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PART I

An Interpretative Guide

1. Goals of social indicators

The present report aims to give insights relevant to answering two main questions:

- What progress have OECD countries achieved in terms of their social development?
- How effective have been the actions of society in furthering social development?

The first of these questions requires indicators covering a broad range of social issues. Insofar as social development requires health, education, economic resources and a stable basis for social interactions, so must the indicators reflect these various dimensions.

The second question is more challenging. Societies try to influence social outcomes, usually through government policy. The question is whether such actions are effective in achieving their aims. A first step in answering this question is to compare the changes in social outcomes that social policies try to influence with the scale of the resources that are used to that effect. This comparison does not, of course, allow the evaluation of whether a particular social programme is effective. Indicators can however highlight areas where more in-depth investigation is required. For example, they can indicate whether countries where social spending is relatively high also achieve better social outcomes; in such circumstances, they do not tell *why* outcomes are poor, but they do indicate the need to think hard about why this occurs.

2. The framework of OECD social indicators

While the structure applied in this volume falls short of being a full-scale framework for the collection and presentation of social statistics, it is nevertheless more than a one-dimensional listing of indicators.

OECD work on indicators outside the social area has followed different approaches to assess policies and the outcomes that they try to influence. This experience has provided guidance to the present volume. For example, the set of education indicators published in *Education at a Glance – OECD Indicators* is structured into three groups: *context*; *inputs*; and *outputs* (OECD, 2004b). OECD indicators on science and technology have been grouped under four main headings: creation and diffusion of knowledge; information society; economic globalisation; and productivity and economic structure (OECD, 2003).

The OECD environmental indicators (OECD, 2001) follow a different approach, based on a framework known as "Pressure-State-Response" (PSR).[1] In this framework human activities exert *pressures* on the environment, which affect the quality and the quantity of natural resources and environmental conditions (*state*), and which prompt society to respond to these changes through environmental, general and sectoral policies (*societal response*). The PSR framework aims at highlighting these links, and helping decision-makers and the general public see the interconnection between environmental and other issues. Examples of *pressure* indicators include those related to sectoral activities (such as energy, transport, industry, agriculture, etc.) and the associated pollution, waste generation, and resource use. Examples of the *state* of the environment indicators are

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measures of air, water, land quality and ecosystem health. Examples of *response* indicators include measures of the extent of policy interventions for environmental purposes such as expenditure and environmental taxes. The PSR approach relates indicators of what government and society do (response indicators) to indicators of what they are trying to influence (state and pressure indicators).

A similar approach is followed in this report on social indicators. Indicators are grouped in three areas:[2]

- ***Social context.*** These are variables that are not usually the direct target of policy, at least in the short to medium term. Nevertheless, they are crucial for understanding the context within which social policy is developed. For example, the proportion of elderly people in the total population is not the direct target of policy, although it shapes how specific policies impact on social outcomes such as the living standards of the elderly and on their costs.
- ***Social status.*** These indicators are descriptions of those social outcomes that policies try to influence. Ideally, the indicators chosen are such that they can be easily and unambiguously interpreted – all countries would rather have low poverty rates than high ones, for example.
- ***Societal response.*** These indicators illustrate what society is doing to affect social status. They include indicators of the stance of government policies, but also of the activities of the private sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Indicators of the development of private pensions, and of the actions taken by individuals and families to care for the elderly and children, fall in this category.

Whilst social indicators are attributed to one of the three groups described above, the distinction between context and status is not always straightforward. For example, fertility rates may be an objective of pro-natalist policies in some countries, while they are part of the context of social policy in others. Similarly, family breakdown can be regarded as a failure of public policies in some countries, whereas it may not be an explicit policy concern in others. Inevitably, any dividing line between different indicators is arbitrary.

2.1. Data considerations

The 30 member countries of the OECD differ substantially in their collection of statistics. In selecting indicators, a choice has to be made as to whether to include indicators that are available for all countries or how far to depart from this principle.

