



Alternatives North

27 May 2012

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

Dear Minister Abernethy,

Feedback on May 2013 Building on the Strengths of Northerners

Members of Alternatives North thank everyone involved in the development of the re-draft of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. The additional resources allocated to the strategy have produced significant, positive changes. The current draft strengthens the context for understanding poverty in the Northwest Territories, as well as the goals which, if implemented, would help those on low or no income live more dignified and fulfilling lives. We support the May draft of the Anti-Poverty Strategy though we have further comments to continue to strengthen the document.

We are looking forward to seeing the document tabled during the next sitting of the Legislative Assembly and to then moving forward with the implementation plan. New Brunswick offers a model of how to create an action plan which we recommend. They contracted experts to review the strategy and come up with themes. These themes were then formulated into an “options document.” That document went to a meeting of stakeholders or decision-makers, and they chose from the “menu” and came up with priority actions. The “menu” had the effect of making the meeting of stakeholders more focused and productive, and resulted in some tough negotiations to arrive at agreement on priorities. The stakeholder list included the New Brunswick Cabinet, which spent 10-12 hours identifying their priorities and preparing for the meeting – a pretty impressive commitment.

To translate this to the NWT context, we suggest, on behalf of the No Place for Poverty coalition, that GNWT contract expert help to come up with the options document as soon as possible, in order to lay the ground work for a decision-makers’ meeting in the fall.

We have some general comments on the document, and in the appendix we detail page-by-page comments. First, it is unclear to us who the audience is for this document. NWT Literacy Council staff tested the text and determined that it is written at a level that requires post-secondary education in order for the reader to fully understand the document. As a result, this document is not readily accessible to some people who live on low or no income for whom this document is a blueprint, and for others who have low literacy levels. A plain language version of this document will make it more comprehensible for everyone. Further on this point, this document lacks a clear connection to people who have lived experience of poverty in a way that acknowledges their realities. It feels disconnected from the front line.

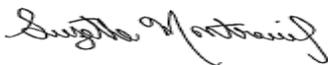
Second, we note that the content is weighted toward those who are waiting for economic development, jobs and skills training to get out of poverty. This emphasis doesn't take into account those people with disabilities, seniors and others for whom participation in the wage economy is not an option. In fact, there is little mention of either seniors or people with disabilities in this strategy.

Third, the Anti-Poverty Strategy continues to omit two significant issues for people who live in poverty. There is no mention of income assistance in this document (except in the Paulatuk case study), although many people who live in poverty depend on income assistance. We are aware that the Auditor General of Canada recently reported on several of the GNWT's Income Security programs. The GNWT responded to a recommendation to evaluate the effectiveness of its programs by saying, "the government is currently developing an Anti-Poverty Strategy that may have an impact on the objectives of income security programs." (p. 29) It is necessary to reference the commitment to improve Income Security programs in the strategy in order to set the stage for action items (already agreed to by ECE) during the implementation phase.

As well, there is no discussion in this document of the need for a living wage. We believe that a living wage, regularly reviewed in comparison to the cost of living, would enable people who work at or near minimum wage to be better paid. We would like to see a recommendation to study a living wage and its effects as a recommendation in this strategy.

We hope that these points will be considered and changes made to strengthen the final draft of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. We look forward to continuing to work with the GNWT and the Anti-Poverty Strategy Steering Committee to create an implementation plan.

Yours truly,



Suzette Montreuil
On behalf of Alternatives North

cc. Bronwyn Watters, Chair APS Steering Committee

Appendix A: Detailed Comments

Message from the Premier

We note the premier uses both “elimination” and “reducing” poverty in his message. We recommend consistently using “elimination” throughout the document.

Page | 3

Message from the Minister

We note that the minister refers to the document as the “Strategic Framework” but elsewhere the writers refer to the document as “Building on the Strengths of Northerners.” We also note variability around italics and capitalization.

In paragraph two, , we think it is important to mention business and non-profits as two who are in the partnership, along with other orders of government.

Message from the Anti-Poverty Steering Committee

In paragraph two, sentence two, the sentence would read better if it said, “People must be able to live in dignity whether they are in need of adequate housing, food or support for their growing children.” In the last sentence in that paragraph, “those with disabilities” should be qualified with the words “some of those with disabilities.”

Executive Summary

We are pleased to see a clear statement from the GNWT embracing its leadership role in this process. On this page and many other pages, the paragraphs are too long. We believe they would be more easily read if divided.

Page 7

Strengthen the contrast between the type and the picture so the quotation is more easily read.

Page 8

We are wondering where the figure 250 residents comes from.

There is a layout glitch in the last sentence of the first paragraph.

Page 10 (and other pages with photos)

Is it possible to use pictures from the GNWT photo voice project (What We Heard from Northerners) rather than stock photos? We generally don't find the stock photos appropriate – they portray people of one ethnicity and social class (pp. 12-13) or those in poverty as beggars (p.15). Neither is appropriate. The lay-out of the document is often confusing and “busy” with format and design elements.

Poverty in the NWT: A Real Issue

The writers have done an excellent job of fleshing out this section. In paragraph one on page 10, there is a reference to people “just getting by.” In fact, they are not getting by, they are living in poverty. Please add those lacking formal education and those who have low literacy levels to the list of people who are disproportionately affected. Also on page 10 and other pages the charts are so small it is difficult to read the print. We suggest making the charts larger. As well, the source of information for the charts should be referenced.

Page 11

We suggest the third paragraph on this page include a statement that links to pillar five, such as “we are going to eliminate program inconsistencies that are an obstacle to effective, comprehensive service delivery.”

By the Numbers:

This is another area where the considerable research done since the last draft has been a great improvement. On page 12, we question whether the incidence of low-income should be capitalized to indicate the term has an official definition. If this term does not refer to the Low-Income Measure then it should be reworded so that it's clear there is no connection.

On page 13, we suggest that in the tradition and culture section all the items be grouped under the subhead “Percentage of aboriginal people who” followed by a colon and the rest of the list. We are unclear whether the statistic “households consuming country foods” refers to half or more of all meat and fish or half or more of *all* food.

Also on page 13, under Housing, we note that home ownership is *not* likely in 25 NWT communities and don't think this measure is relevant, as a result. As well, the term “core need” should be defined, perhaps in a footnote.

We also suggest adding hyperlinks to the references in this section so that in the electronic version readers can click to find more information.

We note some missing numbers such as additions, mental health issues, food insecurity, family violence, and children who are in licensed child care or in an early childhood program to reveal the effects and costs of poverty. We believe the statistical snapshot has great information value, but would benefit

from these additional information items. Certainly, they should include any issues referenced later as gaps or what we need to do to address gaps.

How Poverty Costs Us

This section is well-done and strengthens the argument for paying attention to poverty. At the end of page 15, note there is an incomplete sentence.

On page 16, the information on “return on investment” is not clear. This term needs definition. Also, the word “troubling” in the second paragraph understates the problem. “Socially unacceptable” suggests more impetus for doing something about poverty than “troubling” does.

Page 17

We like the addition of the case study. In paragraph four, note the terms Income Assistance and Income Support are used interchangeably and that they are capitalized, which creates some confusion. It’s important to note, as well, Bob Simpson’s point, that people in Paulatuk don’t consider themselves as poor and do not want to be described as such.

Page 18

In paragraph one, the list of stakeholders should qualify the final stakeholder by referring to “some NWT residents living in poverty.”

The point about the Social Agenda needs to be fleshed out for those not familiar with it.

This page is not laid out well. The box chart repeats the information on the list of priority areas with no clear need for the duplication. As well the box chart refers to “self-sufficiency” in pillar two, while the list refers to “reaching our potential.” The principles are buried when they should be highlighted. A more limited use of the bold lettering may help important points stand out.

Priority 1

We suggest the following phrase be added to the goal statement: “Children and families lead healthy lives free from poverty *in a safe and nurturing environment.*” Alternate wording for the goal may also be found on page 21: “Healthy children born to healthy parents, growing up in strong and supporting families and caring communities.” The point is to make the goal language consistent with the context paragraphs that follow.

In each of the boxes, we suggest the wording change to “NWT residents said.”

The list of examples in this section is too long, with many similarities between programs. We suggest limiting the list to two for each category where the programs have proven successful and appending a complete list or making it available in a separate document. The numerous examples given may prompt the reader to ask, “Why talk about eliminating poverty with all these initiatives under way?” For example, the pillar one list mentions maternal health, breast feeding and the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program. Choose one. As well, we suggest fact-checking the name of the Canada program as it may include NWT in the title.

Page 21

We suggest removing the words “at risk” in connection with families. Many of the families who use respite care do not perceive themselves as at risk, though they do have children with disabilities. The respite care paragraph belongs under the heading below the section it is in now. A great example of a Support for families program is the NWT Disabilities Council Early Intervention Program, though unfortunately this is not territory-wide.

We suggest rewording the second heading to “Quality Early Learning and Intervention Programs and Support.”

The focus on departmental positions (regional early childhood consultants) is not consistent with the rest of the document where specific programs and initiatives have been highlighted.

Page 22

We suggest only including initiatives on this list where program evaluations have shown success. For example, the Child and Family Resource Centres are pilots in place only since January in only two communities. The text as it is now is misleading.

In the section, “Where do we need to do more” the three statements could be rewritten into one without loss of clarity. And the three boxes could address needs for supports to individuals, families and communities to be consistent with the first paragraph of this section on page 19.

In the section “How are we going to get there”, bullet three, replace “women” with “parents”. As well, consider adding a fourth bullet, “Support family resources centres to provide a variety of services, such as respite.” We note that most of what happens to families with infants and toddlers happens at home. As a result, in-home support for families is essential.

Generally, in this section, the text doesn’t relate to the points in “where we need to do more” and the points in “NWT Residents Have Told Us” don’t match with the back end of this section.

Priority 2

This priority doesn't include enough information about education. We suggest that education, both primary and secondary, be moved to pillar 1, while post-secondary education belongs in pillar 2.

In paragraph one, literacy promotion needs to be coupled with a statement of support for people who are continuing school as adult learners.

Page 24

In the paragraph on the Yellowknife Association for Community Living, the phrase "come from" is misleading as clients need to be in Yellowknife to access services. We suggest it be replaced with "originate."

The NWT Literacy Council intends to compile its own response to this draft strategy and will address the points made in the Literacy section.

Page 26

In the section, "Where do we need to do more" in the third box, make this information more specific by including the age and level of education of people you are talking about. For example, adult learners are not supported the same way grade school, trades or other post-secondary students are. Yet this kind of support is crucial to helping people obtain services and employment.

In the section "How are we going to get there" add a bullet that says "eliminate program barriers" and another that says "seek community and culturally appropriate solutions."

Priority 3

Omit the phrase in bullet three "but it should also be an individual responsibility" as the important point in that statement is that housing should be affordable. As well there needs to be an acknowledgment that youth, single people and seniors need housing in disproportionate numbers compared to the population as a whole.

Omit the paragraph after the bullets as it contributes little to the whole or make the connection between housing and population health clearer.

We like the housing continuum graphic.

Page 28

Relate GNWT support in paragraph two to the vision of the 17th Assembly.

This paragraph reads as if government has done enough in this area. The second sentence describes the section below as an overview of current programs and services. We recommend fixing this inconsistency. Examples could be drawn from the non-profit or business sector, though there are no territorial initiatives eg. Habitat for Humanity, Inuvik Homeless shelter, etc. As well, while buildings may be in place, programming that assists people to avoid or get out of homelessness is lacking. This is particularly the case in transitional housing (BETTY House).

Page 29

Under “How are we going to get there” change the word “promoting” to “providing.”

As well, there is a need to increase the stock of affordable housing, and this is a point that should be included in this section. A third point that needs to be made is to improve the condition of public housing stock and to train community members to provide maintenance.

Priority 4

We are unclear what “own resources” means in the goal statement. We are also unclear about the meaning of the phrase “community governments.” Are these Aboriginal governments or municipal government councils?

Under Harvesting, we suggest you highlight the Small Scale Foods Program. It helps to establish market gardens in communities across the NWT. Grass root community initiatives are instrumental in the creation of farmers markets in Hay River and Yellowknife.

As well, the harvesting section should include fish production.

The section labelled Resource Development should be re-titled Non-Renewable Resource Development to better reflect its content.

Page 32

We are also unclear about why the chart with the high school diploma information is in this section rather than with pillar 1, where education is discussed.

In the section, “Employment and Skills Development” we suggest adding the following, the Department of ITI, in collaboration with the Territorial Farmers Association and the NWT Literacy Council, have established the Northern Farm Training Institute. The Institute is delivering living-classroom instruction for sustainable food production in the North.

The paragraph on the cost of living should be moved into the main discussion of priority 4 on the previous page.

In the section, “What we need to do more” change the word “encourage” to the word “build”

In the section “How do we get there” the language needs to be strengthened. Rather than “encourage access” “improve access”. Rather than “increase investments” “invest in”. Also include developing local sources of energy such as wood, water and wind, and developing gardens and agriculture. As well, we would like to see language about improving elder care in communities where that service is weak.

This pillar is the one in which to highlight social cohesion. We consider it an important element in keeping communities strong, and it’s a concept referenced in the title of the Anti-Poverty Strategy and well as in the asset chart on page 11 (relationships and networks).

Priority 5

On page 34, we take issue with the wording of the first box under “Where do we need to do more.” The text implies that the non-profits are not delivering programs effectively and efficiently. We know this is untrue. As well, we believe this set of actions is not about program delivery per se but about working together (government, NGOs, business) to provide a seamless continuum of services with policies that complement each other.

In the section, “How are we going to get there,” we suggest that there needs to be two more points added: GNWT needs to lead the process of better integration and co-ordination. As well, there needs to be an indication of how this change is going to be achieved, such as “providing support for inter-agency groups to strengthen the continuum of service.”

We also recommend that a gap analysis of services be completed as a pre-requisite of a plan for greater integration.

Roles, Responsibilities and Moving Forward Together

We are troubled by the chart (which has no title). It seems to us that many of these goals need to be a priority for all the organizations listed at the top, rather than being organized into silos. Everyone needs to work on everything. Any mention of social issues should be changed to include socio-economic issues. Perhaps some other graphic which illustrates the overlap and linkages, rather than perpetuating silos would be more appropriate.

Page 36

We believe that the discussion of GNWT leadership needs to appear near the front of the document, perhaps in the introduction. Note the words “we are” are missing in the first sentence of that section.

We have questions about the “daisy” chart. We believe that it is missing some essential elements such as the economic development strategy, the mineral development strategy and the labour market

framework. We also believe that this graphic belongs in the continuum of service pillar (5) so that it gives context to the ways in which government needs to bring its anti-poverty work together.

Page 37

Here's the spot for a comprehensive listing of GNWT programs and services to be linked to this document.

Page 38

The last sentence in paragraph one should be a call to action, written in active language.

The sentence in paragraph two about groups gathering their own indicators should be fleshed out with an example.

Page 39

The title of the chart should be "Methods of Community Input"

Page 40

The graphic for the No Place for Poverty report should be of the report itself, not the logo.