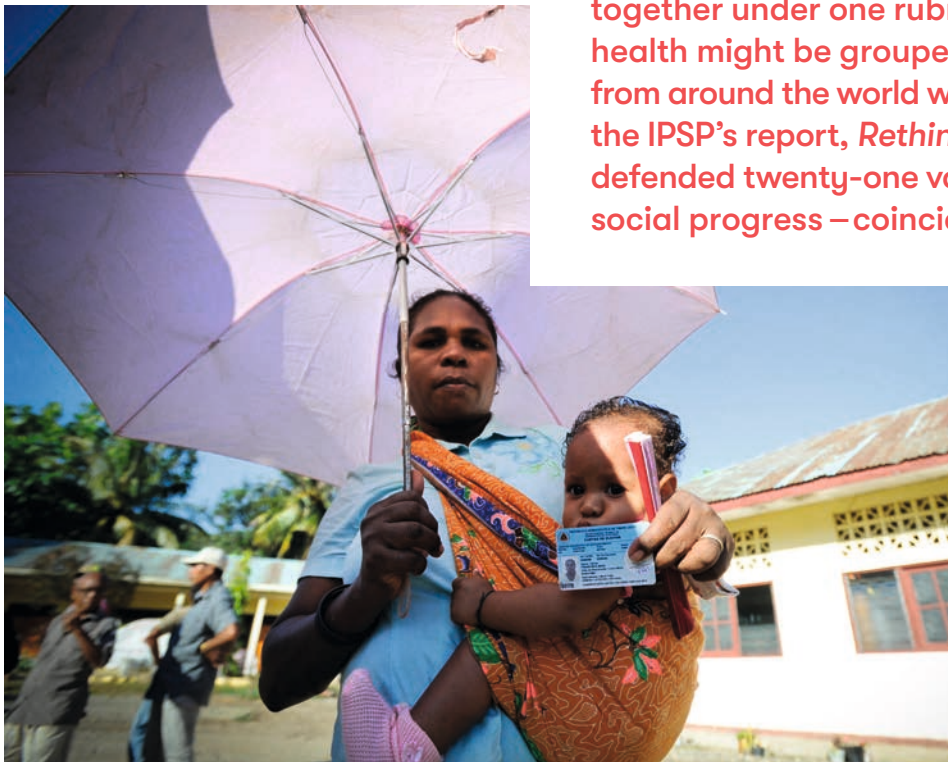


# Values and principles for social progress

Henry S. Richardson

To comprehensively assess the social progress of some locality, nation, or the globe, how many different evaluative dimensions does one need? Nothing important should be left out. Some dimensions might potentially be reduced to other ones. Items important only as means to other ends may be dropped; for instance, economic growth is merely a means to enhancing individual welfare and security and the society's ability to secure people's basic needs and promote cultural goods. Some items may be reasonably grouped together under one rubric; for instance, avoiding hunger and promoting health might be grouped as basic needs. Together with thirteen colleagues from around the world who collaborated on the framing normative chapter of the IPSP's report, *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century*,<sup>1</sup> we identified and defended twenty-one values and principles irreducibly relevant to assessing social progress – coincidentally, 21 for the 21st.



Woman Votes in Timorese Presidential Election. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of UN Photo on Flickr.

Suppose that one seeks to judge the extent to which China has made social progress between 1950 and today. To do that, it suffices to make, as best one can, a relevant assessment of Chinese society at each of these two points in time. And, as almost always happens, a society that moves forward in many respects may also move backward in some. Yet costs endured only in the intervening time raise a different issue. If some of the intervening work to achieve social progress came at great, but relatively temporary cost that does not directly affect this retrospective assessment of progress – say, because some of the gains resulted indirectly from some of the harsher abuses of the Cultural Revolution – one could aptly say, “much progress was achieved, but at considerable cost”. By contrast, if one looks forward, and assesses alternative policies as pathways for making social progress, one will have reason to treat some of the expected interim costs in a different way. Suppose that laissez-faire treatment of expanding agribusiness would boost economic growth in India between now and 2030, but at the cost of severely threatening the subcontinent's already depleted supplies of groundwater, one could argue that this cost provides strong reason for taking that option off the table. To be sure, some of this cost will be felt by those alive in 2030, but it will also cause trouble for a long time afterwards.