The indicators presented in this volume are not confined to those for which there is "absolute" comparability across countries. Such a condition would, for example, exclude most indicators on income distribution and poverty, which are affected by a range of features that escape full cross-country standardisation. To the extent possible, readers will be alerted as to the nature of the data used and their potential pitfalls. *Also, as a general rule, this volume includes only indicators that are available for at least half of OECD countries.*

Aggregate data at the national level can often be decomposed into sub-categories, such as age of individuals, family type and gender. The type of breakdown available (*e.g.* by individual and household characteristics) varies according to the indicator considered. *Indicators for sub-national regions or units of government are not included in this volume.* Also, no attempt is made to record all data in the same units, *i.e.* the social indicators presented in this volume are a mixture of head counts, currency units, percentages of GDP, etc.

3. Use of the indicators

The *social context* and *social status* indicators describe the social conditions of the population. The *social status* indicators can also be interpreted as measuring one particular dimension of what social policy is trying to achieve. Response indicators give one (or more) dimension of the scale and nature of social policy interventions. Confronting *response* indicators with *status* indicators provides a first-order indication of policy effectiveness.

Social context indicators help in the interpretation of policy effectiveness. Such indicators enumerate those quasi-exogenous variables that may help to "explain" part of the differences in *social status* across countries, regardless of the policy stance; their aim is to inform readers about differences across countries within which public policy operates. Unlike *status* and *response,* social context indicators cannot always be unambiguously interpreted as "good" or "bad". For example, cross-country differences in the number of lone-parent families may reflect cultural factors, although in all countries social policy makers are called upon to confront its consequences.

To help users, social indicators are further grouped according to the broad policy fields that they cover. Four *objectives* of social policy are used to classify indicators of *social status* and *social response*:

a) Enhancing ***self-sufficiency*** is an underlying objective of social policy, featuring prominently in, for example, the Communiqué of Social and Health Policy Ministers (OECD, 1999a). Self-sufficiency of individuals and families is promoted by ensuring active participation in the economy and society, and autonomy in activities of daily living.

b) ***Equity*** in this context refers mainly outcomes, *i.e.* policies which seek to overcome social or labour market disadvantage, promote equality of opportunity and autonomy of individuals. Equitable outcomes are measured mainly in terms of the access by households to resources.

c) The underlying objective of health care systems is to improve the ***health status*** of populations. This implies a focus that is broader than disease and its cure, including other social factors that can affect mortality and morbidity.

d) ***Social cohesion*** is often identified as an over-arching objective of the social policies of countries, although little agreement exists on what precisely it means. However, a range of pathologies are informative about *lack* of social cohesion, which do have resonance as objectives of social policy. This is true, for example of crime, imprisonment, suicides, industrial strife, and family instability.

To the extent that indicators of social responses have an impact on multiple areas of social policy, they can be recorded under more than one heading. For example, the ability to undertake activities of daily living without assistance is an indicator of social cohesion, self-sufficiency and of health; similarly, drug use may signal a lack of social cohesion as well as poor health conditions. The problem of indicators that could be classified under different headings is not specific to social policy;[3] the solution adopted in this volume is to show indicators that are relevant to each of the four headings, rather than repeating the indicator in each group. Throughout the remainder of this volume, the code in-between brackets associated to each indicator (*e.g.* GE1) is used to relate it to a policy field or category of indicators (as listed in the tables below), while the numbering of the indicators is used to simplify cross-references. While the name and coding of indicators used in this

volume differs from those used in previous versions of *Society at a Glance,* an effort has been made to assure continuity in the areas covered.

4. Description of the indicators

For each of the selected indicators, this report describes the key evidence together with general information on definitions and measurement. Most indicators already exist in one form or another, and many are published in other OECD publications on a regular basis. The majority of the indicators shown here are drawn from OECD databases, often run in co-operation with other international organisations (*e.g.* Labour Force Statistics, Social Expenditure Database). Others indicators have been collected on an *ad hoc* basis, as for example, information on older people in institutions. No new large-scale data collection exercise was undertaken for the preparation of this volume. In general, there are fewer good-quality indicators of societal response than of social status. This suggests a need for greater efforts in improving the collection of data describing public and private action, including information on private social spending and on the number of people and households receiving different social benefits and services from employers and NGOs.

