



Policy Briefs

Policy Brief # 2

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Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction: 2008 Pre-Budget Consultation

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction commends the Province of Ontario on its leadership in establishing a Cabinet Committee focused on poverty reduction and the development of a strategy to address the unacceptable levels of poverty in the province. We also recognize the important leadership role and contribution of the Ministry of Finance to this Cabinet Committee. Over the next year, the Government of Ontario will focus strategic investments in poverty reduction efforts which we believe will make a significant impact on low-income children, their families and communities.

Over the past few years, several other provincial governments have moved towards creating poverty reduction strategies by adopting specific policy goals, establishing financial commitments and setting out benchmarks for implementing change to reduce poverty in their jurisdictions. In Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Quebec, governments have focused on poverty reduction initiatives to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Several European jurisdictions have been extremely successful in reducing levels of poverty through comprehensive, coordinated strategies. In what came to be dubbed as “the Irish miracle”, poverty in Ireland was slashed to “6.8 per cent from the daunting 15 per cent that lived beneath the line of destitution 10 years ago”¹.

Importantly, each poverty reduction initiative recognizes the importance of breaking down the systemic (or bureaucratic) barriers that exist within or between governments by developing a synchronized approach to dealing with poverty. Like the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction’s process of ‘breaking down silos’, a successful poverty reduction strategy must engage both community and government and strive towards a widespread commitment or ‘buy-in’. Many families are trapped in poverty because of policy and systemic failures. Reducing poverty means removing barriers that keep families from achieving self-sufficiency² and building a *‘better Ontario for Families’*.

In September 2007, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction called upon the Government of Ontario to support an Ontario Poverty Strategy. Specifically, we urged the Government to:

- 1) **Establish a Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction.** The Cabinet Committee must draw on the expertise of its different ministries, and be directly accountable to the Premier and Minister of Finance. Over the last few years there have been several successful initiatives of this kind; for example, the Democratic Renewal Secretariat and the Ontario Growth Secretariat. A Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction will establish political accountability for the issue of poverty, build

¹ Toronto Star “The Irish miracle, April 7, 2007

² “Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative” Saint John.

bridges between different government departments that relate to poverty and implement the wide range of solutions needed to combat conditions of poverty across Ontario.

- 2) **Establish a multi-sector Provincial Panel on Poverty Reduction.** One of the major findings of the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction is that, while government has a major role to play in reducing poverty, all sectors – business, community, people living in low income, and government need to take responsibility and be involved in the long term solutions.
- 3) **Develop measurable targets and timelines to reduce poverty.** The ability to monitor progress or lack of progress is a crucial factor to evaluate success in reducing poverty. An example of targets and timelines include Campaign 2000's call for a 25% reduction in the child poverty rate (based on the Low Income Cut Off) by 2012. Other targets should include reductions in the rates of low income for different sub-populations – Aboriginal people, single mothers, recent immigrants, or visible minorities. Once established, the Poverty Reduction Strategy should include annual progress reports toward the targets.
- 4) **Invest the resources and create the necessary policies to reduce and prevent poverty.** The Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction has identified five key areas of investment in the lives of children, youth and their families living in poverty:
 - Quality early learning and child care
 - Skills through education, activity, and recreation
 - Targeted skills development (Post – secondary)
 - Employment
 - Asset Building and Wealth Creation

2008 Ontario Budget Considerations

Research conducted by the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction identifies that investing in the lives of children; youth and their families living below the low-income cut off will have a significant and positive impact. The Government of Ontario recognizes the importance of this investment through the recently announced **Ontario Child Benefit** which can be accessed by Low-Income and Working Poor families. In 2006 and 2007, the City of Hamilton returned the municipal portion of the National Child Benefit, nearly \$3 million was returned to 6,000 low income families resulting in an increased capacity for these families.

We also commend the Government for its recent investments in the **Ontario Dental Benefit** and **social assistance rates**. The Hamilton Roundtable commends the Government of Ontario on these steps forward to support vulnerable families but we know that many low-income and working poor families live in precarious financial circumstances. We urge the Government of Ontario to consider a shorter timeline for the full implementation of the Ontario Child Benefit and to consider a stronger investment in social assistance benefits to build a stronger Ontario for our most vulnerable families. The Ontario Child Benefit is one of the strongest tools available to reduce child poverty in our province.

