The 3rd Summit on Poverty organized by the Common Front for Social Justice (CFSJ) was held at the Moncton Lions Community Center on October 16 and 17, 2010.

Under the theme “Poverty, a Violation of Human Rights”, 150 participants heard the views of several speakers, who concurred in affirming society’s responsibility for guaranteeing everyone’s right to a standard of living sufficient to ensure their health and welfare and that of their family.

Moncton Mayor George LeBlanc expressed his thanks to Forum organizers and described the meeting as a real statement on the condition of people living in poverty. Referring to his own youth, the Mayor said he was raised in very modest circumstances but not in poverty. He realizes that not everyone has been so privileged.

To live in poverty is to live in constant violation of my basic rights.

The first day of the Summit featured addresses by three influential guest speakers. Former Lieutenant-Governor Herménégilde Chiasson spoke to the group on the vision of John Peters Humphrey, native of Hampton, New Brunswick, who was among the writers of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Quoting the fact that three billion people are currently living on an income of $2.00 per day, he went on to call for the eradication of poverty.

A highlight of the day was the minute of silence that was observed in memory of persons who lost their lives due to poverty. Common Front Co-President John Gagnon led the memorial.

A number of individuals shared with the participants some of their personal experiences that demonstrate instances of violations of human rights. One woman stated that she had to make do with $110.00 per month for food and clothing. A mother of four confided that their basic needs were not being met. A single man mentioned that 60.5% of his income was spent on rent. He deplored having to live in one small room, and the ill effects it was having on his health and mental ability.

Another man said that he can’t feed himself adequately and that his weight is being affected. One senior who has reached retirement age has to keep on working to pay for her Blue Cross coverage.

One woman described the hardship associated with paying for medication for her disabled husband who suffered a stroke. She took care of him for eight years but now her own health has given out and she has had to place him in a nursing home. It’s a financial burden when reaching retirement age.
Panel: Why does society tolerate poverty?

Claudia Park Julien, a Provincial Board member for the CFSJ, made the following points:
A lot of people think that nothing should change regarding poverty except for the attitude of the person who is poor. There are still many prejudices that continue to generate violations of human rights:

- Poor people are poor because they don’t adapt to society; they are beer drinkers; they often play bingo; they are filthy dirty; they can’t be trusted; they sleep until noon; they are neglectful of their children, etc.

Yet one of the root causes of poverty is admittedly our economic system based on profit making.

According to Rob Moir, Professor of Economics at University of New Brunswick in Saint John, social assistance policies are a way for governments to save money. Mr. Moir used statistical charts to illustrate the large gap between the rich and the poor.

Mr. Moir’s propositions include increasing minimum wage rates, restoring unemployment insurance benefits, guaranteeing security pensions, setting a maximum wage, improving assistance benefits for those unable to work, promoting employee ownership of businesses, and encouraging adherence to the principles of co-operation. “If we could only manage to eliminate injustice, we could stop spending so much on the prison system and the health system.”

What is being done internationally to enforce the human rights of the poor?

Keynote speaker for October 15th was Martha Jackman, Law Professor at the University of Ottawa. She lamented the degradation of the social safety net since the 1990s. In her view, Canadians’ perception of poverty has not evolved since the 19th century. Most still think that poverty can be attributed to people’s laziness.

She emphasized the unbelievable status of poor people when society allows them to sleep in cardboard boxes on the street while refusing them permission to put up tents in municipal parks. Ms. Jackman believes that international law provides a context that allows us to recast poverty as a violation of human rights. It can be used to force governments to help the needy. Will we therefore need to go through the courts to pursue the struggle to help people living in poverty?

Evening activities on October 15 attracted various participants according to their interest. Films demonstrating the persistence of prejudice, such as Mary Walsh’s Poor No More and La faim d’un pays, were shown. Painting and drawing workshops gave participants another opportunity to express their views on poverty.
Human Rights: From principles to practice

Retired teacher Hector Cormier, from Moncton, is also President of the Coalition for the Rights of Seniors and Nursing Home Residents. He offered a good summary of discussions during the Summit, wondering why there is such a gap between our great principles and reality as we know it.

When we consider the slowness of decision-makers in upholding human rights, it’s not surprising that practice trails so far behind ideals. In Canada, various movements on the extreme right have dominated religious, social, economic and national political thought. This orientation has made it difficult to push for and adopt some of the principles of the various charters of rights and freedoms.

Mr. Cormier evoked some of the teachings of great monotheistic religions that have restricted the implementation of rights and freedoms over the centuries. He quoted controversial passages from the New Testament, the Quran and other sacred writings, and called on society to reflect on discrimination, hatred, segregation and atrocities committed against human groups such as women, children, homosexuals, Jews, Blacks, and others.

To illustrate his point, Mr. Cormier used as examples two of Canada’s provincial premiers who fought to bring reforms based on social justice: Tommy Douglas established a Medicare program in the province of Saskatchewan and Louis J. Robichaud, a program of social equality in New Brunswick. Opposition to both these programs was ferocious, as everyone knows.

There is much talk of turning to the private sector to provide health care, and Mr. Cormier had a warning on that score for Summit participants. In his view, the private sector isn’t interested in poor people nor in people who have severe health problems. It is no wonder to him that coalitions have to fight to claim everyone’s right to social justice and the right to live with dignity.

After citing several examples of wasteful spending by governments, he questioned the scarcity of human and financial resources allocated towards the elimination of the causes of poverty. He concluded by commenting on our society’s good fortune in having people that are engaged in creating a better world and promoting equality and equity. In his final comments, Mr. Cormier applauded the passion and commitment of the organizers of this Summit for social justice.

What can be done in New Brunswick to increase respect for human rights?

Discussion tables, facilitated by CFSJ Provincial Coordinator Jean-Claude Basque and Provincial Consultant Auréa Cormier, recommended the following actions to reduce poverty:

**Food and nutrition**

- Provide funding to farmers and encourage people to buy locally grown products
- Provide more public education to enable people to read labels and compare prices
- Invest in community gardens and transform the forest industry
- Provide tool banks for use in co-operative gardens
- Institute income tax rebates to help with land use development
- Lobby government. Protect “ordinary people”.
- Change our culture to improve children’s nutrition
- Compost restaurant food wastes

**Prescription drugs**
- Medical care as a priority in election platforms
- Educate the public on medications and preventive measures
- Create a public drug coverage program as promised in the Poverty Reduction Plan
- Introduce a course on prescription drug abuse within medical school curriculum and for the general public
- Examine the cost of not taking prescribed drugs on the health care system

**Disability**
- Increase disability supplement
- Remove restriction of over 21 years of age to be considered disabled
- Bring back the lump sum payment of $1000 as supplement
- Create a common fund for people with handicaps
- Mental disability status should not be subject to age limit
- An Ombudsman should be able to help. What authority is carried by that office?

**Seniors**
- Increase Income Supplement by 5%
- Increase monthly income cut-off to $20,000 for access to supplement
- Universal drug coverage

**Housing**
- Ensure that a rentals officer exercises a more active role in supervising residences and units. Educate tenants and landlords concerning laws and their application
- Adopt best practices, and best programs meeting with success in other countries and provinces (funded programs such as the John Howard Society as well as co-operatives)
- Pursue the “At Home/Chez soi” initiative
- Raise public awareness. Keep our ears open to hear our neighbours. Watch over and coach individuals.
- Provide regular inspections to ensure cleanliness and prevent abuse by landlords

Closing remarks and words of thanks were given by Linda McCaustlin, co-president of the New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice.