



Building together local indicators for societal progress

Construire ensemble des indicateurs locaux pour le progrès sociétal

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Today, many private and public decision makers, associations and citizens strongly feel the need to benefit from more appropriate tools to conduct and to assess local public policies, the quality of life and the progress of society towards their chosen goals. Many local, quantitative indicators are available to decision makers, coming from various public or private accounting bodies. But the qualitative aspects of life and progress are in general neglected, and even remain unknown in many cases. Choices and decisions based on these quantitative indicators lead to a growing gap between the outcome of public policies and the needs of many citizens.

What matters then is to clarify what is important for citizens. There is no agreed and universal definition of well-being, of development, of progress, which we can feed into our computers. What do we want locally for our future? What are our objectives? Which aspects of our living conditions do we want to give priority to? How can we influence our future? In order to supply an answer to these questions, we need to carry out work clarifying this matter, with an important qualitative dimension, and first, we have to document and to analyse the various aspects of our societal values.

Desired by most societies and aimed at by many public policies, economic competitiveness and efficiency are seen as the ultimate objectives, while these should only be intermediate goals. The well-being of everyone should be the ultimate objective of societies, served by appropriate public policies, and this is what should be measured. Today, we know that well-being cannot be reduced to

material wealth, as measured by GDP, and we need to explore what alternative well-being measures can be established.

Beyond the technical dimensions linked to various indicators, an essential dimension is the participation of citizens and local associations affected by social problems in drawing up public policies. This participation is nowadays more effective in the definition, preparation, and implementation of local public policies (local Agendas for the 21st Century, territorial cohesion programmes...). In this context, local public policies and territories seem a relevant field, as they are full of innovative experiments. These experiments indicate the need for broad changes in the design and modalities of governance and evaluation in order to build a common desirable future together.

Our international conference fits in with this general perspective. Its ambition is to enable participants to share national and international experiences concerning the construction of local indicators of societal progress and well-being. It is a way of enabling a useful exchange of knowledge between elected representatives, those in charge of public policies, the members of local assemblies, citizens and academics, all concerned with the joint preparation and implementation of local public policies. The organisation of this conference is scheduled within the framework of the research programme backed by the Region of Brittany (ISBET-Indicateurs Sociétaux de Bien Etre Territoriaux), as a follow-up to the workshop-seminar organised by PEKEA in 2006. A strong similarity then appeared with the research programme undertaken by the Council of Europe on the measurement of social cohesion. The Council of Europe has now come alongside us in this symposium. In 2007, the OECD also moved closer to this programme and its perspectives, as stated in the « Istanbul Declaration »¹.

¹ Signed 06/30/2007 during the second World Forum « Statistics, Knowledge, and Policies » by representatives of the European Commission, the OECD, the Islamic Conference Organization, the UN, the UNDP, the World Bank.

During this international conference, discussions on the analyses behind this approach and on the various on going experiments should enable progress towards the production of guidelines for all interested parties. This objective is also shared by the group FAIR a recently set up group to organise on a new basis discussions about the topic of « wealth » – discussions launched in France ten years ago² - ; the new group has just emerged when the French Government asked a group of international experts to find out an alternative indicator to GDP which could give a better account of the improvement of societal and environmental well-being in France. Which types of societal progress indicators are relevant? How can citizens be involved in their construction? How can local characteristics be taken into account? All of these questions lie at the heart of the discussions at this conference.

This conference is organised around three major topics:

-Reconsidering societal progress: the objective is to analyse measures and dimensions of well-being and of societal progress. As we know, « growth » does not always lead to improved well-being for citizens. It is therefore necessary to define what counts for a society and to measure progress differently. This requires us to discuss what « value » means and what values are behind these measures. The question of « what » to measure is closely linked to that of « why » measure. The search for other indicators expresses the will to clarify ends, which cannot be achieved, if one relies only on the values attached to monetary and market economy indicators. It is essential, for instance, to ask ourselves whether citizens do not give more importance to social and environmental health ...

-Working out the collective construction: reconsidering societal progress cannot be left only to expert committees, even if expertise in many areas is necessary. Citizens must be given the possibility to say which ends should be selected in priority, and to participate in discussions on how to take them into account. The participation of society, the deliberation of policies and the mobilisation of

² Dominique Méda Qu'est ce que la richesse ? Aubier, 1999

the research community are all necessary to enable us to define and select the desired ends, to weigh up the criteria and the relevant assessment procedures. An analysis of the means and procedures to work out this collective construction is also required.

-Setting up a good structure for local indicators. this implies finding out which groups of citizens and communities are relevant to reconsider societal progress and to work out ways of collective construction. It is essential to draw lessons from past and on-going experiences, and experiments, i.e. to have a « field approach » in various areas. We shall also be coming together because we have some « knowledge in building local indicators », which can be shared. It is therefore a central topic for this conference, since local bodies (communities, municipalities, departments, regions...) are undertaking many experiments in bringing together societal progress indicators.