To assist Ontario's working poor families; the Government of Ontario has identified increases in the **minimum wage** to \$10.25 by 2010. We acknowledge this commitment but know that even a \$10.25 minimum wage would continue to place many working families below the low income cut off. All working families should be able to benefit from their contributions to a stronger Ontario and a **living wage approach** will achieve this end. It will enable all Ontarians to work, build and dream about a positive future together.

Finally, the Hamilton Roundtable believes that place matters. Investing in cities, communities and neighbourhoods is critical. Our poorest families often live in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods in communities. The Government of Ontario is a critical partner in ensuring that neighbourhoods and communities are healthy.

In Hamilton, the City of Hamilton and Hamilton Community Foundation are co-conveners of the Roundtable and are supported by a broad array of business, government, voluntary sector and low-income leaders. True community solutions require the shared investment of many partners. We invite the Government of Ontario to join us as we move forward on a poverty reduction strategy focusing on children, youth and their families in Hamilton. Below are suggestions about how the Government of Ontario can contribute to our shared poverty reduction strategy.

Specific Investments in Children, Youth and their Families

Quality Early Learning and Parenting:

- Continued support and increased investment in the provincial Best Start Initiative and the Ontario Early Years Centre
- Commitment to implement the recommendations outlined in the three expert panel reports commissioned under the Best Start initiative
- Commitment to work with Best Start Networks and CMSMs/DSSABs to understand and plan for the transition to full-day JK/SK (which will have a huge impact on the current child care system)
- Expand and enhance the integration of programs directed at children and families in the early years with a particular focus on low-income and marginalized families; including increased investment in child care subsidies to assist CMSMs/DSSABs. Research proves that an investment in the 0 to 6 age range makes a significant impact on the child and their family.

Skills through Education, Activity and Recreation

- Increased access recreational activities by children in the middle years through before and after school programs; support for sports, recreation and the arts; and support to schools to increase their availability to the community.

Targeted Skills Development:

- Support for targeted training and mentoring programs for at-risk youth to increase their opportunities and attachment to the workforce. At risk youth traditionally fall between the margins in being able to access appropriate employment training programs. A unique pilot project is being undertaken in Hamilton through the Skills Development Flagship and community partners which provides at-risk youth with employment supports, mentoring and social supports to ensure employment success.

Employment:

- Continued support for new immigrants to obtain appropriate credentialing and access to employment opportunities which will increase the earning capacity of these families. In Hamilton, 50 % of new immigrants fall below the poverty line. Many of these individuals have skills and capacities which would strengthen the Ontario economy but are not able to access employment because of credential and Canadian experience barriers.

Asset Building and Wealth Creation:

- Investment in increasing the affordable housing stock in communities and supporting low-income families to maintain their current housing status. In many low income neighbourhoods, families often move several times during the course of a year leading to increased costs to the family, disruption to the school system and disorientation within neighbourhoods. Supporting families to build assets including home ownership can have a significant impact on the stability of a family.



The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction was born out of concern for our community's poverty challenge. It came together in May 2005 to understand Hamilton's high poverty levels, focus the community's attention on poverty, and begin to find solutions. Since then, we have consulted widely in the community, reviewed findings from local consultations on poverty related issues, explored best practices here and elsewhere, and received advice from experts in approach to poverty and community action.

Hamilton is a community at the crossroads. 20% of our people are living in poverty. We know that tackling poverty is a key to both our economic development and our social development. In February 2006 the Roundtable announced a poverty reduction strategy focused on children and youth: making Hamilton the best Place to Raise a Child: A Change Framework. We took this initial focus for a number of reasons:

- It reflects the voice of the community
- It targets a significant poverty demographic and encompasses other poverty "hotspots"
- It is grounded in best practices
- It supports Hamilton's strategic vision
- Children are the future of our City

The Roundtable is one piece of the framework – in its role as convenor and facilitator the Roundtable will help to drive the change process – but it will take everyone in Hamilton working together to really make an impact on poverty. The Roundtable believes that by taking a systems approach and working together with a focus on children and youth, our community can reduce poverty and make Hamilton *The Best Place to Raise a Child*.

For more information about the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction visit:
<http://www.hamiltonpoverty.ca>

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The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction is co-convened by the Hamilton Community Foundation and the City of Hamilton

Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction – Membership

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