

# **SOCIAL REPORTING IN THE 1970s AND IN THE 1990s**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In November 1997 and in February 1998 there were held two conferences commemorating important events in the development of social reporting in Germany: the publication of the first government report on the situation of the family in 1968, and the trade union congress on quality of life in 1972. At both conferences I gave a talk referring to an early paper of mine also from 1972, under the title "On the measurement of quality of life" (Zapf, 1972). In the following version I take up again the two main parts of that paper: the theoretical discussion about a broader concept of welfare (chpt. 1) and the discussion about methods and institutions of social reporting (chpt. 2). In conclusion, I briefly shall discuss probable effects and limits of social reporting today (chpt. 3).

## **1. CONCEPTS OF WELFARE**

In 1972, the theoretical discussion about a broader concept of welfare was presented under the topic "the economics of qualitative growth". First the concepts of social cost (Kapp) and external diseconomies (Mishan) were investigated with the result that externalities basically are a function of the *level* of industrialisation, not of the *system* of the economy, i.e. that externalities emerge in socialism as well as in capitalism. As countermeasures, in economics there was developed the program of qualitative growth, in the US by the Republican government in "Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity with Quality" (1970) by help of liberal sociologists R. Bauer and D. Moynihan. For the political system there were designed programs of "active social policy", and at the societal level, programs for an active society (Etzioni, 1968), with a significant increase in public participation when citizens leave behind their only passive roles as consumers and voters.

The next topic was "private wealth and public poverty" in the sense of K. Galbraith's criticism. This criticism around 1970 was formulated in terms of public goods (including meritocratic goods) and publicly provided infrastructure. As mechanisms of public poverty were identified short-sighted time preferences in politics, the free rider effect in collective action and the egoism of bureaucratic agencies.

Another topic was the revision of economic accounting by including environmental cost on the negative side, and quality improvements and enlarged leisure time on the positive side.

As to the philosophy of quality of life there was a discussion of possible dilemmas between mobility and solidarity, efficiency and participation, information as control versus information as means of social learning. For illustration of the paradox effort to *measure quality* I quoted the dimensions selected by Karl W. Deutsch (1970, pp. 204–223): quality of political leadership, quality of everyday life of the average citizen, equal rights, opportunity of participation, protection of minorities. Quality of life in the earlier discussion comprised, at the same time, individual well-being and quality of society.

The oil crises of 1973 and 1979 seemed to confirm the worst predictions of the growth critics. Nevertheless, the development of Western societies took another path and that, of course, influenced also the discussion about welfare and quality of life. The oil crises proved to be politically produced and not as the exhaustion of resources. The next economic crises in the early 1980s and the discussions about stagnation and social dismantling ended with a new period of growth in the late 1980s.

Overall, the further growth of OECD countries again increased private wealth, and the manifold effects of all this might be summarized as individualization and a greater plurality of industrial class structure. In *Shifting Involvements*, Albert Hirschman (1982) has developed a theory about why after years of public engagement its marginal utility decreases and actors again turn to private interests. The heavy protest against the national census in Germany was an indication for a serious resistance against an active social policy led by information. The misery of Socialist command economies discredited large-scale planning and budgeting programs. The expansion of material infrastructure, of the educational system, and, overall, of the welfare state silenced critics of public poverty or seemed to qualify this phenomenon as a special US problem. Ecological innovations supported the notion that the “ecological question” could be stepwise solved as successfully as already earlier the “social question”.

During the 1980s we had an intensive discussion and plenty of investigations into the quality of life. But somehow, the concept itself became “individualized”. Quality of life was conceptualized more and more as individual well being (cf. Argyle, 1996) which is determined not only by good objective living conditions but also by subjective well-being: “quality of life must be in the eye of the beholder” (A. Campbell, 1972: p. 422). Survey research became the favourite methodology because it enables you to combine objective and subjective characteristics on the individual level (e.g., income and satisfaction with income), whereas official statistics by tradition (in Germany, also by law) has to renounce to collect subjective characteristics. Survey research proved to be also a flexible instrument for international comparative welfare research, and in the version of panel studies it allows you causal modelling and life course analyses.

However, I do not want to give a picture of welfare research in the 1980s that is too idealistic. The idea that, after the problems of *standard of living*, also the problems of the *quality of life* are neat solution, and that post-modern *plurality of lifestyles* would be now guiding welfare research as well as inequality research has not succeeded. I already have mentioned serious debates on the welfare state crisis, "new poverty" and "deterioration of social security" which used in the early 1980s nearly exactly the same arguments which we hear today (although in Germany social security spending increased by 15% in real terms between 1980 and 1990).

Today we are again in the middle of controversies about the "state of the nation" and the welfare of its citizens. According to the Hirschman theorem it could be the start of a new stage of public interest and engagement. Quite obvious is the fact that distribution questions become the more important, the more insecure the profits from growth. These controversies or discourses occur in several contexts, e.g. about ongoing modernization versus second modernity, decline of the welfare state, decline of innovations. Obviously, problems of content and guidance of quality of life play an important role, and this again in the original broad understanding in which individual well-being and quality of society influence each other and are evaluated jointly. There are, however, at least four aspects in which the constellation has clearly changed compared to the 1970s.

1. Quality of life and other new welfare concepts are no longer oriented, for instance, at "the socialist way of life" in the context of a competition of systems, although they can be still very critical of capitalism.

2. Quality of life today is a world-wide concept which applies not only to the rich West and which is no longer constructed from one single contradiction as, for instance, quantity versus quality or economy versus ecology.

3. Hopes and illusions as to a comprehensive planning society and guidance by comprehensive information systems have vanished not only in the East, but also in the West.

4. Presently, the self-regulating market is not the prominent model, but, instead, the co-ordination of different and differentiated guidance systems: market, state, associations, but also families and other small groups.

What are the new concepts of welfare? "Sustainable development" and "Human development" are global programs. "Quality of persons" and "Liveability" are concepts which want to broaden a narrow understanding of subjective well-being. "Exclusion" is a new perspective of inequality research. "Social capital" describes the societal resources of solidarity. "Welfare pluralism" or "welfare mix" refer to the innovation potential of the welfare state. Here I can only outline the basic ideas of those concepts. "Sustainable development" as well as "Human development" are propagated as world-wide programs at the level of the United Nations. Here sustainable development is the modernized version of qualitative growth which starts from the problem that we need further growth nationally and internationally which,

however, must be shaped in such a way that the living conditions of future generations are preserved. The concept of sustainability can also be applied at the sub-national level, e.g., for firms and organisations. Competing concepts would be zero growth, resignation, asceticism, radical redistribution.

“Human development” has become prominent by the annual reports of the United Nations Development Program. At present it is the most ambitious and far-reaching concept of welfare. The basic idea is to increase the individual options, the quality of human life. That notion goes beyond the development of human resources and beyond welfare state programs which consider people more as recipients than as actors for achievement. Theoretically, human development, therefore, includes beside productivity, equality and sustainability, also empowerment. Empirically, all nations of the world are classified according to a Human Development Index (HDI). The Human Development Reports and the HDI are, besides all criticism, the realisation of two basic demands of social reporting, namely international comparison and the presentation of a comprehensive indicator beyond Gross National Product. By the way, Germany in 1995 was numbered 19 behind 18 other OECD countries.

At the micro-level, the concept of “Personal development” has a similar purpose (cf. Lane, 1996), namely to combine living conditions and objective welfare with active capabilities of growth. Moreover, the macro-perspective is connected with the microperspective in as far as Personal development depends on a liveable society – the concept of Liveability (cf. Veenhoven, 1997). In this concept we find the important perspective of trust in institutions, trust in the future; and perceived security without which even good living conditions cannot be transformed into stabile subjective wellbeing. (This might explain several problems in today’s Eastern Germany. The personal living conditions are regarded by the majority as good, but trust in the political and economic system and, even more, in the system of social security clearly are declining; cf. Zapf/Habich, 1996).

The topic of “Exclusion” points to the most actual welfare problems and the most modern form of inequality within the European Union: not only distance but exclusion from social life, not only exclusion because of poverty and unemployment (i.e., by deficits in resources) but exclusion by discrimination and the refusal of access and life chances (cf. Silver, 1994). Exclusion is destroying solidarity, the fairness of competition, political rights of participation and integration in a society. Solidarity and integration can be preserved, extended or regained the better and bigger the “Social capital” of society, i.e., the stock of shared norms and values, personal support systems and social networks. Whereas social capital originally (in Bourdieu) was presented as a scarce and, in principle, unequally distributed good, i.e., as social connections in a narrow sense of privilege creating contacts, it is presented in more recent approaches (Coleman, Putnam) as, in principle, multiple and distributable. Social capital at the same time increases competence to solve social problems better: “Civil engagement and close social

contacts produce positive results – better schools, faster economic development, lower crime, more effective administration” (Putnam, 1995: p. 65).

Contributions to “Welfare pluralism” or “Welfare-mix” concentrate on a very prominent problem, namely the financial and institutional crises of the welfare state and of the system of social security (cf. Evers/Olk, 1996). The basic idea is that social security no longer can be guaranteed by market and state alone but that the resources of civil society (the social capital) has to be activated, i.e., the big social organisations as well as local communities, neighbourhoods and families. By combination of the outputs of those institutions, by a “portfolio of economies” (R. Rose), the overload of particular institutions can be prevented. The most practical example is old-age pension which rests on several pillars, i.e., in addition to public pensions, on company pension plans and on private life insurance. No longer economies of scale is propagated, but diversification.

## 2. INSTITUTIONS OF SOCIAL REPORTING

Under the second heading, “social reporting”, in 1972 I had discussed the following three areas of research:

- Approaches for a societal information system;
- Social indicators and social reports;
- Mobility versus solidarity: efficiency versus participation.

I shall give some more detailed comments on the first two topics. For illustration, I remind you of some brilliant publications which are still influential today: *Toward a Social Report*, edited by Mancur Olson in 1969; *Les indicateurs sociaux*, edited by Jacques Delors in 1971, and also the German *Materialien zum Bericht zur Lage der Nation*, edited by P. Ch. Ludz in 1971. Social reporting is a broader concept for the ideas of the so-called social indicators movement which goes back to a classical work of Raymond A. Bauer, *Social Indicators*, from 1966.

To condensate societal information into social indicators is only one approach among others. At that time, the following approaches to social reporting had been topical – and are important still today. First task was the *development of official social statistics* which should become as differentiated as the more developed economic statistics. Next was the *development of survey research* which then and now is basically in the private sector. The development of time series by replication studies then was regarded as an innovation. The first general household surveys or welfare surveys, were carried out in the United States and in Sweden. Classics here are the *Level-of-Living-Study* of 1968 in Sweden (cf. Johannson, 1973) and *Quality of American Life* of 1971 in the United States (cf. Campbell et al., 1976). Promising was *national goals analysis and national goals accounting* with the help of medium term and long term development plans. Social predictions and societal simulation systems were discussed as ways to give social reporting, in addition to the retrospective or stock-taking focus, also a prospective focus. *Social*

*accounting systems* eventually should summarize the most important information for particular areas of life and eventually for the overall societal system – in analogy to national economic accounting. We find interesting contributions, e.g., for a demographic accounting systems, educational accounting system and, somewhat later, also for an ecological accounting system.

On the other hand, already in the early 1970s there had been doubts if two other goals could be accomplished by social reporting, namely the consensual *setting of societal goals* and priorities, and the convincing *evaluation of social policy programs*. Notable is also that there was a promising discussion on the preconditions, implementation problems and consequences of data production and data utilisation. That means that statistics itself had become a relevant research topic in the sense of sociology of knowledge.

The most practical successes came with the development of *social indicators* and *social reports*. Social indicators are nothing else than social statistics which, however, differ from normal statistics by several characteristics: they should measure outputs and not inputs; they should refer to individual welfare and not to bureaucratic activities; they should inform about change, i.e., they should be presented as time series; they should be formulated within a theoretical context, i.e., there should be a clear causal relationship between indicator and indicatum. Some authors also pledged for the development of highly aggregated indicators, e.g., the total learning force/total labour force ratio.

For more than a decade the OECD – Programme of Work on Social Indicators (cf. OECD, 1973) was especially influential. It defined eight basic areas of life, and below those areas, more specific concerns:

- Personal health and safety;
- Personal development and intellectual and cultural enrichment through learning;
- Occupational development and satisfaction;
- Time and leisure;
- Command over goods and services;
- The physical environment;
- The social environment;
- The political environment.

For several years high ranking civil servants together with social scientists worked on common definitions and operationalizations of those concerns but they did not succeed with any serious empirical implementation and in the 1980s the program was cut down. But in some countries social scientists have taken up the OECD ideas. For instance, we developed in our Frankfurt/Mannheim group the so called SPES indicator system (cf. Zapf, 1978) which is continued until today and which encompasses several hundred time-series, ideally 1950–1996 (cf. Noll, 1995).

Social reports are social policy analyses with the clear-cut question if objective living conditions and subjective well-being, and beyond individual dimensions, if the quality of society have improved. The classical example is the

US *Toward a Social Report* (1969) organized by economist Mancur Olson. "Our ideal is that social indicators measure and that a social report evaluates what is neglected by economic accounting" (Olson, 1969: 86/87). The chapters of this report come under the following headings:

- Health and illness: Are we becoming healthier?
- Social Mobility: How much opportunity is there?
- Our physical environment: Are conditions improving?
- Income and poverty: Are we better off?
- Public order and safety: What is the impact of crime on our life?
- Learning, science and art: How much are they enriching society?
- Participation and alienation: What do we need to learn?

That ambitious report was not repeated, but it became a model for several countries to establish regular social reports. Since 1970, *Social Trends* in Great Britain are regularly published. We have several editions of the French *Données sociales* since 1973, and since 1974, the *Social and Cultural Reports* of the Netherlands. In the United States there were published *Social Indicators* three times, but then disconnected. In West Germany also three times were published *Materialien zum Bericht zur Lage der Nation*; later on, the *Datenreport* became the most important German contribution (cf. Habich/Noll, 1994: pp. 71-112).

If we now turn to recent developments then we must say that social reporting's zenith was passed in the mid-1970s and that we had until the mid-1980s a considerable downturn. Some observers called it the routinization of social reporting, in the sense that its ideas were implemented in several different disciplines and special branches of sociology and that there was no longer a need for a social indicators movement. It was called "dissolution by diffusion" (cf. Glatzer in: J. Public Policy, 1988). From today's point of view there have been, however, also several promising innovations which promoted a renewal of social reporting in the 1990s. Heinz-Herbert Noll and myself (1994), in an article "Social Indicators Research: Societal Monitoring and Social Reporting", have summarized some of the new developments. First we note the enormous spread of national social reports which mostly are published by ministries, planning agencies or the central statistical office. The ideas represented by *Social trends* and *Données sociales* have succeeded after all. In Germany, the *Datenreport* is published bi-annually by the Statistical Office in co-operation with social scientists who cover a second part on "Objective living conditions and subjective well-being" with survey data.

A second line of new activities can be found at the supra-national level of international organisation, e.g., the World Development Reports and the Social Indicators of Development of the World Bank; in Eurostat publications such as *Social Portrait of Europe*; and since 1990, annually in the Human Development Reports of the UNDP program. On the other hand, we observe manifold activities on the regional and local levels, e.g., statistical compendia or social reports and development reports for regions and cities.

An area in which social reporting lately has made particular progress are reports focused on specific population groups and specific areas of life and policy areas. H.-H. Noll in a summary volume (1997) has brought together experts to describe this field for the Federal Republic of Germany: There is a broad literature in the areas of poverty, health, family, further education, environment, children, old age population, women, and there are interesting efforts for an ecological accounting.

In our review (Noll/Zapf, 1994: pp. 11–13), in conclusion, we delineate seven recent lines of development:

– Because of obvious political reasons, monitoring the *transformation of the former socialist societies* and investigating their welfare development resulted in numerous research projects and will be an important topic for more years to come.

– *The elaboration of concepts of welfare and quality of life* is theoretically of special importance as already discussed above.

– Once more we have *efforts to develop synthetic welfare indicators*. In this context Jaques Delors' demand toward social indicators research has become famous to produce two or three comprehensive indices which can complement the Gross National Product. Next to fulfill this demand comes the Human Development Index (HDI) which combines the dimensions of average life expectancy, education (rate of illiteracy, years of schooling) and per capita income (with heavily decreasing marginal utility). These are macro-analyses for all countries in the world. This effort has been heavily criticised; it has meanwhile, however, made some impression as a measure of developmental progress of poorer countries.

– Another innovation is the *utilization of longitudinal data*, besides classical time series analyses, which is generated by a series of cross sectional surveys. In recent years there have been developed two alternatives: panel studies and retrospective life-course studies. In panel studies, e.g., all members of selected households are investigated year after year so that one can reconstruct individual changes within the context of the household and can build causal models. Retrospective life course analyses lead to quicker results than a panel that is continued annually but they have bigger methodological problems of reliability and validity of respondents' memories.

– *Strengthening the international perspective*: Meanwhile, ideas as formulated in the 1970s in the OECD program are taken up again, namely large international comparisons of social change and welfare development. One reason for this is the closer entanglement of the member states of the European Union. Comparisons of one's own position ("Where we stand?") always had been a strong motive of social reporting, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world where ranking is a wide-spread and legitimized procedure.

– *New efforts of modelling and social accounting*: These classical topics are taken up again, for instance, in connection with the above mentioned area reports and especially by statistical offices. It is a reasonable goal to try to filter a systematized core set from the mass of information.

– *Development of prospective social reporting.* These are efforts to develop systematically the underdeveloped and dispersed prognostic methods like scenarios or projections. The reason is to add to retrospective and status-quo analyses also controlled prognoses or scenarios of alternative futures. These approaches, too, are a revival of early experiments of the founders of the social indicators movement.

### 3. SOCIAL REPORTING TODAY

How should one evaluate the success of social reporting and how should one explain its effects? These questions which deserve an essay of its own can be only briefly covered in conclusion. As to the evaluation of present social reporting recently two international experts have given statements which broadly coincide with our review. Kenneth Land (1996) from the United States is quoting some of our criteria literally. Interestingly, he points to new relationships with marketing research and especially emphasizes the comparison of achievements and outputs by ranking-methods. Joachim Vogel (1997) from Sweden argues that still the most important contribution of social reporting is general enlightenment. He articulates this function with classical goals of the welfare state, namely measurement and evaluation of objective and subjective living conditions. In connection with the serious crisis of classical welfare states he demands a substantive reorientation and the development of indicators which refer to the current problems of inequality, poverty, exclusion and disintegration.

What can one reasonably expect as results of social reporting, granted that it is theoretically stimulating and empirically reliable? To answer this question I refer to a study of German reporting on families, and to an evaluation of economic policy counsel. In an article by Wolfgang Walter (1995) the results and effects of the hitherto five German Family Reports are evaluated as follows. They have had influenced the discourse of family policy and have changed it from ideological to functional orientations. They have had only little direct political effects because there is no consensus about the ideal family but rather criticisms of any ideal type. But those family reports have had a catalytic function in preparing new definitions, and in the proliferation of new topics, concepts and empirical findings.

Manfred J. M. Neumann, the chairman of the Council at the German Ministry of Economics, has called economic policy counsel “a troublesome business with uncertain result” (1998). He concedes that politics and economic policy follow their own interests and may under certain circumstances consciously act against scientific counsel. Nevertheless, economic reporting should insist to inform according to best knowledge about the short-term and longer-term consequences of economic policies and it should insist to evaluate urgent measures according to basic policy principles. For instance, the German Council of Economic Advisors has introduced into public debate, over the years, several new theoretical concepts. Again, also for economic reporting general enlightenment is the overall goal and

the most important achievement, whereas direct influence on urgent political decisions is rather the exception.

In my opinion, the idea of the one and only encompassing social report is not feasible. The big policy alternatives eventually are decided in elections and for a limited period of time. Nevertheless, we can go beyond the enlightenment function and the continuous monitoring. If social reporting succeeds in improving causal explanation models then the debate about evaluation and intervention will be revived. In particular areas, e.g., in medical organisation research, there are some positive signals, and at the same time we observe a revival of a sociology of knowledge of statistical data production.

### Note

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