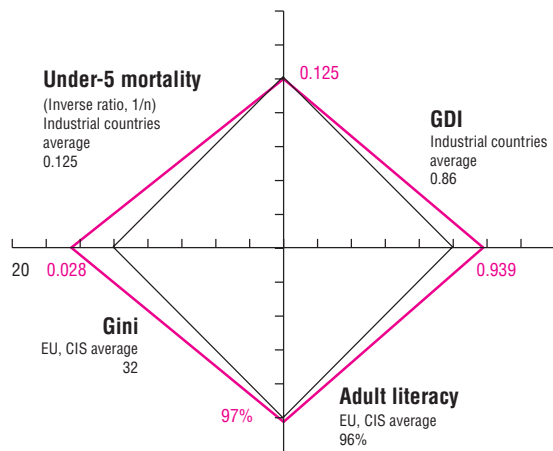


•PAUL WEINBERG



The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue.

*Anti-poverty organisations in Canada are looking for legal ways to force the federal government to live up to its responsibility to help the poorest of its citizens, as guaranteed by Canada's Charter of Rights. Bruce Porter, spokesman for the non-governmental Charter Initiative stated that while the country had committed itself to eradicating poverty at the 1995 Copenhagen Social Summit, it was busy dismantling its own social safety net, including assistance to the poor, health care and education.*

«Canada has had an impressive record of making commitments in international law and equity», noted another social activist, Shelagh Day. «But its recent actions such as the elimination of the Canada Assistance Program (CAP) belie its official statements on aid.» CAP provided a mechanism in Canada's complex federal system, whereby in such areas as social services, health care and education, the federal government would fund national

## TWICE AS MANY HUNGRY

programmes that were administered locally by the provincial governments. In exchange for these transfer payments, the provinces were under the legal obligation to provide the basic necessities of life to people-in-need. «People could go to court if the provinces were not providing what was necessary,» Porter noted.

Under CAP, the provinces were not allowed to lower welfare rates, impose work-for-welfare on recipients or implement local residency requirements for receiving social assistance. Now, these measures are being implemented in many provinces in Canada, following the replacement of CAP by weaker, non-enforcing funding arrangements between the federal government and the provinces.

At the same time, the federal government has cut nearly US\$4.26 billion in federal social transfer payments to the provinces. «The federal government has copped out of its traditional role in ensuring that transfer payments made to the provinces are properly targeted to alleviate poverty», Porter said. The government justifies its cuts in social transfer payments to the provinces as a central part of its strategy to reduce the country's mounting deficit.

An unsuccessful effort was made in 1995 to use the basic entitlement argument in the lower courts to stop the province of Ontario from embarking on a 21.6% cut in welfare rates. «The courts have ruled that the government is free to make cuts in the social area», said Porter.

The Domino effect of federal and provincial cuts to social assistance has meant a doubling in the number of hungry people forced to depend on a grassroots non-profit network of free food providers who depend on donations. **The total of food recipients in 1989 was 329,000 but this rose to 669,000 in 1997, according to the Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB). Worse, about 42% of those who received help were children under the age of 18 years.** The combination of cuts to the federal unemployment insurance programme and transfer payment cuts has led to a situation where «food banks have shouldered more and more of the burden of poverty, unemployment, family breakdowns and illness,» said CAFB executive director Julia Bass.

A high rate of unemployment since 1990 –currently hovering around nine per cent– has been blamed on economic restructuring, free trade arrangements with the United States and Mexico and a controversial anti-inflation policy by the Bank of Canada.

Also, there has been a growth in Canada, as in other industrial countries, of short-term low-paying jobs while permanent well-paying positions become fewer. **But in a conservative political climate, the poor themselves are blamed for their predicament,** said Porter.

«*Poverty has become a skills problem for the poor*», he said. «*They are telling the poor how to manage their money, how to be better parents*». The National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO) says in a report that provincial and federal authorities increasingly divide the poor into the categories of «deserving (working poor, children and the severely disabled)» and «undeserving (adults deemed employable, including parents of young children)». Social assistance benefits are maintained for the former while they are denied to, or penalties are imposed on the second group. In addition, says Porter, funds for advocacy groups such as his own have been eliminated by the conservative provincial government in Ontario, a trend repeated elsewhere in Canada.

Porter observes that the federal and provincial politicians are opting to protect Canada's publicly run health-care system rather

than grapple with the more dire fate facing country's low-income families, lack of adequate housing. Some families are forced to double up in their present living accommodations in the large Canadian urban centres like Toronto where affordable housing is scarce and homelessness is an obvious problem.

Until the mid-1990s, Canadians in need of financial assistance because of job loss had access to unemployment insurance and social assistance to tide them over until they found employment. «*The social safety net provided some relief from the drop in income*», according to Ken Wyman, a NAPO researcher. But cuts in both unemployment insurance and social assistance have made Canadians more vulnerable to economic downturns, particularly young people, single mothers, people with disabilities and aboriginals, he added.

- [IPS. Special report for Social Watch](#)