

European System of Social Indicators

Heinz-Herbert Noll

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 carried out by the Social Indicators Research Centre of GESIS, the Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences. In its initial stage, this research was funded by the European Commission as part of the 4th European Research Framework Program. 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 is 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:

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, which allows 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 figure 1).

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

Individual Well-being	Quality of Life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living Conditions • Subjective Well-being
Societal / Collective Well-being	Social Cohesion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inequalities, Disparities, Exclusion • Social Relations, Ties, Inclusion (Social Capital)
	Sustainability <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 so-called "capital approach", the concept of sustainability is supposed to cover natural capital and human capital as its two major dimensions, while the "social capital" – dimension is already addressed as part of social cohesion.

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.

As far as the "system architecture" of the European System of Social Indicators is concerned, a life domain approach is most characteristic. The indicator system covers altogether 13 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:

- Population, Households and Families
- Income, Standard of Living, and Consumption Patterns
- Labour 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 sub-dimensions, which are operationalized by selecting one or several indicators for each of them (see figure 2).

Figure 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, e.g. 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 currently covers all member states of the European Union as well as Norway and Switzerland as two 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 socio-demographic 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 more recently in the so-called Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Report (Stiglitz/Sen/Fitoussi 2010), as for example the life domain approach, the joint consideration of quality of life and sustainability, the use of objective and subjective indicators. The European System of Social Indicators has been implemented gradually in recent years and is continuously being updated by the Social Indicators Research Centre of GESIS. At this stage time series data are available for 9 out of the projected 13 life domains. Additional domains are currently under construction. Comfortable access to the data from the European System of Social Indicators is provided through the online information system "[Social Indicators Monitor - SIMon](#)".

The *European System of Social Indicators* may 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 is also considered to be most relevant for policy making purposes.

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