

“Social Monitoring and Reporting in Europe 2014: The Quality of Society and Individual Quality of Life – How do they relate?” (Villa Vigoni, June 23-25)

The current debate about measuring and monitoring well-being and the quality of life addresses issues of individual as well as societal well-being, but usually does not distinguish them explicitly. In consequence also the differences and interrelations between the “Quality of Societies” and the “Quality of Life” of individual citizens rarely have been discussed thoroughly, neither at a conceptual, nor at a measurement level, although the distinction between the two seems to be crucial for social monitoring and reporting activities as well as from a policy making point of view.

The 2014 seminar on “Social Monitoring and Reporting in Europe” shall thus have a focus on the “quality of societies” and “individual quality of life” and will discuss, how the two qualities relate to each other. The seminar invites contributions addressing conceptual issues as well as measurement issues, but also welcomes contributions presenting empirical results for single countries or EU countries in comparison.

So far the discourse on the conceptualization as well as measurement of well-being is more or less limited to individual quality of life, while it is rather obvious that societal characteristics, like the degree of freedom, the rule of law, commitments to sustainability goals, the extent of social cohesion and inclusion as well as the quality of governance and certain institutions, matter and may have a strong impact on individual well-being of present and future generations. It may thus be useful to have a specific and separate view on issues of the quality of societies, which seems to be different from and going beyond the sum (or average) of individual well-being.

At a conceptual level, current debates frequently mix up issues of individual and societal well-being or elements of the quality of life of individuals and the quality of societies. Obviously there is thus a need to better define the two concepts and to clarify the differences and interrelations between them, which is not least important with a view to adequate measurement and proper empirical analysis. While conceptualizations of individual quality of life start from notions of the elements of a “good life”, conceptualizations of the quality of societies are supposed to be grounded in considerations on the “good society” and its characteristics and desiderata. Although it is widely assumed that living in a “good society” may be a precondition of leading a “good life”¹, it is all but clear – theoretically as well as empirically – how to identify the relevant elements of a “good society” and how to assess their impact on the Quality of Life of individual citizens.

While we have seen a booming literature focusing on the measurement of individual well-being recently, the question of how to adequately measure the quality of societies has rarely been addressed as yet, and only few indicator systems aiming to measure and monitor well-being comprehensively – like the European System of Social Indicators (Noll 2002) – are in fact explicitly distinguishing between indicators related to individual quality of life and indicators supposed to measure the quality of societies. As it seems, there is not yet a common understanding neither on the relevant domains and dimensions nor on a set of indicators – objective and subjective – or survey questions (Harrison/Stoop 2012) to be used for the measurement and monitoring of the quality of societies.

The question of how the two qualities relate to each other empirically, and how the quality of societies eventually translates into individual well-being – objective and subjective – is of crucial interest of

¹ As Bertrand Russell put it once: “The good life must be lived in a good society and is not fully possible otherwise” (quoted in Harrison/Stoop 2012:2).

course. As it seems, these issues have been studied sporadically, but not systematically as yet. The well-known study by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) turns out to be a prominent example of investigating the relationship by example of one important feature of the quality of societies – the degree of equality of opportunities and distributions: Are citizens in more equal (or cohesive) societies better off in terms of their individual well-being than citizens in less equal societies? Studies aiming to assess the impact of different types of welfare states in terms of individual well-being (e.g. Veenhoven 2000; Vogel 2003) form another example of investigating the relationship between societal qualities and individual quality of life empirically.

The forthcoming 2014 “Social Monitoring and Reporting in Europe” seminar shall provide an opportunity to explicitly address some of the questions raised and to discuss them more comprehensively and thoroughly as it was the case as yet. Among the issues to be addressed are the following:

- How to define and conceptualize the “Quality of Society” as compared to the “Quality of life” of individuals?
- What are the relevant domains and dimensions of a concept of “Quality of Society”?
- How to measure the “Quality of Society”? Are there survey questions, indicator sets or composite indices available to be used to measure and monitor the “Quality of Society” – either in total or by example of specific components?
- In which ways are societal qualities and individual well-being related to each other conceptually and empirically?
- How to describe and analyse the quality of European societies by example of specific EU member states or in comparison?

The “Social Monitoring and Reporting in Europe” seminar series bringing together a particular mix of participants – academic researchers, official statisticians and policy makers – seems to provide an ideal forum to discuss these issues with a view to advance existing approaches of social monitoring and reporting at national and European levels.

References

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