

Final Report: Research stay at Freie Universität Berlin

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Well-being indicators

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Recent years have witnessed the development and implementation of national indicators supposed to represent the well-being, welfare or quality-of-life of societies and nations. This development has gained the attention of governments and international institutions, such as the EU, OECD and UN, each of which chooses or develops its own indicators or indices of indicators to represent well-being. My current research project develops two distinct bridges between existing discussions of the national indicators of well-being and the philosophy of well-being on the one hand, and political thought on the other.

During my visit to Freie Universität Berlin, I had the opportunity to exchange ideas on this topic with my host, Prof. Dr. Philipp Lepenies (Visiting Professor for Comparative Politics and Director of the Environmental Policy Research Center). The dialogue with Phillip was intriguing and constructive and helped me further develop my ideas, as well as exposing me to his interesting perspective on these issues.

Essentially, the whole project of developing the indicators begins from an acknowledgement of the problem of leaning too heavily on GDP per capita as an exclusive indicator of wellbeing. Among the many kinds of indicators and new measurement frameworks one can distinguish between three basic categories: accounting/monetary approaches, objective conditions approaches and subjective approaches (often conducted by broad surveys of life satisfaction). Each of these three

categories has its own particular intellectual roots, trajectory of scientific development and history of implementation, as well as an extensive literature concerning its analytical advantages and pitfalls.

It appears that a dual consensus has become established: about the inadequacy of GDP per capita as an exclusive (albeit still important) indicator; and about the need for the implementation of a plurality of (existing) indicators in order to best represent well-being.

Notwithstanding the huge literature and discussions surrounding this multi-faceted development, only recently has scholarly attention been given to the significance and particular meaning of the various ways of combining the different types of indicators into an index.

During the visit, Dr. Lepenies and I had the opportunity to discuss our mutual conviction that ascribing particular meaning (and context) to methods of combining different indicators of well-being is the next necessary challenge for the field. Meeting this challenge could make the variety of measurements and overflowing data meaningful and comprehensible, thereby dramatically contributing to the success of the whole project. Each of us, my host and me, holds to a different approach of how to cope with this challenge.

Dr. Lepenies was a wonderful host, and during my stay, I not only learned a lot about his views of the role of well-being indicators, but many other subjects - the fascinating history of Freie Universität, in particular. The two of us discussed future opportunities for collaborations in research and teaching.