

Montreal, October 3, 2016

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia  
Chair, House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform  
and Ms. Christine LaFrance, Clerk of the Committee

Dear Sir and Madam:

When I spoke during the open microphone session at the meeting of the Committee on Electoral Reform in Montreal earlier this afternoon, I drew a link between human rights and democratic reform and suggested to the Committee members that they pay special attention not only to the means of ensuring effective representation, but also to the poorest people in our country, without overlooking anyone. All of these people and their family members live in intolerable situations of misery and exclusion, which they must be helped to eradicate, and they have experiences and knowledge that must be understood and taken into account if Canadian society is to become fair, peaceful and equitable.

In that regard, I mentioned a reference document adopted by the United Nations in 2012, entitled ***Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights***:  
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/DGPIntroduction.aspx>.

“Based on international human rights norms and standards, the Guiding Principles provide for the first time global policy guidelines focusing specifically on the human rights of people living in poverty. They are intended as a practical tool for policy-makers to ensure that public policies (including poverty eradication efforts) reach the poorest members of society, respect and uphold their rights, and take into account the significant social, cultural, economic and structural obstacles to human rights enjoyment faced by persons living in poverty.”

On the subject of participation in society, including political life, the Guiding Principles specify the following:

**“F. Participation and empowerment**

37. Effective and meaningful participation is an affirmation of the right of every individual and group to take part in the conduct of public affairs. It is also a means of promoting social inclusion and an essential component of efforts to combat poverty, not least by ensuring that public policies are sustainable and designed to meet the expressed needs of the poorest segments of society.

**38. States must ensure the active, free, informed and meaningful participation of persons living in poverty at all stages of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of decisions and policies affecting them. This requires capacity-building and human rights education for persons living in poverty, and the establishment of specific mechanisms and institutional arrangements, at various levels of decision-making, to overcome the obstacles that such persons face in terms of effective participation. Particular care should be taken to fully include the poorest and most socially excluded persons.**

**39. States must ensure that groups at higher risk of falling into poverty, including those who commonly experience disadvantage and discrimination based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, are not only adequately represented in all decision-making processes that affect them but also empowered and supported to express their views.**

40. States must ensure that indigenous peoples, who are particularly susceptible to extreme poverty, enjoy the right to free, prior and informed consent through their own representative institutions regarding all decisions concerning the use of their lands, territories and resources by State and non-State actors.

41. States must also actively protect individuals, community-based organizations, social movements, groups and other non-governmental organizations that support and advocate the rights of those living in poverty.”

I would strongly encourage Canada’s Special Committee on Electoral Reform to use these Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights as a model, and to raise awareness of them in its search for ways to correct deficiencies in the representativeness of Canada’s electoral system and propose changes that include absolutely everyone in efforts to create an active and truly participatory democracy at all levels.

Yours sincerely,

Guy Demers, Montreal