

FIGHTING POVERTY, INEQUALITIES AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION



By Alain Noël

Conference Report

This report summarizes and comments the main lessons from recent research from Quebec, Canada and abroad on the challenges of measuring poverty, inequalities and social exclusion, understanding their causes and adopting public policies that will reduce them.

Fighting Poverty, Inequalities and Social Exclusion

CONFERENCE REPORT

SUMMARY

This report highlights the main lessons that emerged from the presentations at the international conference on “Social Statistics, Poverty and Social Exclusion: Perspective from Quebec, Canada and abroad” organized by the Quebec Interuniversity Centre for Social Statistics (QICSS) and Quebec’s ministère de l’Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale (MESS) in Montreal in the fall 2011. The main objective of this conference was to take stock of the evidence and identify knowledge gaps in this field of research.

The report reminds us that social phenomena are never simple to gauge and that measurement is rarely free of normative and political considerations. While there is no official measure of poverty in Canada, three distinct measures of low income produced by Statistics Canada are commonly used to that effect. Each measure has merits for certain purposes but also intrinsic limits. Caution is thus recommended when using them. Since no measure is perfect, the report strongly suggests using of a variety of measures to obtain a more global, multidimensional understanding of poverty, inequalities and social exclusion, as they now do in Europe for instance, where material deprivation and underemployment are considered in addition to low income.

There is not one single technological or economic explanation that can account for varying poverty and low income rates across societies. Empirical evidence indicates that employment levels and the distribution of market income play a preponderant role and that education always has a positive effect, but some groups do not seem to benefit as much from existing opportunities. Indeed, advantages and disadvantages are not distributed uniformly among different groups of the population, even at equivalent levels of education. In Canada, for instance, women, young people, people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, and recent immigrants are more likely to experience poverty. Children who grow up in poverty also have more chances of becoming impoverished adults.

Much of the research on poverty and inequalities focuses on individual determinants of low income, such as family history, education and access to the labour market. As relevant as these factors may be, the report argues that they cannot explain why, at roughly equal wealth, some societies are characterized by more poverty and inequalities than others. Individual characteristics tend to hide the role played by institutions and public policies. Yet public policies have a crucial role to play to correct the non-egalitarian effects of the market. The different outcomes of families across Canadian provinces examined in several presentations throughout the conference are an obvious result of distinct public-policy choices. Comparative analysis makes it possible to establish the effects of these different choices.

The report recommends that governments adopt action plans with explicit and measurable objectives to combat poverty. Such action plans have the advantage of setting a direction and fostering the mobilization of all social actors. When they announce tangible objectives, governments accept a challenge and force themselves to change their habitual ways of conducting policy. These plans should also identify the political and institutional changes required to attain the established priorities and establish information and reporting mechanisms to guarantee the transparency and democratic vigilance necessary to attain the stated objectives. Because it is a unique event, by far the most important moment of the year in the public policy universe, the report suggests that the budget speech be used each year to take stock of poverty and inequalities.

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ABOUT...

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This report follows from the conference on "Social Statistics, Poverty and Social Exclusion: Perspective from Quebec, Canada and abroad" organized by the Quebec Interuniversity Centre for Social Statistics (QICSS) and Quebec's ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale (MESS) in Montreal from November 30 to December 2, 2011.

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...the QICSS and the CRDCN

The Quebec Interuniversity Centre for Social Statistics (QICSS) was established in 2001 with the specific aim of promoting research within the field of social statistics in Quebec. It brings together the Quebec universities in a unique partnership with Statistics Canada and Institut de la statistique du Québec. The QICSS pursues three main objectives: support and develop cutting-edge research in the field; expand the pool of researchers and provide training to the next generation; make research findings and their implications known to a wider audience. To know more, visit: www.ciqss.umontreal.ca

The Canadian Research Data Centre Network (CRDCN) was created at the turn of the century to improve access to Statistics Canada's confidential microdata, to expand the pool of skilled quantitative researchers in Canada, and to improve communication between social scientists and knowledge users. To know more, visit: www.rdc-cdr.ca

INTRODUCTION

Social inequalities are in the spotlight. On November 28, 2011, two days before the opening of the international conference on social statistics, poverty and social exclusion organized by the Quebec Inter-University Centre for Social Statistics (QICSS) and the ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale (MESS), a report published by the Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal revealed that, even with a universal health care system, and despite some progress over the past 20 years, health outcomes are still related to wealth in Montreal (Direction de santé publique, 2011). One week later, another report of far wider scope, by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), highlighted the current “historic gap” between the incomes of the richest and poorest in member countries – a gap that risks widening still farther until it eventually threatens the “social contract” of these countries (OECD, 2012). Members of the “occupy movement” around the globe were not the only ones worrying about rising inequality.

