

Editorial: Shared prosperity ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The wealthiest one per cent get a lot of attention these days, but the real cause for concern is a bigger group of people, down at the bottom of the income spectrum. Beyond Canada's simple humanitarian duty to make sure all its citizens have access to the necessities of life, there are real social and economic consequences when skills and opportunities are out of reach for many.

So the latest "How Canada Performs" report from the Conference Board of Canada, which focuses on "Society," should give policy-makers something to consider. It gives Canada a "D" grade on working-age poverty, and a "C" on child poverty and income inequality. Those grades reflect Canada's performance relative to 16 of its "peer countries" in the developed world. Poverty among the elderly in Canada has actually risen more quickly than in the other age groups, but relative to our peer group, we're doing well on that score.

It wouldn't be complete or accurate to call Canada an unequal society. Intergenerational mobility is relatively high here, which means that how well you do is not strongly determined by how well your parents do. And taxes and transfers reduce the inequality.

But there's a limit to how much a government can do to solve the problems of the poor by simply moving money around. The report suggests governments focus on providing skills and opportunities through education, tax and benefit reforms that allow the working poor to keep more of their money, and policies to reduce child poverty. It says, "The countries that do best in keeping child poverty low are those which help mothers work," through flexible employment and access to child care.

The gender gap in income is another area in which Canada gets a "C."

There are many other areas in which Canada outperforms its peers: its low homicide rate, for example, and its acceptance of diversity. Those are reasons to be proud. But the Conference Board argues that if Canada paid more attention to the areas in which it lags, it could truly lay some claim to being the best country in the world. A wealthy society can be an equitable society. The report points out that Norway and the Netherlands earned "A" grades on both their economic and social report cards. Canada could do the same.

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