

Measuring Social Justice and Sustainable Governance in the OECD

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Introduction

Philosophical explorations of issues of justice are almost as old as the project of philosophy itself. In antiquity, Aristotle was the first to develop and present a systematic theory of justice in which he identified two basic kinds of justice: *justitia directiva* and *justitia distributiva*. The first kind of justice refers to the fulfillment of contractual obligations or the rectification of injuries committed, while the second kind is manifested in the “distributions of honor or money or the other things that fall to be divided among those who have a share in the constitution” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1130b 30). In what follows, we focus on the latter—distributive justice—that is, the just allocation of goods and responsibilities. Within the field of political science, in particular, this is often referred to as the issue of “social justice.”

Since the end of the 1990s, social justice has increasingly become a hot-button issue in political discussions throughout the world. Now a key theme in the political contests of most OECD countries, the issue of social justice influences electoral campaign agendas, if not electoral results. At the same time, cross-national comparisons have shown considerable differences between the standards of social justice achieved by developed industrial states (cf., Merkel 2002). While these societies’ various preferences with respect to justice are identified as one hypothetical reason for these differences (Roller 2005), the kinds of reforms pursued within OECD countries and these states’ capacity for reform are also highlighted as explanatory factors.

However, until now, reform capacity in OECD countries has not been subjected to systematic examination. In order to systematically study and measure social justice in individual societies as well as the reform capacity of their governments, reliable measurements that are

based on theoretically sound models and which can be empirically corroborated must be developed. Indices for both constructs, namely, social justice (Merkel 2002; 2007) and reform capacity (this publication) are now available. The Bertelsmann Stiftung's SGI, which is based on qualitative assessments by experts as well as "hard" OECD data, provides new opportunities for research in this field.

In the following, we pose four questions and then provide initial responses to these questions that are intended to shed light on the relationship between justice and reform capacity. The four questions are:

- The normative question: Upon which regulative conceptions of social justice provided by the theoretical debate on justice can we draw, and how applicable are these conceptions in the 21st century?
- The methodological question: Which indicators can we derive from the theoretical debate and combine to create a consistent modality that allows us to measure justice?
- The empirical question: Comparatively speaking, how just are the societies of the OECD states?
- The relational question: What are the relationships between, on the one hand, justice in OECD countries and, on the other hand, reform capacity, level of economic development and the quality of democracy in these countries?

In this chapter, we aim to link political philosophy with empirical social research in such a way as to identify and compare the structures and levels of justice achieved within entire societies. This approach constitutes an innovation in cross-national research on justice, which has hitherto focused on micro-level data.

The normative question: What conceptions of social justice do theories of justice have to offer?

What is just? If we do not want to rely exclusively on our intuitive sense of justice, upon what should we base our criteria of judgment? It seems trivial to point out—although such questions are often confused in everyday semantics as well as in political discourses—that equality of distribution is by no means *per se* just and inequality of