But the issue is far from simple, and it raises many difficult questions. For instance, how are inequalities, poverty and social exclusion to be measured? What indicators will provide the best gauge of each society's progress and regress, and allow comparisons among countries that are all different? Should inequalities be the priority? Or poverty? Should income be taken as the sole indicator, as is normally the case, or should other dimensions of poverty and inequalities – such as assets, consumption or access to certain goods and services – be taken into account? And if income is chosen, where is the “poverty line” to be drawn? And how should the effects of public policies be assessed?

Researchers taking part in the QICSS/MESS conference attempted to provide answers to these questions by summarizing the current knowledge and proposing new avenues for study and analysis. The themes, topics and societies considered varied greatly, but in general, discussions were focused on three main questions:

- How should poverty, inequalities and social exclusion be measured?
- How can the causes and consequences of poverty, inequalities and social exclusion best be understood?
- How should societies be compared, among each other and over time, in order to evaluate public policies and strategies aimed at combating poverty, inequalities and social exclusion?

In other words, the objective was to determine the best tools for measuring, understanding and comparing poverty, inequalities and social exclusion, and for assessing the policies designed to reduce them.

This report highlights some of the main lessons that emerged from the presentations and takes stock of the proposals made by researchers with regard to measuring social disparities, understanding them, and making comparisons among different societies¹. In the last part, the report briefly addresses a further question that to some extent underlies the entire discussion: to reduce inequalities and combat poverty and social exclusion, should governments set themselves quantifiable objectives – and are they able to do so? But let us begin with measurement.

¹ Several presentations discussed in this report were published, in the language into which they were presented at the conference, in Guy Fréchet, Danielle Gauvreau and Jean Poirier (eds.). 2011. *Statistiques sociales, pauvreté et exclusion sociale: Publication en hommage à Paul Bernard*. Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

MEASURING

In France, reported Didier Gelot, general secretary of the Observatoire national de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion sociale (ONPES), the adoption of an indicator and of a more exhaustive scorecard for measuring poverty gave rise to a wide-ranging national debate in 2007 and 2008. The final choice of indicators, he explained, “necessitated a series of compromises between sometimes widely diverging positions that often brought the French government and civil society actors head to head” (Gelot, 2011: 21). Still today, the main indicator that was finally chosen, the “relative rate of monetary poverty anchored in time²,” is strongly contested, and it is not approved by the ONPES.

The fact is that measuring social phenomena is never simple, and it is rarely free of prescriptive and political considerations. To measure inequalities, one can examine the distribution of income throughout society, by calculating the Gini coefficient, for example; or one can observe gaps between specific components of the population, such as quintiles, deciles or even percentages (here, the notorious “one per cent” of the richest members of the population naturally springs to mind). But one can also look at the distribution of assets, at consumption behaviour, or at social determinants of health inequalities.

Canada has never settled on an official measure of poverty. But Statistics Canada produces three distinct measurements of low income: the low-income cut-off (LICO), the low-income measure (LIM) and the market basket measure (MBM). Economist Jean-Yves Duclos suggested dispensing with the LICO, a measure that is obsolete on a number of grounds, and using instead the MBM for interprovincial comparisons and the LIM for international comparisons.

As economist Jean-Yves Duclos explained at the start of the conference, one must first determine what is to be measured (2011). Welfare can be evaluated in a variety of ways, depending on the theoretical approach taken. The focus could, for instance, be placed on the satisfaction of basic needs, on the fulfilment of individual potential, or on income distribution. Most often, incomes are favoured to measure poverty, because they give a good idea of the prevailing standards of living and are relatively easy to measure, understand, and compare. But even here, a number of choices must be made – particularly between market income (mainly a person’s wages) and available income (which includes public transfers and taxes in addition to wages), and between individual and household income.

Canada, Duclos noted, has never settled on an official measure of poverty. But Statistics Canada produces three distinct measurements of low income: the low-income cut-off (LICO), the low-income measure (LIM) and the market basket measure (MBM). In line with the recommendations of the Quebec government’s *Centre d’étude sur la pauvreté et l’exclusion* (CEPE, 2009), Duclos suggested dispensing with the LICO, a measure that is obsolete on a number of grounds, and using instead the MBM for interprovincial comparisons and the LIM for international comparisons.

Xuelin Zhang, Brian Murphy and Sylvie Michaud of Statistics Canada clearly demonstrated the complexity of the issues underlying these choices of measures (2011). The LICO, which was developed by Statistics Canada at the end of the 1960s and has long been the main reference in our public debates, considers a family to be low-income if the proportion of its income spent on food, shelter and clothing is 20 percentage points higher than that of the average Canadian family.

Zhang and his colleagues acknowledge that the choice of food, shelter and clothing (and not transportation, for example) remains largely arbitrary, as does the decision to use a 20 percentage-point

² The threshold is adjusted for inflation only, according to a reference year.

difference in relation to the mean. Moreover, this measure of low income does not take into account differences in the cost of living among regions, rendering it of little use for comparisons among provinces. Being a uniquely Canadian measure, it also precludes international comparisons.

The LIM appears to be a much more transparent and solid measure for international comparisons, because it sets the low-income threshold at half a country's median income. Its purely relative nature could, however, make the objective of reducing poverty seem more remote, even unattainable, since the low-income threshold rises constantly with the growth of overall income. This is why Ontario, like France, refers to a low-income threshold "anchored in time," using 2008 as the baseline year (Ontario, 2012: 21). Besides, the LIM makes no direct connection with what would be deemed necessary for covering basic needs, since it refers strictly to the distance between a person's income and the median.

In this respect, the MBM, developed by Human Resources and Social Development Canada, brings very significant additional information. As Zhang and his colleagues explained, the MBM uses the threshold at which, in a given region, income available for consumption is not sufficient for a representative family to obtain a basket of goods deemed essential. Obviously, putting together such a basket entails making a number of relatively arbitrary choices, and the makeup of the MBM is inevitably open to question and challenge (see, for example, Goldberg et al., 2012). At the same time, in its assessment of low income, this measure does introduce a reference to basic needs. This brings undeniable advantages for public debates because it links the established low-income thresholds to actual living conditions and thus, in a way, to what is necessary to live decently in a given society. The American government is currently in the process of adopting a quite similar measure, known as the Supplemental Poverty Measure, to complement and possibly replace the official poverty measure used since the early 1960s, which has become increasingly inadequate (Short, 2011).

The market basket measure (MBM) uses the threshold at which, in a given region, income available for consumption is not sufficient for a representative family to obtain a basket of goods deemed essential. Obviously, putting together such a basket entails making a number of relatively arbitrary choices, and the makeup of the MBM is inevitably open to question and challenge. At the same time, this measure does introduce a reference to basic needs in its assessment of low income. This brings undeniable advantages for public debates because it links the established low-income thresholds to actual living conditions and thus, in a way, to what is necessary to live decently in a given society.

Above all, Zhang and his coauthors remind us that no measure is perfect, and that all these constructs are only indicators to inform the public debate and public policies; they cannot be used to determine whether or not a given household is poor. In fact, these authors strongly favour using a variety of measures, each of which has its own merits.

But it is also important to understand that for some purposes a measure can actually be misleading. It is not acceptable, for instance, to ignore – as governments, media and sometimes even certain antipoverty organizations often do – the limitations inherent in a measure such as the LICO, which does not allow proper comparison among provinces (see, for example, the most recent report by Campaign 2000, which continues to use the LICO in this manner (Campaign 2000, 2011). Caution and vigilance are therefore always necessary.

That said, it can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, which reproduce data from the most recent report by the CEPE (2011), that although the various low-income measures are based on different foundations, they do not produce income thresholds or poverty rates that are radically different from one another. In fact, the results produced probably correspond, more or less directly, with an implicit but very widespread social standard in industrialized countries.

For several decades, Gallup has polled Americans to find out what they believed constituted the minimum income necessary for a family of four to “get along in [their] community.” The answers varied somewhat from one year to another, but not by much. On average, respondents put the threshold for “getting along” somewhere between 50 and 60 percent of the median income, and generally closer to 60 percent – the standard often used in Europe (Fremstad, 2008: 30-31). Similarly, in an Ipsos poll conducted in France in 2010, respondents, who were asked from what net monthly income a single person should be considered as poor, put the figure at €1,003 on average – almost exactly the official threshold, which was approximately €970, or 60 percent of median income, in 2010 (Gadrey, 2011). It is interesting to note that, as early as 1897, Herbert Brown Ames, who sought to measure poverty in a Montreal neighbourhood, also set the poverty line at half the average family industrial income (Ames, 1897: 24 and 49).

Member countries of the European Union kept this standard in mind during their 2010 deliberations and negotiations aimed at setting common targets for their new Europe 2020 strategy. As Pascal Wolff and Fabienne Montaigne explained during the conference, the Europeans started out from an indicator that had been accepted for several years, which placed poverty at 60 percent of the national median income. But in an entity as vast and diverse as the European Union, this measure of low income left a number of questions unanswered. In a country with a relatively low median income, for example, there would be a risk that the true extent of poverty was being underestimated. Similarly, a simple measure of income might hide significant gaps in the living conditions of citizens by failing to take into account services and benefits that may be publicly provided in one country but not in another (Wolff & Montaigne, 2011: 49). More importantly, in an entity encompassing countries of very different wealth, it seemed

Table 1: Low-income cut-offs based on various measures, Quebec, 2008-2009 (current dollars)

	LICO, 2009	LIM, 2008	MBM, 2009 (Montreal CMA)	MBM 2009, Montreal CMA (estimated income)
Single person	18,421	14,734	15,028	16,561
Two-parent family (2 children)	34,829	29,468	30,055	33,123

Note: The MBM cut-off is measured for the Montreal Census Metropolitan Area. Since the MBM threshold is not an after-tax income threshold but a measure of income available for consumption (estimated after subtracting certain nondiscretionary expenses such as daycare costs), an MBM-compatible after-tax threshold, more comparable with other thresholds, is estimated and reported in the last column.

Source: CEPE, 2011: 7 and 14

Table 2: Low-income rates according to various measures, all persons, Quebec, 2008-2009 (percent)

	LICO, 2009	LIM, 2008	MBM, 2009
All persons	9.4	9.6	9.5

Source: CEPE, 2011: 7 and 14

necessary to take into account real gaps in living standards and to introduce a more absolute measure of poverty. The Europeans have thus selected three complementary measures of poverty and social exclusion, one focused on income, another on material deprivation, and the last on employment.

A European household is now considered poor if one of the three following conditions applies to its situation: 1) its income is less than 60 percent of the national median income; 2) it suffers from “severe material deprivation”; that is, the household is experiencing difficulty in four or more dimensions of daily life out of a list of nine (to be capable of paying the rent and utilities; heating the home adequately; facing unforeseen expenses; eating meat, fish or an equivalent protein source at least once every two days; taking one week’s vacation away from home; owning a car; owning a washing machine; owning a colour television; and owning a telephone); and 3) its working age members have no job or a very limited presence in the labour market (having worked less than 20 percent of the time in the past year). In total, in 2010, close to 120 million Europeans faced one or a combination of these situations. In June 2010, in Luxembourg, the European Council agreed to attempt to reduce this number by 20 million by 2020.

Material deprivation reveals a dimension of poverty that cannot be captured by low income alone. Material-deprivation measures, however, make comparison difficult, not merely because questions and criteria differ from country to country, but also because they must take into account the cultural context: items deemed to be important in one country may be seen to be much less so in another.

By adding material deprivation and underemployment to low income, the Europeans have moved closer to a more complete, multidimensional understanding of poverty. Indeed, material deprivation does not correspond exactly with low income. Certain people, for example retirees who own their homes, may have relatively low current income without being subject to material deprivation. On the other hand, citizens of a poorer country may have income higher than 60 percent of their country’s median income and still be in a situation of material deprivation. Thus, among the 80 million Europeans who have low incomes, over half do not suffer from material deprivation, whereas less than half of those who do suffer from material deprivation have an income of less than 60 percent of their country’s median income (Wolff & Montaigne, 2011: 52).

As shown by the first validity tests of the material-deprivation indicator developed in Ontario, material deprivation reveals a dimension of poverty that cannot be captured by low income alone (Matern, Mendelson & Oliphant, 2009). Material-deprivation measures, however, make comparison difficult, not merely because questions and criteria differ from country to country, but especially, as Andrew Heisz and Manon Langevin explained at the conference, because they must take into account the cultural context: items deemed to be important in one country may be seen to be much less so in another (Heisz & Langevin, 2011: 276).

It is no easier to measure social exclusion – a concept, as Myriam Fortin and Joël Gauthier pointed out in their presentation, about which there has never been a consensus of opinion and for which there exists no shared definition, either in Canada or elsewhere (2011: 125). Fortin and Gauthier proposed that exclusion should be understood as an accumulation of disadvantages, including low income, in order to establish which populations are more likely to be excluded. According to their results, single-parent families and families living in Central and Eastern Canada are more likely to be disadvantaged. But it must be borne in mind that they used the LICO to measure low-income, which poses a problem for interprovincial comparison, as we have seen earlier, because of the differences in the cost of living across the country. As well, including the LICO contaminates the measure of exclusion, which becomes no longer entirely distinct

from the measure of low income. Ilene Hyman and her co-authors suggested that the concept of social exclusion needs to be rethought to take into consideration processes of inclusion (policies that produce equity) and the results of exclusion (at the economic level, but also education, health, civic participation, cultural life, and transportation) (2011). This exercise is primarily theoretical, however, and it is hard to see how inclusion could be operationalized, except by taking a broad sociological perspective, as proposed by Bill Reimer, who analyzed the various sources of social support in rural communities in Canada (2011).

Although the various low-income measures are based on different foundations, they do not produce income thresholds or poverty rates that are radically different from one another. In fact, the results produced probably correspond, more or less directly, with an implicit but very widespread social standard in industrialized countries.

Ultimately, as recent decisions by member states of the European Union show, decision-makers must reduce the concepts of poverty and social exclusion to a few measurable dimensions likely to inform public debate. The same goes for the concept of inequality, as Thomas Lemieux noted in his presentation. Lemieux underlined the importance in public debates of the very targeted data recently presented by Atkinson, Piketty and Saez, which established the changes over a period of close to 100 years in the share of income of the richest 1 percent of the population in several countries (2011). But the conference presentations rightly reminded us that, beyond the most frequently indicators used, the reality is above all complex and multidimensional.

UNDERSTANDING

Inequalities have increased over the past 20 years or so. But, as Lemieux pointed out, they have not increased in the same manner in all countries, and there is no one technological or economic explanation that accounts for these differences, even though economic factors necessarily played a role (2011; see also Cousineau & Merizzi, 2011). In all probability, institutional and political factors are the first determinants of these varying performances. The strength of trade unions, for example, goes some way in explaining the difference, as David Brady showed in his presentation (2011). Even in the United States, where unions are particularly weak, the presence of relatively strong unions in a state contributes to reduce poverty.

Employment levels and the distribution of market income certainly play a preponderant role. Economic cycles, Jean-Michel Cousineau and Bruno Merizzi observed, definitely have an impact on income distribution (2011). And, as Stéphane Crespo stressed in his presentation, finding a job remains by far the best way of getting out of poverty (2011). This was also what Raiq, Plante and van den Berg found; they noted, however, that the quality of one's job was of great significance to a person's trajectory: part-time or precarious jobs often keep people in a situation of vulnerability and poverty (Raiq et al., 2011b: 200). Education, however, always has a positive effect, and represents a profitable investment for all, on the entire income scale (Lemieux, 201; Cousineau & Merizzi, 2011; Parent, 2012).

Other factors come into play: for example, some groups do not seem to benefit as much from existing opportunities. The conference featured few presentations focusing on the gaps between men and women, or on the disadvantages arising from disability, but we know that these gaps and disadvantages are significant. The same goes for the considerable gulf that still separates the Aboriginal peoples of Canada and Quebec from the rest of the population (on this subject, see Perreault & Duhaime, 2011). Everywhere in Canada, recent immigrants are also more likely to encounter difficulties (Statistics Canada, 2008: 21 and 49).

The results of Nong Zhu and Cécile Batisse (2011) and those of Aline Lechaume and Frédéric Savard (2011) confirm these trends. Both analyses show that low income among immigrants is largely the result of difficulties of integration into the labour market, even for those who are highly educated – difficulties that particularly affect recent immigrants from new country sources. These difficulties, Lechaume and Savard suggested, may diminish over time, thanks to a mutual adaptation effect that facilitates integration of later waves of immigrants (2011: 241). But the transition could also prove to be difficult. In recent years, for example, immigrants in Quebec, even qualified ones, have experienced more difficulty in leaving social assistance. Among those who received social assistance benefits in 2008, almost half still did two years later (Benzakour and Lechaume, 2011: 212-13). From this point of view, one may wonder whether social assistance truly represents, as these researchers suggest, “one of several provisions for facilitating integration” (217). To find out, one would have to compare rates of access to employment among those receiving social assistance with the access rates of beneficiaries of other programs, such as francization programs.

In the case of families and children, there are worrying but also contradictory signs. Taking Canada as a whole, the progress seems minimal, despite the motion to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000 that was adopted unanimously by the House of Commons in 1989 (Curtis, 2011: 89).

In her presentation, Annie McEwen suggested that we need to go beyond poverty and adopt a multidimensional perspective that would take into consideration all the factors that disadvantage children (2011). This resembles the approach taken by Lisa Serbin and her co-authors, who explored the accumulation of disadvantages to which children growing up in poor families are subject (2011). In this respect, the idea of policies aimed at the family, rather than just children, appears promising, since it embraces all factors affecting children’s lives and development. The analysis of the effects of each policy would not be simple, however, because good programs often come together, as is the case in Quebec with child support, parental leave and daycare services.

Finding a job remains by far the best way of getting out of poverty. However, the quality of one’s job is of great significance to a person’s trajectory: part-time or precarious jobs often keep people in a situation of vulnerability and poverty. Education, however, always has a positive effect, and represents a profitable investment for all, on the entire income scale.

The results obtained by Hicham Raïq and his co-authors for Quebec and for other provinces or countries are, however, very enlightening (Raïq et al., 2011a & 2011b). Even within Canada, a country where child poverty rates are unsatisfactory, Quebec did succeed in improving the situation of low-income families to the point where the province stands favourably in a cross-national perspective. This is where comparison is most meaningful.

COMPARING

Only through comparison can we bring to light the factors that can explain why some societies, with approximately the same levels of wealth, end up more egalitarian or less affected by poverty or exclusion than others. Much of the research into poverty and inequalities focuses on individual determinants of low income, such as family background, education and access to the labour market. As relevant as these determinants may be, they still do not explain why, given equal wealth, some societies are characterized by more poverty and inequalities than others (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). In

particular, these determinants tend to overlook the role played by political actors and public policies (Brady, 2009: 5-6).

In his presentation, David Brady highlighted the importance of trade union strength in attenuating income disparities, even in the American context, where unions are weak and virtually absent from low-pay sectors (2011). Raquel Fonseca and her co-authors also found that in the United States the risk of poverty increases after retirement age, whereas in Europe it diminishes. However, they failed to highlight the role of public policy in this connection (2011: 65), even though this difference is the direct result of distinct public-policy choices.

Only through comparison can we bring to light the factors that can explain why some societies, with approximately the same levels of wealth, end up more egalitarian or less affected by poverty or exclusion. Much of the research into poverty and inequalities focuses on individual determinants of low income, such as family history, education and access to the labour market. As relevant as these determinants may be, they still do not explain why, given equal wealth, some societies are characterized by more poverty and inequalities than others. In particular, they tend to overlook the role played by political actors and public policies.

Such policy choices have obvious effects in Canada. As shown by Raïq, Bernard and van den Berg (2011a:38-44), for two-parent families in 2004, Quebec had a poverty rate almost three times lower than that of Ontario (2.4 percent as opposed to 6.9), and practically equal to that of Sweden (2.3 percent in 2005). Quebec protected single-parent families less well than did Sweden (Quebec's poverty rate was 24.6 percent compared with 9.1 in Sweden), but it stood apart from other Canadian provinces in this regard (for instance, the rate in Ontario was 39 percent). The difference was particularly noticeable with regard to "acute" poverty, which the authors defined as 30 percent of median income. This level of poverty, which can certainly be seen as worrying, is rare among two-parent families but not among single-parent families. In Ontario, for example, the acute-poverty rate for single-parent households was 12.8 percent in 2004. In Quebec, in contrast, the rate was only 1.5 percent – half the Swedish rate (3 percent). As Raïq and his co-authors note, this result is both recent and unique, because Quebec had a rate comparable with that of Canada in 1990 (above 7 percent) and has radically reduced it in less than 15 years, whereas elsewhere in Canada the situation of the poorest single-parent families deteriorated.

Among the Quebec households that escaped acute poverty and poverty, some fell into a modest income bracket – between 50 and 75 percent of median income – but others moved out of low-income ranges. Indeed, in 2004, about half of single-parent families in Quebec had incomes above 75 percent of median income, the highest exit rate from low income in societies studied by the authors. Raïq, Bernard and van den Berg concluded that these results suggest that, for families at least, Quebec's anti-poverty policies have borne fruit.

This conclusion is supported by the analysis of Plante and van den Berg, who use a decomposition technique to determine what the situation would be in four Canadian provinces – Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec – if they had the same demographic profiles (e.g., the same number of single-parent and two-parent families) (2011). The results are striking. Prior to considering the impact of the provinces' demographic profiles, Quebec had poverty rates that were lower than those of the other three provinces, but not by much. However, once corrections were introduced to take into account the fact that Quebec had relatively fewer two-parent families than the other provinces, the results changed considerably. Indeed, the authors found that if Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia had the same demographic makeup as Quebec, their poverty rates would be much higher than Quebec's. Conversely, if Quebec had Ontario's

demographic characteristics, its poverty rate would be even lower. In other words, Quebec achieved its good results despite a less favourable demographic situation at the outset.

These results seem to be largely attributable to public policies: they mainly concern households with children and, as a proportion of GDP, Quebec spends much more in this area than other provinces, to the benefit of less well-off families, in particular (Proulx et al., 2011: 180-82). Quebec also invests much more in active labour-market policies and work-family balance policies — parental leave and daycare services, in particular. One result of these policies is a distinct increase in the labour-market participation of women with children under the age of six (182-86). Quebec's favourable situation is thus in large part a consequence of its policy choices.

SETTING OBJECTIVES

Although the exercise is difficult and bound to be imperfect, it is thus possible and necessary to measure poverty, inequalities and social exclusion in order to better understand their effects and consequences, and to make comparisons so that the impact of policy dynamics and public choices can be determined. But is it desirable to go still farther and set target figures to guide government action?

Throughout the conference, participants pondered this subject, directly or indirectly. Indeed, the organizers had hoped the deliberations would inform the public debate about the best ways to respond to section 4 of the *Quebec Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*, which commits the government to “progressively make Québec, by 2013, one of the industrialized nations having the least number of persons living in poverty, according to recognized methods for making international comparisons.” Compared with the new Europe 2020 strategy, which aims to take 20 million people out of poverty by 2020, this objective is relatively unspecific, but it nevertheless sets a horizon, subject to the use of “recognized” comparison methods. In both cases, the objective seems useful but leaves room for interpretation.

At the political level, public, quantified objectives have the advantage of setting a direction and fostering the mobilization of all actors. In announcing tangible objectives, governments accept a challenge and force themselves to change their habitual ways of doing things. In this sense, presenting quantified objectives does indeed constitute “a political exercise.”

The idea of building explicit, measurable objectives into action plans such as these has spread in a number of domains in recent years, along with a willingness to rethink public management in order to stress results as much as processes; to link policies with proven, measurable facts; and to coordinate the action of social and political actors at various levels of intervention. The construction of the European Union, and particularly the introduction of an open method of coordination, are noteworthy in this respect (Gelot, 2011: 22; Wolff & Montaigne, 2011: 57).

At the political level, public, quantified objectives have the advantage of setting a direction and fostering the mobilization of all actors. In announcing tangible objectives, governments accept a challenge and force themselves to change their habitual ways of doing things (Walker, 2010: 221). In this sense, presenting quantified objectives does indeed constitute “a political exercise” (Gelot, 2011: 25-26). At the federal level in Canada, the absence of government targets reveals a clear lack of political will regarding the reduction of poverty and inequalities. By contrast, several Canadian provinces have recently announced their own strategies to fight poverty (Mendell, 2009; Caledon Institute for Social Policy, 2012).

An exercise of this type is not without difficulties, however. First, objectives, even quantified ones, do not create binding obligations. Failure brings no legal consequence for governments and, what is more,

it is unlikely to be noticed until several years after the deadline has passed (Damon, 2010: 237; Gelot, 2011: 25). Take, for example, the inability of the Canadian government to fulfil, even 12 years after the set date, the commitment made by the House of Commons to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000. The mobilization of actors is therefore vital to support the implementation of policies that are consistent with the announced objectives and to keep public attention focused on results, which is never easy because poverty and inequalities are rarely at the forefront of citizens' concerns (Walker, 2010: 207).

In addition, the established objectives are likely to be complex and difficult to interpret, and may even be misleading. Consider, for instance, the European objective of getting 20 million people out of poverty. Since the attainment of this target is in part measured by a material-deprivation indicator, which records people's access to certain essential goods and services, mere economic growth could suffice to reduce mechanically the number of poor people in Europe, without any change in public policies (Wolff & Montaigne, 2011: 52). The same goes for the reference-year ("anchored in time") measure of poverty used in France, which "naturally follows an ascending slope" when the economy is growing (Gelot, 2011: 24). This means that the limitations inherent in each indicator must be borne in mind. More broadly, one must beware of the temptation to use a single measure of progress. By focusing solely on the number of people beneath a certain income threshold, for instance, a government could be tempted to perform "skimming," and improve the situations of households closest to the threshold, ignoring those farther below it (Damon, 2010: 236).

It is also important to link the indicators to the public policies adopted, in order to establish a causal connection between the stated objectives and the reforms adopted to attain them (Walker, 2010: 221). In this respect, much remains to be done in Quebec. As the Auditor General revealed in his most recent report, the government has not really set itself a specific, quantifiable objective to combat poverty and social exclusion, and it has not "formulated precise criteria to orient entities nor insisted on target results and timetables associated with the proposed measures" (2011: 2-11). Despite proven successes, a degree of vagueness surrounds the Quebec government's action to combat poverty and social exclusion.

Nothing consolidates political will like the obligation to be transparent and accountable. A suggestion by French sociologist Julien Damon, who formerly headed the *Observatoire national de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion sociale*, is especially interesting in this respect. In a recent book, Damon proposes building the agreed-upon indicators of poverty into annual budget documents. In fact, one could go farther and suggest, as Vivian Labrie did recently in an open letter to Quebec's finance minister, that the budget be used each year to take stock of poverty and inequalities.

It must be acknowledged, however, that establishing a definite link between policies and their effects is far from easy, because a host of factors contribute to determining the results (a number of them partly outside government control, such as the economic context). And the exercise does not become easier over a longer period of time.

How are governments to proceed, then, if we accept that setting objectives and quantifying them are politically relevant? As a minimum, three guidelines could serve to mark out a serious attempt. Briefly stated, governments should: 1) announce their priorities with some degree of precision; 2) identify the political and institutional changes required to attain the established priorities; and 3) introduce information and reporting mechanisms to guarantee the transparency and vigilance necessary to attain the objectives announced.

Stating objectives clearly implies going beyond general considerations of poverty, inequality and social exclusion, to include exactly what changes are sought. This is not simply a matter of positioning one's

society in relation to others; it is above all a question of aiming to improve matters in the present in comparison with the past. It is with this intent that the European Union undertook to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty by 20 million by the year 2020. Whether one agrees with this target or with the tools proposed to measure progress, the target has the merit of being simple and straightforward, and of having a departure point and an arrival point as references. The same is true of Ontario's objective to reduce child poverty by 25 percent in five years. In comparison, the objective adopted by the House of Commons in 1989 and those of the *Quebec Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* are less precise.

Aside from arrival and departure points, it seems desirable to specify at the outset the situations that should be addressed as priorities. Member countries of the European Union, which each interpret common European objectives in their own way, often proceed in this manner. Several governments, for instance, have targeted children, for obvious reasons. But a priority could also be granted to households living in situations of acute poverty. Julien Damon, for example, suggests paying particular attention to those living with less than 40 percent of the median income (2010: 240). Similarly, Raïq, Bernard and van den Berg focused on families having less than 30 percent of median income (Raïq et al., 2011a: 41). A number of choices can be made. The main idea is to bring the core issues into focus by setting precise objectives and priorities.

Regardless of the objectives, however, bringing about change necessarily means challenging existing practices and policies. Governments that commit to reducing poverty, inequalities or social exclusion should therefore explain, as the Auditor General suggested, how they intend to achieve their aims. This means drawing up a carefully calibrated action plan, one that identifies the levers that must be acted upon to attain the stated objectives. A degree of uncertainty regarding the effects and consequences of reforms is inevitable, but without new instruments a government has little chance of obtaining new results. As was recently pointed out by the Social Protection Floor Advisory Group chaired by United Nations Under-Secretary-General Michelle Bachelet, even the poorest countries are able to considerably improve the situation of their poorest citizens. If they fail to do so, it is primarily because the political will is lacking (International Labour Organization, 2011: 42).

Nothing consolidates political will like the obligation to be transparent and accountable. A suggestion by French sociologist Julien Damon, who formerly headed *the Observatoire national de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion sociale*, is especially interesting in this respect. In a recent book, Damon proposes building the agreed-upon indicators of poverty into annual budget documents (2010: 241). In fact, one could go farther and suggest, as Vivian Labrie did recently in an open letter to Quebec's Finance minister, that the budget be used each year to take stock of poverty and inequalities (Labrie, 2012). Of course, this is not a matter of sidelining other policy-monitoring instruments and mechanisms, which certainly have their uses, but of acknowledging the fact that, in the public-policy universe, the budget speech is a unique event, by far the most important moment of the year, and one that more than any other focuses attention on the years to come (Savoie, 1999: 12). By doing what Damon and Labrie suggest, governments would demonstrate their will to achieve their stated objectives and their commitment to take the measures that are necessary to achieve them. Although far from perfect, the document on the fight against poverty produced by the Quebec government for the 2012-2013 budget is a step in the right direction (Gouvernement du Québec, 2012).

CONCLUSION

There is "a very strong connection" between statisticians and political power, observed Pascal Wolff of Eurostat during the QICSS/MESS conference. Measuring poverty, inequalities and social exclusion is never simple and it imposes choices that are, ultimately, political. But measurement is always possible and necessary. Most measures, indeed, overlap or come close to common standards. And in any case, a plurality of viewpoints and measures is ultimately an asset. Indeed, it is often when discussing the

various ways of taking account of poverty, inequalities and social exclusion that experts, political actors and social movements define their positions and clarify their priorities.

The same applies to a broader understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and social inequalities, which are in themselves subject to differing views. Some researchers insist on the macroeconomic context, and in particular stress the very strong connection between access to employment and exiting from poverty. The same applies to education, which is unquestionably a profitable investment in combating poverty and inequalities. But other factors also come into play. Advantages and disadvantages are not distributed uniformly among different groups of the population, even at equivalent levels of education. Women, young people, people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, and recent immigrants are more likely to experience poverty. Children who grow up in poverty are also more likely to become impoverished adults. In the circumstances, public policies have a crucial role to play, because they alone can correct the inegalitarian effects of the market.

If progress is to be made, social groups, political actors and experts must continue to work together and pursue their research and debates, in order to better measure, understand, compare, and ultimately contribute to building effective government strategies.

In this respect, comparison is extremely useful, because it makes it possible to establish the effects of good or bad public policies, and to highlight the consequences of the distribution of power in society, as is shown by the impact on poverty of a trade-union presence. From this perspective, Quebec's scorecard is quite positive. This is especially true if we take into account the Canadian context and its social and institutional foundations, typical of anglo-saxon, liberal welfare states. In a few years, Quebec has succeeded in reducing the poverty of two-parent families to levels that compare with those of Sweden, and to levels that are much better than elsewhere in Canada for single-parent families. This result is the fruit of distinct family policies that are particularly favourable to low-income families.

For single, working-age people, however, governmental efforts have been less sustained and the progress much more limited (Noël, 2011; CEPE, 2011: 11). This shows the limits of an incomplete strategy that has failed to formulate sufficiently precise and operational objectives. To have an impact, an action plan must have specific and quantified objectives and must lead to a true transformation of approaches and policies (Walker, 2010: 221). Such an action plan must also create obligations regarding information and accountability. Otherwise, nothing will happen. The strategy, as well as the government that implements it, end up losing credibility (Damon, 2010: 236-40).

If progress is to be made, social groups, political actors and experts must continue to work together and pursue their research and debates, in order to better measure, understand, compare, and ultimately contribute to building effective government strategies. But if they are to be credible, these strategies must be stated and formulated precisely, must be linked to new practices and public policies that are likely to bring about change, and must be incorporated each year into the budget speech, when governments take stock of their actions and look towards the coming years.

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