

WSSD2 PEOPLE'S REPORT 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Historically, Canada has been a leader in human rights and social development, recognized for its achievements at the United Nations and on the international stage. Yet the lived experiences of people across the country make clear that Canada is actively backsiding on fulfilling human rights obligations at home.

The Second World Summit on Social Development (WSSD2), held November 4-6, 2025 in Doha, Qatar, marked a critical opportunity for Canada to reassert its commitments and leadership. Canada is now being called to account for its obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights—specifically SDG 1: No Poverty, SDG 2: Zero Hunger, and SDG 5: Gender Equality.

Organizations from across the country—grassroots groups, community agencies, human rights organizations, feminist, disability-led, Black-led, and Queer/2SLGBTQIA+ led organizations, academics, and faith groups have developed this WSSD2 People's Report as a shared platform to hold Canada accountable and propose evidence-informed solutions. This report provides input into Canada's upcoming Voluntary National Review and the formulation of the post-2030 SDG agenda.

This report applies intersectional, rights-based, feminist, anti-oppressive, and anti-colonial approaches to explore experiences, outcomes, barriers, and solutions across housing, income security, food security, health, employment, education, and childcare through the lenses of Indigenous rights, race, gender, (dis)ability, environmental and climate justice, immigration status, and sexual orientation.

Historical Context and a Critical Contradiction

In 1995, Canada played a major role at the first World Summit for Social Development (WSSD1) in Copenhagen, helping craft the Copenhagen Declaration which affirmed three interdependent pillars: **economic development, social development, and environmental protection**. The 10 commitments provided a comprehensive framework for addressing poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion, with emphasis on human rights, gender equality, and sustainable development.

Yet that same day in March 1995, Canada's federal budget made deep cuts to social programs, gutted the Canada Assistance Plan and its national standards, and reduced civil service capacity working on human rights and social development. This marked the beginning of a thirty-year slide.

Social development has evolved through the Millennium Goals, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and Rio+20 to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda with its 17

SDGs. While these commitments represent significant diplomatic achievements, domestic implementation of economic, social, and cultural rights has proved less than satisfactory.

History repeats itself. On November 4, 2025, the same day WSSD2 began in Doha—Canada presented its federal budget. Rather than aligning with the Doha Declaration's call to strengthen universal social protection and address structural inequality, the budget moves in the opposite direction: 15% across-the-board cuts to government programs, reduced civil service capacity, increased military spending, and investment in fossil fuel projects. These choices directly undermine Canada's human rights, SDG, and climate commitments at the precise moment when the international community gathered to reaffirm them.

Canada's Progress: A Mixed Record

SDG 1: No Poverty — While there were measurable poverty reductions before COVID-19, systemic inequities remain entrenched, poverty is now rising, and there has been insufficient movement toward equity-based targets addressing marginalized populations.

SDG 2: Zero Hunger — There have been positive initiatives like the National School Food Program in recent years, yet Canada still lacks a rights-based, legally enforceable framework for food security. Policy responses remain fragmented and temporary. Food insecurity is at historic highs, and charitable approaches are overwhelmed by rising need.

SDG 5: Gender Equality — Canada has introduced important policy tools like the Gender Results Framework and the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence. The gender wage gap has narrowed among some workers. However, progress has been uneven, with persistent disparities disproportionately affecting Indigenous women, racialized women, and women with disabilities. High rates of violence, unequal caregiving burdens, and lack of binding legislative measures demonstrate incomplete progress.

Cross-Cutting Analysis: Structural Barriers to Progress

Canada's progress remains constrained by structural drivers: income and wealth inequality, underinvestment in affordable and non-market housing, labour market barriers, over-reliance on charitable food systems, and a fragmented social safety net. Climate change acts as a risk multiplier, deepening poverty, hunger, and gender-based harms while magnifying historic inequities for Indigenous peoples, Black communities, newcomers, disabled people, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, and youth.

While there have been policy successes (\$10-a-day childcare, the Canada Child Benefit, the Pharmacare Act), current responses often follow market-first approaches that fail to address hidden homelessness, food insecurity, gendered evictions, ableism, social exclusion, and regional realities.

Food insecurity tracks closely with incomes and housing costs. Charitable responses cannot meet people's needs and rarely promote dignity. Rights-based approaches; income adequacy, living wages, non-market housing, Indigenous food sovereignty show better outcomes.

Income security programs remain piecemeal and inadequate. Income inequality has intensified as wealth concentrates among a tiny elite and the tax system becomes increasingly regressive. When adequate unconditional supports were tried (e.g., CERB), food insecurity fell

and wellbeing rose—evidence that unconditional transfers effectively remedy poverty and deprivation.

Key Lessons for Follow-Up

Integrate intersectionality: In 1995, gender equality, poverty reduction, and food security were treated as separate policy areas. This siloed approach persists, undermining effectiveness. Poverty, hunger, and gender inequality are interconnected and reinforced by climate change, experienced most acutely by people at multiple intersecting margins.