4.1. Context indicators

When comparing *social status* and *societal response* indicators, it is easy to end up making statements that one country is doing badly relative to other countries, or that another is spending a lot of money on a specific policy target compared with others. It is important to put such statements into a broader context. For example, national income levels vary across OECD countries. If there is any link between income and health, richer countries might be expected to have better health than poor ones, irrespectively of societal responses. If the purchase of health care services increases with income (as it appears to be the case), rich countries might be expected to spend more on health care (as a percentage of GDP) than poorer countries. This does not mean that the indicators of health status and health spending are misleading: it does mean, however, that the general context behind the data should be borne in mind when considering the implications of indicators.

Many context indicators are of relevance in interpreting several indicators included in this publication. This is true of national income per capita (GE1), which has implications for the quality, quantity and nature of the social protection which individuals desire, but also of age-dependency ratios (GE2), fertility rates (GE3), foreigners and foreign-born population (GE4) and marriages and divorces (GE5). Context indicators are not categorised as falling in any of the four underlying objectives of social policy – equity, self-sufficiency, health or cohesion. Apart from national income, the chosen indicators generally reflect long-term demographic trends and trends in household composition.

List of general context indicators

GE1. National income per capita
GE2. Age-dependency ratio
GE3. Fertility rates
GE4. Foreigners and foreign-born population
GE5. Marriage and divorce

Note: Additional indicators are available on the OECD Web site (*www.oecd.org/els/social/indicators*).

4.2. Self-sufficiency

All social security systems rely for their funding on contributions by people in work. Most systems in the OECD area achieve this by tying eligibility for social benefits to employment and/or contributory records. Hence, employment for the majority of the population of working age is necessary for the very survival of social security (SS1). In addition to the benefits to society as a whole that it delivers, work provides economic resources, identity, social interaction and status to individuals and their family.

Nevertheless, providing the means to support oneself and one's dependants through work is sometimes an aspiration rather than a reality (SS2, SS3). Labour force participation rates of women – and of mothers in particular (SS4) – vary sharply across countries, reflecting both social differences and the effectiveness of government policies to overcome the barriers faced by women in reconciling work and care responsibilities. Long-term unemployment remains high in many countries, and many young people face difficulties in the transition from school to work (SS9). Labour market disadvantage is often concentrated among low-skilled workers, who in all countries are more likely to find themselves unemployed, non-employed or earning lower wages than their better-educated peers (SS7). Early exit from the labour market often reflects low qualifications and poor re-employment prospects, rather than choice, for persons who are close to retirement age (SS8).

The societal response to these problems has traditionally combined provision of cash benefits to individuals unable to support themselves and interventions aimed at overcoming obstacles to work and facilitate integration into the labour market. When poorly designed, these two set of measures may however contradict each other. Benefits provided by the social protection systems to jobless persons may sometimes inadvertently reduce financial incentives to take up work (SS5), while they are most often not generous enough to escape poverty (SS6). Moreover, social protection systems have to take account of the tax burden on labour that they imply, in order to avoid adversely affecting labour demand.

The table below lists the indicators of social status and societal response that are most relevant for assessing whether OECD countries have been successful in meeting goals for assuring the self-sufficiency of individuals and their families. Indicators shown in italics refer to those that, while presented in another sub-section (Section 4.3 through to 4.5), also have a bearing on achieving self-sufficiency.

List of self-sufficiency indicators[1]

Social status	Societal responses
SS1. Employment	SS5. Out-of-work benefits
SS2. Unemployment	SS6. Benefits of last resort
SS3. Jobless households	
SS4. Working mothers	
SS7. Educational attainment	
SS8. Age at retirement	
SS9. Youth inactivity	
EQ1. Relative poverty	*EQ5. Public social spending*
EQ2. Child poverty	*EQ6. Private social spending*
EQ4. Income of older people	*EQ7. Total social spending*

1. Indicators in italics are those that, while presented in another sub-section, are also relevant for an assessment of self-sufficiency. The list of indicators is affected by data availability.

