

Final Report: Explorative Research Stay at Hebrew University Jerusalem

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During my explorative research visit to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, meetings with various scholars at Hebrew University and practitioners of Israeli governmental institutions served to establish contacts to the Israeli researcher community with whom it would be beneficial to collaborate on the topic of the role that statistical indicators play in the transformation to sustainability – a research project on the political economy of statistics that I plan to undertake in the coming years. Using a comparative approach, I will look at different initiatives of OECD countries that attempt to come up with alternative indicators of well-being (alternative to GDP, that is, that cater for a higher degree of sustainability).

The idea of my research is not only to look into the process of fixing indicators in a comparative perspective through the scrutiny of various national case studies – but also to analyze the impact that the fixation of these indicators has on national political debates, strategies and measures. In this, I will not limit myself to indicators and indicator methodology alone (although this is an important part), but to the analysis of the overall political economy of discussing and fixing indicators and the consequences that this has in terms of a desired transformation to sustainability.

Israel has become a member of the OECD in 2010 and has also started to define alternative indicators of societal well-being. Focusing on the case study of Israel is of special interest and importance to my project, given that in a comparative perspective, Israel faces quite different social, political and environmental challenges than many other OECD countries – so that the relevance of specific Israeli debates and their respective statistical indicators might be particularly revealing.

The contact to Prof. Feitelson and the idea to look into a possible research collaboration resulted from our meeting during the Spring Campus of the University Alliance for Sustainability at Freie Universität Berlin this April where I gave a speech on the instrumental role that statistical indicators have come to play in political transformation processes (“Governing by Numbers”). Eran Feitelson not only invited me to Israel, but organized the meeting of different scholars and was extremely helpful during every step of the preparation of the trip and during my stay itself.

In Israel, I met with the following people:

Prof. Dr. Eran Feitelson, Professor of Geography and member of School of Public Policy, Hebrew University

Prof. Dr. David Levi-Faur, Head of the School of Public Policy, Hebrew University

Prof. Dr. Gabriel Motzkin, Director, Van Leer Institute

Prof. Dr. Moshe Justman, Academic Director of the Israeli Civil Society Unit, Van Leer Institute

Prof. Dr. Michel Strawczynski, Head of the Economics and Society Program at the Van Leer Institute and member of School of Public Policy, Hebrew University

As well as staff and students from the School of Public Policy and other scholars of Van Leer.

During my stay, I was invited to give a public lecture to the school of Public Policy of Hebrew University on the topic of the political history of Gross Domestic Product.

An important concrete result was the planning of a session on indicators in the transformation to sustainability to be held during the next year's Spring Campus of the Alliance and in which various of the people I met are willing to participate.

Not only was I made to feel welcome and had excellent discussions during my stay. The combination of meeting scholars from the Hebrew University with close ties to the Freie Universität (like Prof. Feitelson and Levy-Faur) and scholars of the Van Leer Institute proved unexpectedly fruitful. For instance, not only had Prof. Strawczynski of Hebrew and Van Leer been personally involved in the initiative of alternative well-being measurement. More importantly, the Van Leer Institute is not only engaged in alternative indicator construction (civil society index), but has established a multidisciplinary study group on quantification and numbers that proved to be highly compatible with my own research plans. I hope that this will result in a successful and long-term cooperation. I am very grateful to the Alliance to have financed my stay in Jerusalem.

Philipp Lepenies