Our diverse group of authors quickly agreed on the outlines of our approach. We would be guided by a fundamental commitment to the equal dignity of each human being and a respect for the deep pluralism, around the world, of views about values, morality, and religion. We agreed to abjure any trace of the Enlightenment faith that human society is destined to progress. We also rejected the related thought that there is some single, privileged pathway to social progress. Instead, we intended our

catalog of dimensions of social progress simply to support the kinds of retrospective evaluation and prospective policy choices described in the previous paragraph. To reflect the difference between simple evaluative dimensions and ones that register the kinds of costs that may put some options off the table, we distinguished between fundamental principles, which have this extra feature, and fundamental values, which do not. To avoid redundancy, we sought to limit ourselves to values and principles of non-derivative importance: ones whose importance cannot securely be derived from some other value or principle. In the end, we offer two orienting, cross-cutting principles, nine fundamental values, and ten fundamental principles (see fig.1). Intent on guiding those who are diving more deeply into specific social issues – including both policy-makers and other scholars – we thought it best to err on the side of including a dimension.

Why so many dimensions? Many economists will be used to admitting just two: welfare and distributive justice. Notoriously, focusing solely on maximizing total (or average) welfare is compatible with fostering unacceptable levels of economic inequality. It might be thought that once justice has been added to welfare, these two dimensions are enough. After all, the idea of welfare or well-being is quite capacious. The subjectivist approach to the idea of welfare that was dominant in economics through the middle of the last century is giving way to more substantive understandings of well-being. This shift is in no small part due to Amartya Sen's

pioneering development of the capability approach, which distinguishes multiple dimensions of well-being.<sup>2</sup> Taking advantage of this development, the 2009 report of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission focused on just two main dimensions: well-being and sustainability.<sup>3</sup> Yet the dimension of well-being, its authors suggested, could in turn be broken down into eight sub-dimensions (material living standards, health, education, personal activities, political voice and governance, social connections and relationships, environment, and security). This report did not ignore distributive justice, but made a rather strained effort to suggest that it could be accounted for under the heading of political voice and governance (as if there existed any system of governance that both gives the people a serious voice and guarantees that measures generating unjust inequalities will not be adopted!). In our chapter of the IPSP report, we instead pull out distributive justice for detailed separate treatment.

The treatment of sustainability in the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report valuably emphasized the importance of keeping track of capital stocks, including stocks of social capital. Remember that progress is naturally judged by comparing things at two different points in time rather than by integrating all the data over a long period. Looking at capital stocks importantly adds to the time-slice information in a way that helps assess a society's resilience – the likelihood that it will withstand shocks and support future improvement.

We implicitly distinguish three different kinds of social capital, broadly understood. First, and most abstractly, it characterizes the value of security not as itself an element of well-being but as a contextually-

assured robustness in people's enjoyment of its elements – a robustness that will withstand at least many types of misfortune. Security of this kind requires that settled practices and institutions are in place to help people when they get in trouble – with their health, for example.

Second, the dimension of social relations is worth recognizing as an independent dimension in part because it combines present enjoyment with a set of informal practices that embody social capital. If an innovative form of social media or an addictive new video game erodes social relations in a given society, even if the short-term effect on

people's enjoyment is a wash, the weakened social relations would undercut people's resilience in dealing with unexpected setbacks. It would tend to deprive people of support networks. For this reason, the value of good social relations is not well captured in the current well-being accounts. Additional, of course, there is a strong case for thinking of friendships and various other healthy forms of social relations, which in their nature go beyond a single individual, as being valuable for their own sakes.

Third, the dimension of cultural goods similarly combines intrinsic value, current enjoyment, and a significant standing as a social capital. In characterizing this dimension, we had in mind quite broadly the fruits of scientific endeavor, insights of creative and scholarly reflection, stores of memories and historical knowledge, and diverse modes of artistic and religious expression. Each of these builds up over many centuries, with innovations sometimes erasing and writing over what came before but always building on it. Because the well-being and the potential progress of future generations depend in important respects on the current generation's guardianship of this heritage, and because, again, the concept of progress suggests that we compare two time-slices, the value of cultural goods should be recognized as a distinct dimension for judging social progress. If a society achieved high well-being at the cost of neglecting all maintenance and enhancement of its cultural heritage, this neglect ought to count against its claim to having progressed.

These last two dimensions, social relations and cultural goods, come together in an interesting way in the Chinese regime's attempts to cope with the downsides of modernization. It has been widely noted over the past decade that the regime has at least been exploring the revival of Confucianism as a means of combating the normless individualism that has come from rapid industrialization and broadening capitalism and exacerbated by the one-child policy. These changes have somewhat eroded the familial ties that had traditionally been central to social relations in China. Rebuilding social relations in a way that fosters solidarity (another of our fundamental values) over individualism is no easy thing to do. A nation cannot simply import, lock, stock, and barrel, ways of living life that have worked elsewhere. The relevant types of informal social practice need to put down roots organically, a process that takes a very long time. Hence, it makes perfect sense that the Chinese regime, in seeking to combat the ill effects of excessive individualism arising from modernity, turned to an indigenously well-established set of cultural norms: the Confucian tradition,

Prayer tablets hanging in the Confucian temple in Pingyao. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of E. Gawen on Flickr.



## Dimensions for Evaluating Social Progress

### Cross-cutting, orienting principles

- The principle of equal dignity
- Respect for pluralism

### Basic values

- Well-being
- Freedom
- Non-alienation
- Solidarity
- Social relations
- Esteem and recognition
- Cultural Goods
- Environmental Values
- Security

### Basic Principles

#### Of general applicability:

- Basic rights
- Distributive justice
- Beneficence and generosity

#### Applicable to governments:

- The rule of law
- Transparency and accountability
- Democracy
- Giving rights determinate reality

#### Applicable to civil society:

- Toleration
- Educating and supporting citizens

#### Applicable to global institutions:

- Global justice

with its emphasis on filial piety and ritual propriety.<sup>4</sup> Whether such an effort can work in a top-down way is another matter.

Institutions may be looked at in the same light, for they cannot be set up overnight, and often need to exist for generations before they earn the trust of those who participate in them and interact with them. In introducing the distinction between values and principles, above, we focused on a moral-philosophical distinction: when looking forward, principles serve to put options off the table in a way that values do not. That is in part because principles directly indicate how some agent should or should not act, whereas values do so only via some process or principle of weighing or reasoning. Seven of our principles are framed as applying only to a specific range of human institutions: to governments, to civil society, and to global institutions. Principles are especially at home in application to institutions, for institutions are themselves constituted on the basis of rule or principles. Consider the role of the principle of the *rule of law* in characterizing the core requirements of a well-functioning legal system. Governments typically rest on constitutions, written or unwritten, that give them shape. Civil society, being so heterogeneous, is less obviously rule-constituted than either governments or the law; but civil society arguably exists only against the backdrop of a government that is at least minimally effective and that sufficiently protects basic liberties for a diversity of civil-society organizations to arise.

One of our chapter's principles, relevant to assessing a society's progress, is the principle of *democracy*: all governments should be democratic. Given the size of modern nations, democracy therein must clearly be indirect, involving the election of representatives, rather than assembling all citizens for a large meeting. Democracy is important to treating citizens as free and equal persons, which calls for giving them a role in ruling themselves. To allow citizens to do so in a way that allows them to respect one another as free and equal persons, the process should afford them an opportunity to give and to hear one another's reasons for and against alternative laws or

policies.<sup>5</sup> In discussing this, we emphasized that the idea of democracy has roots all around the world. For example, legislators were elected in Ashoka's India.<sup>6</sup> In Africa, the Oromo people of Ethiopia developed a complex democratic process involving a system of checks and balances.<sup>7</sup>

Relatedly, there is no uniquely preferred way to implement democracy. Different forms of democracy will be appropriate in different places. This was made vivid to me when I participated in a conference in Paro, Bhutan in 2009 on Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Asia.<sup>8</sup> One point brought home to me was that the United States could be described as being stuck with Democracy 1.0, with all its faults. Given how hard it is for the U.S. to amend its constitution, we essentially cannot upgrade. Newer democracies have a chance to design democracy better, and in ways that suit their circumstances. Bhutan, being a monarchy, is by no means fully democratic; but the king, like Emperor Ashoka before him, had decided that the country should adopt democratic mechanisms. It was exciting to see how thirsty the Bhutanese organizers were for ideas about how to do democracy better. For instance, they lapped up voting theorists' state-of-the-art ideas about how to design voting processes to minimize strategic voting.

Just as there is no one privileged path to democracy, there is also no one privileged way to combine the twenty-one dimensions so as to reach an overall assessment of achieved or expected progress or decline. It will be said that weights (or more sophisticated aggregating functions) need to be applied to the dimensions in order to produce an overall score. That doing this is sometimes useful for public-relations purposes is shown by the competitive incentives generated by the Human Development Index's rankings, annually released by the U.N.D.P. But this is just one simple use of a multi-dimensional understanding of how well a society is doing. For many other purposes, it will be more important to work first to specify some or all of the dimensions more fully before doing any aggregation or assessment.

Generalizing the line of thought just suggested about the local adaptability of the idea of democracy, for some purposes it might be apt for locally appropriate specifications first to be reached before any weighting is contemplated. In addition, there are many contexts – both in policy-making and in social-scientific study – in which there is no need to attend to the full range of values and principles that would be relevant to judging a society's overall progress. Our compass chapter was intended in part to be of use to the authors of the twenty chapters that follow ours in the IPSP report, and to other humanists and social scientists working in their wake. These chapters cover a huge diversity of topics, including cities, the future of work, wars and violence, media and communications, democracy, families, health, and education. Different ones of our twenty-one values and principles will be salient in each of these distinct areas of concern. When doing scholarly work or policy assessment on one of those issues, it will be perfectly apt to select the dimensions most worthy of attention and to elaborate them, as needed, by specifying them or disaggregating them. For instance, work on assessing individual deprivation will sensibly set aside the dimensions that apply only to collective or institutional achievement and will disaggregate the basic needs so as to bring to bear more detailed data. In principle, however, all twenty-one dimensions are relevant to overall social progress if causally impacted, intentionally or not, by the actions taken or policies adopted in any arena. This is of course true of effects on well-being and distributive justice; but it is true of the other nineteen dimensions as well.

The complexity of the idea of social progress implied by the multiple dimensions needed to capture it also indicates that there is room to interpret it different ways in different places. By differently interpreting the various dimensions and differentially prioritizing them, nations may arrive at their own conceptions of progress. What is to be hoped is that, in so doing, they do not either neglect any of the twenty-one dimensions distinguished in our compass chapter and that they work out their conceptions of progress via processes that respect the equal dignity of all persons.

Henry S. Richardson

Professor of Philosophy, Georgetown University, Washington DC,  
<http://henrysrichardson.com>

### Notes

- 1 Richardson, H.S. et al. 2018. 'Social Progress: a Compass', *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Socio-Economic Transformations, Report of the International Panel on Social Progress* Vol. 1, Ch.2, pp.41-82, Cambridge University Press; <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108399623>
- 2 Sen, A. 1987/1999. *Commodities and Capabilities*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- 3 Stiglitz, J., Sen, A. & Fitoussi, J. 2009. *Report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP)*. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/stiglitzCMEPSP>, accessed 24 June 2018.
- 4 See, e.g., Bell, D.A. 2010. 'Reconciling Socialism and Confucianism? Reviving Tradition in China', *Dissent* 91: 91-99; Solomon, D., Ping-Cheung Lo & Ruiping Fan (eds) 2012. *Ritual and the Moral Life: Reclaiming the Tradition*, Dordrecht: Springer.
- 5 See Richardson, H.S. 2004. *Democratic Autonomy: Public Reasoning about the End of Policy*, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, ch.5.
- 6 Sen, A. 2009. *The Idea of Justice*, Harvard University Press, pp.329-32.
- 7 Legesse, A. 2000. *Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System*, Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press.
- 8 The proceedings of this conference were published in *Beyond the Ballot Box: Report from the Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Asia Conference, 11-14 October 2009, Thimpu, Bhutan: Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2010.*



Taiwan 2016 presidential election. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Studio Incendo on Flickr.