4.3. Equity

Equity has many dimensions, including access to social services, economic opportunities, and outcomes. Opinions as to what exactly entails a *fair* redistribution of resources or what establishes a *just* distribution of opportunities vary widely within and between countries. Hence, it is not surprising that it is hard to obtain comprehensive information on all aspects of *equity*. Data limitations are compounded by the fact that social services are often delivered by lower tiers of governments and non-government organisations, which makes it even harder to obtain quality data. As a result of these considerations, most of the *social status* indicators that are relevant for an assessment of equity outcomes are limited to inequality in financial resources.

Relative poverty (EQ1), restricted access to health and other social services, and low levels of literacy and educational attainment are strongly correlated with each other and with the labour market situation of individuals and of their families (SS2, SS3). The current distribution of work within societies raises equity concerns for special groups, in particular for children in their families (EQ3). While income in old age is generally adequate to support living standards following retirement for a large majority of elderly people, some groups of elderly (in particular older women with no own pension rights) remain disproportionately exposed to poverty (EQ4). Many of these trends in poverty have their roots in the forces shaping the distribution of income among individuals and households (EQ2).

Social protection systems are the main tool through which policy-makers have responded to these equity concerns. Regardless of the national differences as to what establishes a fair society, all OECD countries have developed (or are developing) social protection systems that, to a varying extent, redistribute resources within societies and insure individuals against various contingencies. Much of these interventions take the form of public social expenditure (EQ5). In addition, households may have access to social benefits provided through the private sector (EQ6) or through the tax system (EQ7). In all OECD countries, a large share of these resources is devoted to providing income following retirement: indicators of old-age pension replacement rate (EQ8) and pension promise (EQ9) show the long-term impact of existing pension rules and parameters for tomorrow's retirees. In recent years, social policies in most OECD countries have moved towards employment-oriented social policies, in recognition of the fact that getting a job is the most effective tool for obtaining a more equitable distribution of resources.

Equity indicators cannot be disentangled easily from self-sufficiency indicators. Taken together, they reveal how national social protection systems grapple with a recurrent policy dilemma: how to balance adequacy of provisions with sustainability of the system and promotion of self-sufficiency of individuals.

List of equity indicators[1]

Social status	Societal responses
EQ1. Relative poverty	EQ5. Public social spending
EQ2. Income inequality	EQ6. Private social spending
EQ3. Child poverty	EQ7. Total social spending
EQ4. Income of older people	EQ8. Old-age pension replacement rate
	EQ9. Pension promise
SS2. Unemployment	
SS3. Jobless households	*SS6. Benefits of last resort*
SS4. Working mothers	*HE4. Total health care expenditure*
SS9. Youth Inactivity	

1. Indicators in italics are those that, while presented in another sub-section, are also relevant for an assessment of equity outcomes.

4.4. Health

The links between social and health conditions are strong. Indeed, growth in living standards, accompanied by better access to health care and continuing progress in medical technology, has contributed to a significant improvement in health status, regardless of whether the indicator used is life expectancy at birth or in old age (HE1), health-adjusted life expectancy (HE2) or infant mortality (HE3). However, disparities in health conditions remain large. Poorer countries tend to consistently display lower health outcomes. Within each country, some of the most disadvantaged groups in society – the poor, the less educated, those without jobs – tend to have the higher morbidity and, often, the shortest longevity. As a result, the health status of some categories of the population may not increase, even though national health indicators are improving.

Total health care expenditure (HE4) is part of the policy response of health care systems to concerns about health conditions in general and for specific groups. Indicators of the share of older persons receiving long-term care in institutions or public support at home (HE5) are also included in this section. Nevertheless, it is important to realise that health care systems have difficulty resolving policy challenges that arise from problems outside the health care system. Where a decline in health status is caused by interrelated social conditions such as unemployment and inadequate housing, health care policies alone cannot suffice. Moreover, more than spending levels *per se,* access to health care is also affected by low coverage of medical insurance or by co-payments acting as effective barriers to seeking medical help.[4]

A much broader range of indicators on health conditions and interventions is provided in *OECD Heath Data* (OECD, 2004e) and in the companion volume to this report *Health at a Glance* (OECD, 2005b), which is also published on a bi-annual basis.

List of health indicators[1]

Social status	Societal responses
HE1. Life expectancy	HE4. