Focusing on rights can help us eliminate poverty

By Elizabeth McIsaac

Maytree and *The Philanthropist* started our series on Poverty and Human Rights in Canada a little more than a year ago. For us, it was an opportunity to explore ideas about solving poverty using a human rights approach, and to share them with other organizations working in this field.

Human rights include civil, political, economic, and social rights. These are fundamental rights that are inherent in all human beings. We all have these rights, regardless of what laws exist or don't exist where we live.

In Canada, we are most familiar and comfortable with civil and political rights, such as the right to vote, have fair elections, and exercise free speech. We are perhaps less familiar with the idea and meaning of economic and social rights, which relate to employment, social security, and access to housing, education, health care, and an adequate standard of living. These rights allow us to live in dignity and participate fully in society.

In the introduction to the series, I outlined our interest in pursuing solutions to poverty that take a rights-based approach. We looked to important international documents, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to guide our thinking about the responsibilities that all levels of governments have to steadily advance the rights of everyone in Canada. We looked to the systems that create poverty rather than protect people from it. We looked to the rights-based approach to re-position people as active agents with a claim to a life with dignity, well-being, and opportunity, rather than as supplicants forced to knock on the door of the system that failed them in the first place.

And then, we looked to others to help us understand what Canada is doing and has done on this front.

Mark Holmgren interviewed Edmonton Mayor Don Iveson and Anglican Bishop Jane Alexander, co-chairs of the Mayor's Task Force, EndPoverty Edmonton. They spoke about how the experience of poverty is about much more than just income, and about how we need to focus on eliminating, not managing, poverty. Importantly, they reminded us that those actions that will really make a difference will probably make us uncomfortable.

Michael Creek chronicled his own journey from "working a regular job," to living with cancer, to sleeping in a ravine, to working to amplify the voices of people with a lived experience of poverty. He reminded us that understanding and fixing the systems that create poverty will require the meaningful

participation of people who are most affected by poverty, and that leading change will take courage.

[Bruce Porter](#) reflected on the history of economic and social rights in Canada. He took us on a tour of the various ways these rights have been interpreted over the past 50 years and gave us a glimpse of how other constitutional democracies have used rights as a catalyst for policy changes. In this way, he showed us that current attitudes towards economic and social rights, and the ways that governments and courts enforce them (or don't), are far from inevitable or immutable, and that we can broaden our ideas of human rights and the ways that we act to realize them.

[Adam Parachin](#) discussed how registered charities can contribute to the work of safeguarding human rights, and how it relates to charitable or political activities under Canadian charity law. In particular, he explained how calling for protections of existing rights is not "political activity" under current charity law.

[Lillian Knorr](#) looked at how our health system can better support people to access income security programs. Her discussion of an innovative tool to support doctors to screen patients for low income demonstrates the variety of actors that must be involved in ensuring economic and social rights. She also highlighted the challenges involved with disrupting the status quo in large, established systems.

As we've worked with the authors on this series, we at Maytree have also been working to find the path forward for our work on poverty and human rights. This has involved further articulating some of the principles that underpin our work and identifying practical actions we can take to tackle the persistence of poverty.

Canada's uneven foundation of human rights

As Canadians, we see ourselves as a nation that respects and promotes human rights. And for good reason: we have a strong tradition of upholding civil and political rights. Though we are certainly not perfect on this front, we have made significant progress towards protecting these rights, and putting mechanisms into place to drive change when these rights are violated.

But we have much further to go when it comes to safeguarding economic and social rights, in particular when it comes to poverty and rights. In fact, we are often uncomfortable with the very idea that people have a *right* to live free from poverty. It could be that we get nervous about the legal implications of acknowledging this right, and the obligations that would come with that. It could be that we are used to thinking about human rights as civil and political rights, and that the notion of economic and social rights is simply not on our radar. Or it could be that many of us are lulled into inaction by the belief that people are made poor by choices they've made, rather than by the systems that fail to protect them.

That said, we tend to be very comfortable talking about aspects of social and economic rights that are firmly established in Canadian culture, such as universal public health care and public education. These have become a part of the Canadian psyche, and a part of our identity as a nation. Access to these essential services is not dependent on the ability to pay, or on some false notion of "deserving" and "undeserving." While we do debate how best to deliver public health care or education, we do not debate that we ought to be delivering them in the first place, nor that everyone should have access to them. Further, we understand how realizing these rights for individuals contributes to a common good – a healthy and educated public is a benefit to society as a whole.

The question now is: How do we shore up our foundation of human rights so that economic and social rights are more evenly balanced with civil and political rights?

How we can make change

As with many of society's "wicked" problems, the path forward is not always clear. One route is the legal one. It would consider how important international documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, define rights and our obligations to protect them. It would also consider particular sections of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms that relate to economic and social rights, and the federal, provincial, and local laws that must accord with it.

Another route is to look to enhancing our culture of human rights – that is, the way that we understand and act on human rights – by widening it to include economic and social rights, and making these rights as much a part of our Canadian identity as civil and political rights already are.

These two paths approach the problem from different angles. We are in the enviable position of being able to tread either path. We can encourage governments to honour the commitments they have made through international agreements and indeed through our own constitution. We can also work "on the ground" to nurture changes in the way people think and feel, which will provide public support for laws and policies, as well as in the equally powerful social expectations that shape our daily actions.

Both routes have potential, and in fact are mutually reinforcing. But first, we have to agree on a destination.

We must forge a consensus that we all have the *right* to dignity, opportunity, and well-being, and to live free from poverty. This is not a lofty goal, nor one that we can simply set aside when times are tough. Economic and social rights, like all human rights, must be protected and realized even when the choice to do so is unpopular.

Poverty *is* the result of the choices we make as a society. In a wealthy nation such as Canada, poverty is not inevitable. We choose to allow poverty to exist by, for example, electing leaders who decline to protect people's rights.

The flip side is, of course, that we can choose to eliminate poverty. To do this, we will need to act. We will need leaders with the conviction to make difficult choices – to make investments without expectation of a political "return," for example, or to raise more money through taxes to strengthen our social safety net.

And we, the electorate, must increase our tolerance for leaders who are willing to make those courageous decisions. Politicians and governments at all levels are not the only ones responsible for protecting rights. Businesses, non-profit and community organizations, and individuals all have a role to play. The recognition of our shared obligation to ensure all of our rights is at the heart of our social contract.

To make good on the social contract, we must focus on realizing our rights in everyday life. Rights must be more than words on a page; we must implement them. This will not happen all at once, but we

can work continuously at it, steadily advancing towards our goal. In the language of human rights, we must work towards "progressive realization."

To evaluate whether we are making progress, we need to set effective and meaningful targets and measure if and how our efforts are having an impact. When our measurements and evaluations demonstrate that we are not advancing our goals, we need transparent mechanisms to hold our leaders and ourselves accountable.

This evaluation requires robust, timely data to help us understand the state of poverty in Canada. Currently, it doesn't exist. We can remedy this by choosing to invest in collecting, cleaning, and analyzing relevant data, and by making sure that it is available in a timeframe that allows us to reflect on, and adjust, our strategies.

Rights inhere in people, and our thinking and actions must always begin and end with people. While words and numbers, in the form of laws, policies, and data, give us an indication of how we are doing, the ultimate test lies with how people experience their economic and social rights in their everyday lives. Do people have access to decent work, nutritious food, and housing that meets their needs? Do they have recourse when their rights are violated? Do they have a voice in shaping the laws, policies, and other decisions that affect their lives?

Our actions should aim to strengthen the foundations for economic and social rights. Measures to limit and prevent violations – and to ensure accountability – are necessary. But so are constructive actions to create the conditions that advance dignity, well-being, and opportunity for everyone in Canada.

Opportunities ahead

We are optimistic. The last year has brought forth new opportunities. A national housing strategy and Canada's first ever national poverty reduction strategy are on the horizon. These are tremendous opportunities for the federal government to clearly acknowledge the right to housing and the right to live free from poverty, and to codify these rights in law and policy.

It is also an opportunity for action. We look to these strategies to come with significant investments in advancing these rights, as well as in improving the data infrastructure that would allow us to measure their impact.

We have to counter the thinking that changing ideas, values, and behaviours takes time. Yes, we might expect profound changes, such as those that involve shifting and expanding our national identity, to happen incrementally. As the saying goes, Canada was formed by evolution, not revolution. But too much is at stake for us to simply wait out natural evolutionary timelines. As activist organizations, we must work to nurture and accelerate this change.

As we learned through this series, changing established systems can be challenging, but the status quo is not inevitable. We, and our leaders, need courage, because transformative change will likely be uncomfortable. But that should not hold us back. Those of us that are registered charities may lawfully call on governments to fulfil existing rights, such as those that we have already agreed to through international agreements and our own laws. And as advocates for social change, we can, and should, consider how a human rights perspective can inform our work, our view of the problem, the solutions that might apply, and who ought to be involved in making those solutions happen. This re-imagining of

our own work is one way that we can contribute to the building of a more robust culture of rights in Canada.

As we move from exploring ideas about rights to taking action to realize and protect those rights, we are encouraged to see these opportunities in front of us, and to see like-minded leaders and organizations walking beside us. To put poverty behind us, we must support the best instincts of Canadians, harness our values of equality of opportunity and human dignity, and turn these values into actions.