

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper  
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Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

The Honourable Kathleen Wynne  
Premier of Ontario  
Room 281  
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October 15, 2013

### **Open Letter: Invest in Poverty Reduction for Better Health and Stronger Communities**

Dear Prime Minister Harper and Premier Wynne,

As we mark the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17<sup>th</sup>, Ontario's registered nurses urge our federal and provincial political leaders to take urgent action to improve the health and well-being of people living in poverty. Across the globe and in our communities, people who struggle to meet their basic needs because of low income and social exclusion are dying decades sooner than those not living in poverty.

To our federal politicians, we ask that the federal government act to restore its traditional commitment of working globally with civil society groups to aid those most in need. We are deeply concerned that Canada's international aid policies are going in the wrong direction with the absorption of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) into the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Affairs (DFAIT) announced in the 2013 federal budget. There is a concern that the newly created Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD) will dilute CIDA's historical core mandate of poverty reduction.<sup>1 2</sup> Instead of focusing on the most vulnerable, there seems to be a shift to the commercialization of official development assistance towards the interests of private Canadian companies, particularly in the extractive sector.<sup>3 4</sup>

Here at home, the realities are shameful. Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world and yet 1.6 million Canadian households, nearly one in eight, experienced some level of food insecurity in 2011. That's 3.9 million individuals, including 1.1 million children, who are unable to access nutritious food of sufficient quality and in sufficient quantity to maintain good health.<sup>5</sup> As the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science, and Technology concluded in their report, **In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing, and Homelessness**: "Canada's system for lifting people out of poverty is substantially broken and must be overhauled."<sup>6</sup> The United Nations' special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, reported: "What I've seen in Canada is a system that presents barriers for the poor to access nutritious diets and that tolerates increased inequalities between rich and poor, and aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples." Noting his particular concern in 2012 about the "large number of people living on social assistance who see their income drained away by housing," De Schutter said, "People are simply too poor to eat decently."<sup>7</sup> The evidence is overwhelming that it is past time to acknowledge "the growing gap between Canada's international human rights commitments and

their implementation domestically”<sup>8</sup> and to act accordingly, beginning with recommendations made in the **In From the Margins** report.

In Ontario, RNs were proud that all three parties voted unanimously on May 6, 2009 to approve an amended *Bill 152, the Poverty Reduction Act, 2009*.<sup>9</sup> RNAO appreciates the initial progress of the first five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy that saw 40,000 children and their families lifted out of poverty despite the recession. At the same time, we continue to be alarmed by the more than 573,000 households that remain food insecure in Ontario.<sup>10</sup> We implore Premier Wynne to accelerate poverty reduction efforts by increasing the minimum wage and indexing it to inflation so that it becomes a pathway out of poverty. Ontario’s dangerously low social assistance rates also need to be increased so that they reflect the actual cost of living. Federal and provincial action is needed to improve access to affordable housing, supportive housing, and address homelessness.

The theme for the 2013 International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is “Working together toward a world without discrimination: Building on the experience and knowledge of people in extreme poverty.”<sup>11</sup> In the midst of the need for transformative systems change to eradicate poverty, it is imperative that we all listen carefully and work together with people who are living in low income and with social exclusion.

As United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon asks: “let us make an investment in our common future by helping to lift people out of poverty so that they, in turn, can help to transform our world.”<sup>12</sup>

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Doris Grinspun", with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Doris Grinspun, RN, MSN, PhD, LLD(hon), O.ONT.  
Chief Executive Officer, RNAO

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rhonda Seidman-Carlson", with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Rhonda Seidman-Carlson, RN, MN  
President, RNAO

Cc: Thomas Mulcair, Leader of the Official Opposition, NDP  
Justin Trudeau, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada  
Daniel Paillé, Chef du Bloc Québécois  
Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party of Canada  
Tim Hudak, Leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario  
Andrea Horwath, Leader of the New Democratic Party of Ontario  
Mike Schreiner, Leader of the Ontario Green Party

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Council for International Cooperation (2013). News Release: CIDA being folded into DFAIT, March 21, 2013. [http://www.ccic.ca/files/en/what\\_we\\_do/2013-03-22\\_news\\_release\\_Budget\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ccic.ca/files/en/what_we_do/2013-03-22_news_release_Budget_2013.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Mackrael, K. (2013). CIDA, private-sector partnering scheme concerns aid workers. **Globe and Mail**, November 23, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Council for International Cooperation and Aid Watch Canada (2013). **Budget 2013: Implications for Canadian ODA**. Ottawa: Authors.  
[http://www.ccic.ca/files/en/what\\_we\\_do/2013\\_03\\_27\\_Analysis\\_Budget\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ccic.ca/files/en/what_we_do/2013_03_27_Analysis_Budget_2013.pdf)

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- <sup>4</sup> Brown, S. (2013). Undermining Foreign Aid: The Extractive Sector and the Commercialization of Canadian Development Assistance. <http://opencanada.org/features/undermining-foreign-aid/>
- <sup>5</sup> Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A., & Dachner, N. (2013). **Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2011**. Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). <http://nutritionalsciences.lamp.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Household-Food-Insecurity-in-Canada-2011.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Canada Parliament. Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science, and Technology. Subcommittee on Cities (2009). **In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness**. Ottawa: Author.
- <sup>7</sup> Scoffield, H. (2012). Ottawa shrugs off UN warning on hunger and nutrition. **Globe and Mail**, May 16, 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> United Nations General Assembly (2012). **Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter**, Geneva: Author, 6. [http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20121224\\_canadafinal\\_en.pdf](http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20121224_canadafinal_en.pdf)
- <sup>9</sup> Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (2013). Open Letter: Ontario's registered nurses implore government to accelerate poverty reduction efforts. Toronto: Author, August 22, 2013. [http://rnao.ca/sites/rnao-ca/files/RNAO\\_Open\\_letter-Ontarios\\_registered\\_nurses\\_implore\\_government\\_to\\_accelerate\\_poverty\\_reduction\\_efforts.pdf](http://rnao.ca/sites/rnao-ca/files/RNAO_Open_letter-Ontarios_registered_nurses_implore_government_to_accelerate_poverty_reduction_efforts.pdf)
- <sup>10</sup> Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner (2013). **Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2011**, 9.
- <sup>11</sup> United Nations, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, <http://www.un.org/en/events/povertyday/>
- <sup>12</sup> United Nations, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty