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Europäisches System Sozialer Indikatoren

- Methodenbericht -

European System of Social Indicators¹

The *European System of Social Indicators* is a systematically selected set of indicators to be used to continuously monitor and assess the individual and societal well-being of European citizens in terms of quality of life, social cohesion, and sustainability as well as changes in the social structure of European societies.

The European System of Social Indicators is the result of research activities within the former Social Indicators Research Centre at GESIS, the Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences. In its initial stage, this research was carried out as part of the Eureporting-Project (Towards a European System of Social Reporting and Welfare Measurement), funded by the European Commission within its 4th European Research Framework Programme from 1998 to 2001.

The research of constructing and implementing the European System of Social Indicators was aimed at developing a theoretically as well as methodologically well-grounded set of measurement dimensions and indicators to be used for a continuous monitoring of individual and societal well-being across European societies. To achieve these objectives, this indicator system was supposed to meet certain requirements, such as:

- A science-based, concept-driven approach of selecting measurement dimensions and indicators;
- The comprehensive coverage of relevant domains and dimensions of well-being as well as selected dimensions of general social change;
- The explicit coverage of the “European dimension”, for example, by means of measures of European identity or in terms of cohesion and conflict between member countries of the European Union;
- The search for and usage of valid and reliable indicators;
- The exploitation of the best data sources available and efforts to ensure the best possible level of international and intercultural comparability of indicators.

The research committed to these objectives followed several steps of development. As a result of this work, the European System of Social Indicators is characterized by the following conceptual and structural features:

¹ This text is a slightly aligned version of Noll (2014).

Conceptual Framework

Science-based indicator systems such as the European System of Social Indicators are supposed to be based on an explicit and clearly defined conceptual framework, allowing to systematically guide and justify the choice and selection of measurement dimensions and indicators. Departing from the major aim of monitoring individual and societal well-being in Europe, three basic concepts – quality of life, social cohesion, and sustainability – have been chosen, around which the framework has been developed. The choice of these concepts was based on theoretical considerations of different notions and conceptualizations of individual and societal well-being as well as on an analysis of goals of societal development in European societies (see Berger-Schmitt & Noll, [2000](#); Noll, [2002](#)). While the concept of quality of life is supposed to cover dimensions of individual well-being, the notions of social cohesion as well as sustainability are used to conceptualize major characteristics and dimensions of societal or collective well-being (see Fig. [1](#)).

Figure 1: European System of Social Indicators: Concepts and Basic Dimensions of Well-being

<i>Individual Well-being</i>	<i>Quality of Life</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Living Conditions• Subjective Well-being
<i>Societal / Collective Well-being</i>	<i>Social Cohesion</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inequalities, Disparities, Exclusion• Social Relations, Ties, Inclusion (Social Capital)
	<i>Sustainability</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Natural Capital• Human Capital

From each of the three basic concepts, two major (goal) dimensions have been extracted. Quality of life is supposed to cover objective living conditions and subjective well-being as the two principal dimensions of individual well-being. The two basic dimensions of social cohesion addressed by the European System of Social Indicators are forces threatening cohesion, such as inequalities, disparities, and mechanisms of social exclusion at the one side and binding mechanisms, such as relations, ties, and inclusion, or what is usually called the social capital, at the other (Berger-Schmitt, [2002](#); Collicelli & Noll, [2010](#)). Referring to the World-Bank's so-called capital approach, the concept of sustainability is supposed to cover natural capital and human capital as its two major dimensions.

Since the European System of Social Indicators is also aiming at monitoring general social change, it moreover addresses the dimensions of value orientations and attitudes as well as selected elements of the social structure of societies.

System Architecture

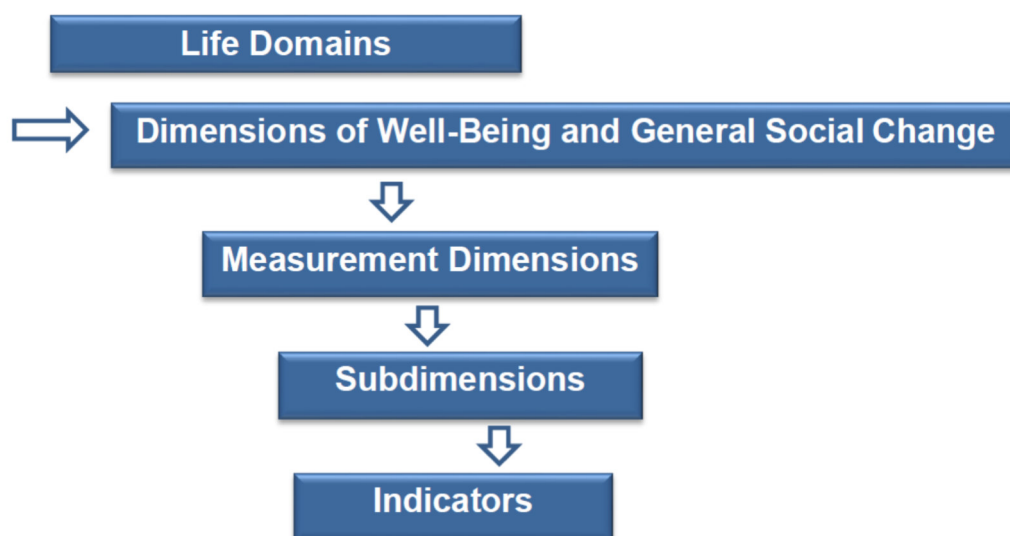
As far as the “architecture” of the European System of Social Indicators is concerned, a life domain approach is most characteristic. The indicator system covers altogether 12 life domains and includes in addition a module on the total life situation with a view to address also more general dimensions of well-being, which are not limited to specific life domains, such as overall subjective well-being, trust in persons and certain institutions, or the level of living in general.

The domains covered by the European System of Social Indicators are the following:

- Population, households, and families
- Income, standard of living, and consumption patterns
- Labor market and working conditions
- Education and vocational training
- Health
- Housing
- Social security
- Public safety and crime
- Social and political participation and integration
- Mobility and transportation
- Leisure, media, and culture
- Environment
- Total life situation.

Applying the dimensions of individual and societal well-being as well as general social change to each of the domains allows to identify measurement dimensions and eventually subdimensions, which are operationalized by selecting one or several indicators for each of them (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Dimensional structure of the European System of Social Indicators



Additional Elements of the Systems' Architecture:

Indicators: As social indicators in general, most of the indicators used for the European System of Social Indicators are considered as outcome measures. The system makes use of objective as well as subjective indicators. While the objective indicators used are for the most part supposed to measure the outcomes of societal processes, for example, in terms of living conditions and individual resources, some input-related indicators are included too. The latter are required primarily when it comes to evaluate the efficiency of societal institutions and policy measures. Subjective indicators are by nature outcome measures and include first of all indicators of subjective well-being, but also other perceptual and evaluational measures as, for example, preferences and concerns, political and social attitudes, or hopes and fears.

Various *key indicators, which have been identified for each of the life domains covered*, address dimensions of well-being and social change which are highlighted as particularly important.

Country Coverage: The European System of Social Indicators covers all member states of the European Union (by then EU29) as well as Norway and Switzerland as two European countries not belonging to the EU. Moreover, also two important non-European reference societies – the United States and Japan – are being covered as far as appropriate and data availability allows. Country coverage may however vary across indicators depending on data availability and sources used.

Periodicity of Observations: Time series start at the beginning of the 1980s at the earliest. As far as data availability allows, empirical observations are presented year by year.

Disaggregations: Most of the indicator time series are broken down by selected sociodemographic variables, such as gender, age groups, employment status, or type of area, as far as meaningful and depending on the specific indicator as well as the availability of respective information. Regional disaggregations of indicators are being provided at the NUTS-1 or similar level as far as meaningful and data availability allows.

Data Sources: The *European System of Social Indicators* is based on data sources ensuring the best possible level of comparability across countries and time. As far as possible, priority is given to data from harmonized sources. The data sources used include international aggregate official statistics, as they are, for example, provided by EUROSTAT or the OECD, as well as microdata from various official as well as science-based cross-national surveys, such as the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), Eurobarometer Surveys, the World Value Surveys, or the European Social Survey, to name just a few examples.

Given the conceptual framework as well as the system's architecture, the construction of the European System of Social Indicators apparently has anticipated several of the desiderata on the measurement of well-being as they have been pointed out in the so-called Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Report (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, [2010](#); Noll, [2011](#)), as, for example, the life domain approach, the joint consideration of quality of life and sustainability, and the use of objective and subjective indicators. The European System of Social Indicators has been implemented gradually and was continuously being updated by the Social Indicators Research Centre at GESIS until 2015. In its

latest version, it provides time series for 9 out of the projected 13 life domains. Comfortable access to the data from the European System of Social Indicators was provided through the online information system “Social Indicators Monitor - SIMon”, which – due to the closing of the Social Indicators Research Centre at GESIS in 2016 – is no longer accessible unfortunately.

The *European System of Social Indicators* has been developed with a view to be used for all kinds of comparative research on quality of life, social cohesion, sustainability, social structures, and value orientations within and across the more than 30 countries covered. As a tool to monitor progress in terms of individual and societal well-being as well as general social change across European societies, it was also considered to be most relevant for policy making purposes.

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