

# German System of Social Indicators

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The *German System of Social Indicators* is a systematically selected set of indicators, which has been developed with a view to comprehensively monitor long term developments of well-being - in terms of objective living conditions as well as subjective quality of life - and social change in Germany.

The German System of Social Indicators initially was the result of early social indicators and quality of life research in Germany, taking place during the 1970s as part of the SPES-Project (Social Policy Decision-Making and Indicators System for the Federal Republic of Germany) carried out by the Social Policy Research Group at Frankfurt and Mannheim universities. The group of researchers who developed the German System of Social Indicators (E. Ballerstedt, W. Glatzer, Ch. Helberger, K.-U. Mayer, H.-H. Noll, R. Ruge, R. Sehringer, A. Steger, E. Wiegand) was headed by Wolfgang Zapf, a pioneer and doyen of social indicators and quality of life research in Germany and beyond. The first version of the German System of Social Indicators was published in 1977 as part of a voluminous social report for the by then Federal Republic of Germany or West-Germany (Zapf 1977). By that time, the German System of Social Indicators eventually turned out to be the first full-fledged national system of social indicators in Europe and is currently perhaps the oldest social indicator system world-wide, which is still in service.

The German System of Social Indicators was developed with a view to contribute to a comprehensive measurement of well-being or quality of life beyond GDP. Thus, the construction of this indicator system was not only a reaction to the already by then widespread discussion of the inadequateness and deficiencies of GDP as a measure of well-being and progress, but also an early attempt to operationalize and quantify the concept of 'quality of life' as the new, multi- dimensional goal of societal development, which emerged in the late 1960s as an alternative to the concept of material prosperity, which turned out to become more and more questionable in affluent societies in this particular period of time (Noll 2004: 153). For practical reasons, the indicator system explicitly referred to a concept of 'welfare' and 'welfare development' covering objective living conditions of individuals, objective societal conditions, like e.g. distributions, and perceived life quality (Zapf 1978: 1), the latter - due to restrictions in the availability of respective data - only to a very limited extent however. Practical work of developing the German System of Social Indicators used the "OECD Work on Social Indicators" (OECD 1973) as a major model, but referred also to ideas developed within the United Nations' (1974) social indicators project and other projects of the 'social indicators movement' of the time.

In its initial stage the German System of Social Indicators covered the following ten life domains:

- Population
- Social inequality and social mobility
- Employment and working conditions
- Income distribution

- Consumption and supply
- Transportation
- Housing
- Health
- Education
- Social and political participation

Each of these domains has been considered as relevant for comprehensive welfare measurement, but the list of ten domains was by no means considered as exhaustive. The process of selecting a set of indicators for each of these life domains included the following steps (Zapf 1979):

*Empirical goals analysis:* Since social indicators within this system were first of all considered as indicators of goal achievement, the process of developing the German System of Social Indicators started from an empirical review of goals of societal development and dimensions of the 'good' life and society as they were manifested in the Constitution, laws and regulations, party platforms and programmatic statements of associations, churches and major interest groups, with a view to identify measurement dimensions for each of the life domains.

*Selection of measurement dimensions and sub-dimensions:* Based on the results of the empirical goals analysis as well as theoretical considerations, a systematic catalogue of measurement dimensions and sub-dimensions was developed for each life domain. Taking the health domain as an example, three major dimensions have been identified: (1) state of health; (2) health care; (3) living conditions that affect health. For each of the three dimensions four to five sub-dimensions have been identified, which are - for example - in the case of the "state of health": (1) life expectancy; (2) causes of death; (3) healthiness of life, and (4) subjective satisfaction with health.

*Selection of indicators:* In a third step one or several indicators, focusing at goal achievement in terms of individual welfare outcomes, were selected for each measurement dimension or sub-dimension.

*Data collection:* At a final stage, time series data were collected for each of the ca. 200 indicators, which the system initially included. As far as data availability allowed, data were presented year by year, starting by 1950. Most of the indicator values are broken down by various socio-demographic characteristics, like gender, age-groups, employment status etc. The data were taken from a variety of different sources, primarily official statistics.

Since 1987 the German System of Social Indicators has been hosted by the Social Indicators Research Centre at GESIS, where it has been enlarged, further elaborated and continuously updated in subsequent years up to the present. Beyond the ten life domains the indicator system initially covered, three additional domains were included:

- Environment
- Public safety and crime

- Leisure and media consumption

Moreover, also a section on "global welfare measures" was included into the system, containing more general indicators of well-being, such as life satisfaction, social isolation or the Human Development Index, which are not referring to specific domains. Due to the introduction of new survey programmes such as the Germany Welfare Survey, the German General Social Survey (Allbus) and the Socio-Economic-Panel Study (SOEP) and a much improved availability of respective survey data, also subjective indicators have been systematically included into the German System of Social Indicators subsequently. Another important completion of the German System of Social Indicators concerns the inclusion of time series data for the East German states as well as Germany as a whole after German unification.

Currently the German System of Social Indicators includes almost 400 indicators and more than 3000 time series altogether. Among the total number of indicators ca. 90 have been flagged as "*key indicators*", highlighting key dimensions of well-being and quality of life across the various life domains. Since most of the time series data are disaggregated according to various socio-demographic characteristics, the indicator system offers not only information on average levels and their changes across time, but also information on well-being for specific subgroups of the population as well as on the inequality of living conditions in general.

As early as in the mid 1990s the data from the German System of Social Indicators have been presented in digitalized rather than printed formats taking the rapid progress in information techniques as well as considerable changes in information demands and behavior into account. In 1995 the first version of the "Digital Information System Social Indicators" (disi) was launched, a computer program allowing to retrieve and visualize the time series data and to display and print respective results (Noll 1995).

Since 2010, the data from the German System of Social Indicators are comfortably accessible through the online information system "Social Indicators Monitor - SIMon" in German and English language.

As a tool for the permanent monitoring of well-being and social change, the German System of Social Indicators is being updated continuously. It provides information allowing to assess changes in individual well-being and societal progress as well as macro social change over a period of more than half a century.

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