatives North takes the position that the anti-poverty strategy should include as an objective a guaranteed annual income (GAI) for all NWT residents, as an alternative to a variety of existing financial supports such as income assistance. We suggest the actions related to this objective could be to develop the policies and plans necessary for implementation of a GAI during the next five to 10 years. If not, the objective should at least be changed to: **Increase the incomes of low income individuals and families.** (See *Quebec Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion.*)

- A further objective in this section would be to implement a living wage policy in the NWT. A living wage can be defined as the minimum income necessary for a worker to meet basic needs such as housing, proper nutrition and clothing for an extended period of time or for a lifetime. The living wage would vary between communities according to factors such as the cost of living and access to roads.

6. Safe and Affordable Housing

- As with some other objectives, it would be helpful and clearer if we knew who is responsible for achieving these objectives.
- Page 11, 1st bullet: As written, this is not an objective. We suggest: **The GNWT initiate a “housing first” program.** A housing first approach recognizes the benefit of ensuring adequate housing regardless of an individual’s situation.
- Page 11, 2nd and 4th bullets: Combine these as: **Increase the stock of social, transitional, supported and affordable housing and ensure ongoing, stable funding for same.** As previously stated, these terms would need to be defined in a glossary.
- Page 11, 5th bullet: Add “persons with disabilities” to the vulnerable populations listed (youth and seniors).

7. Sustainable Communities

- This is the weakest section of the strategy. Many objectives are not objectives. We suggest a clearer, more concrete approach to objectives. For example:
 - Train and educate local people for existing and potential jobs in small communities, e.g. ensure the supply of tradespeople to maintain housing and government buildings or technologists to maintain equipment.
 - Focus economic development spending and other resources on sectors with the greatest potential for creating jobs for local people, particularly in communities with high employment. Those sectors include renewable energy, agriculture, information technology, and the arts. (Note: July 2012 *NWT Economic Multipliers* report by the Bureau of Statistics.)
 - The means by which local economic development is achieved should be specified. Alternatives North endorses the co-operative and not-for-profit sectors, as well as the private.
 - Reduce the economic inequalities that exist in the NWT between individuals and communities. Relative poverty is known to create greater negative social consequences than absolute poverty. We would like to see this as an objective, likely under sustainable communities where there is discussion about the inequalities of employment.

- Increase the capacity of NWT communities to produce and market their own food.
- Link the small community labour market with local job creation.
- Reduce the economic inequalities that exist in the NWT between individuals and communities. Relative poverty is known to create greater negative social consequences than absolute poverty. We would like to see this as an objective, likely under sustainable communities where there is discussion about the inequalities of employ
- Page 12, 2nd bullet: Add public to the beginning of this sentence so it reads: **Public programs and services are appropriate to the communities they serve.**
- The first sentence of the rationale should read: **The NWT is largely dependent on non-renewable resource development – a greater focus on renewable resources holds the greatest potential for job creation in the community and where unemployment is highest.** The rationale should relate to the objectives. (Note: July 2012 *NWT Economic Multipliers* report by the Bureau of Statistics.)

8. Integrated Continuum of Services

- The objectives are too general to be meaningful. The substance is all in the actions, many of which are laudable.
- We suggest that legislation should do more than create a Secretariat. It should commit the GNWT to ongoing anti-poverty measures so we have certainty around the timeframe and the efficacy of approaches. Through legislation, the timeframe for actions can go beyond the life of this Legislative Assembly. This should be a 10-year strategy, given the human and financial limitations of this government. A clearer objective relating to this action would be: **There are clear commitments about how all partners will work together to create a Poverty Free NWT.**
- Rationale might reference the teachings from the document [Addressing Poverty--An Appreciative Inquiry of Program Successes](http://alternativesnorth.ca/web33.winsvr.net/Portals/0/Documents/Poverty/Alt%20North%20Anti-Poverty%20Appreciative%20Inquiry.pdf) produced for the June roundtable and found at <http://alternativesnorth.ca/web33.winsvr.net/Portals/0/Documents/Poverty/Alt%20North%20Anti-Poverty%20Appreciative%20Inquiry.pdf>

9. Concluding sections

There needs to be a clear commitment by the GNWT that, as the territorial public government, it is prepared to take the lead on implementing and evaluating the Anti-Poverty Strategy. While everyone has a role to play, and while we greatly appreciate the efforts to date on the part of the GNWT to work collaboratively, the GNWT must be prepared to champion the document and be accountable for its implementation. The final

strategy needs to identify areas of collaboration with other levels of government—public and Aboriginal—and clearly identify the cooperative opportunities and responsibilities.

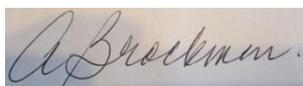
We acknowledge that there is a huge amount of work to be done to complete the strategy by March 31 and it may not be possible to have the monitoring and evaluation framework completed by then. Nevertheless we do want to see specific targets and indicators for measuring success.

10. Appendix B: Recommended Actions to Support this Strategy

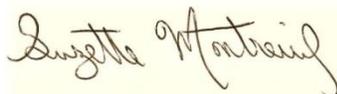
We are not providing detailed comments on the actions contained in the appendix. It seemed premature to do so since, in our view, the action plans need to be better developed with clearer outlines, outcome measures and timelines. In addition, there is a discrepancy in the depth of the action plan that is given to each section that should be corrected. We also recognize that the action plans were not reviewed during the validation process.

Finally, we recommend that participants in the development of the anti-poverty strategy be given an opportunity to review the feedback received on the draft strategy before the preparation of the next document. These comments and the questions on process in the December 20th No Place for Poverty coalition letter to Minister Abernathy continue to frame the work that needs to take place to complete the development of an anti-poverty strategy.

Thank you for your consideration of our submission.



Aggie Brockman



Suzette Montreuil
On behalf of Alternatives North