Enshrine rights in law: While Canada acknowledges rights to food, housing, and gender equality in principle, these lack enforceable domestic law. Legislative guarantees are needed. Now is the time to domesticate key human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Formalize civil society engagement: The Copenhagen process engaged civil society and the civil service; since then, engagement has been ad hoc. Follow-up efforts should commit to formal mechanisms, such as a people's reporting platform involving community organizations, Indigenous governments, and people with lived experience in design and monitoring.

Integrate climate action: Climate change directly undermines all three SDGs, from increasing food prices and displacing communities to worsening gender-based vulnerabilities. Future commitments must explicitly integrate climate adaptation and mitigation into poverty reduction, food security, and gender equality policies.

A Wake-Up Call: The Path Forward

Without a human rights compliance ecosystem, governments rely on less effective remedies, including over-reliance on charity, instead of political choices that could eliminate poverty and hunger.

Economic, social, and cultural rights will remain hollow without concrete accountability and enforcement mechanisms. These rights must be substantive, not aspirational. As climate disruptions grow and AI reshapes employment, Canadians must be assured social protections and freedom from discrimination to remain a prosperous nation where everyone can thrive.

Many of today's issues are characterized as "wicked problems", too complex to solve. Yet we have evidence-informed remedies proven effective in research and other countries. What is required is political will to implement solutions and ensure human rights are real, substantive rights that people can claim and hold political actors accountable to.

Key Recommendations

SDG 1 – No Poverty: Rebuilding Income Security and Housing as Rights

- Commit to a national pathway toward basic income guarantee, lifting incomes to at minimum the Market Basket Measure with additional support for disability-related costs
- Increase the GST Credit to a robust monthly benefit; integrate the Canada Workers Benefit and remove exclusionary conditions

- Strengthen the Canada Disability Benefit based on actual costs; rebalance seniors' benefits to protect lowest-income seniors
- Tie federal transfers to adequacy benchmarks and human rights principles with non-regression clauses
- Set and legislate ambitious non-market housing targets; implement a Renters' Bill of Rights
- Use loan-equity blends, public land strategies, and a Rental Protection Fund for public, co-op, and non-profit ownership
- Co-develop an Indigenous Poverty and Rights Plan with 10-year, needs-based, Indigenous-led funding consistent with UNDRIP and TRC Calls to Action

SDG 2 – Zero Hunger: Ending Food Insecurity as a Policy Choice

- Legislate a Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act with binding targets to eliminate extreme food insecurity by 2030
- Integrate food security into monitoring of income security, housing, and health
- Invest in community-owned food hubs, Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives, and sustainable local/regional procurement
- Transform Nutrition North to be community-controlled, transparent, and effective
- Design the National School Food Program as universal, stigma-free, and culturally appropriate

SDG 5 – Gender Equality: Tackling Material Roots of Inequality and Violence

- Design income security measures with gender and intersectional impacts in mind; provide targeted support to lone-parent households and caregivers
- Fully implement MMIWG Calls for Justice and the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence with dedicated budgets and timelines
- Create dedicated non-market housing for women and gender-diverse people, particularly violence survivors
- Stabilize and properly value the care economy as central to gender equality and economic resilience
- Embed gender-responsive budgeting and intersectional analysis in all major economic, climate, and infrastructure decisions

Building Accountability

For decades, Canada has been advised to create stronger domestic mechanisms for implementing human rights. Key elements include:

- Amend the Canadian Human Rights Act to include "social condition" and explicitly reference core international treaties
- Establish a well-resourced Federal Human Rights Office to track implementation with a public tracker of commitments, budgets, and timelines
- Create independent oversight (e.g., SDG and Human Rights Commissioner) with powers to audit, report, and trigger parliamentary debate
- Require human rights impact assessments for major budgets, trade deals, and climate measures
- Provide stable, (3-10) multi-year core funding for Indigenous-led, Black-led, disability-led, feminist, youth, and other equity-seeking organizations

- Ensure Indigenous nations and equity-seeking communities have meaningful power in program design, governance, and evaluation

Shaping the Post-2030 Agenda

Shaping the Post-2030 Agenda

The current SDG framework expires in 2030. Our credibility at global tables is rooted in domestic progress—we cannot champion human rights internationally while undermining them at home. Canada has the opportunity to lead by example, demonstrating commitment to substantive human rights by proposing and implementing binding targets and timelines. This includes decision-makers who show leadership and political will to ensure people-centred policy design and implementation, courts willing to hold state actors accountable, and a rights compliance and enforcement environment that is transparent, accountable, equitable, and just. We are ready to collaborate in these ways to grow a stronger, more sovereign, inclusive and resilient Canada, capable of thriving as a beacon of sustainable progress in a rapidly changing world.

Report available at: peoplesreportcanada.org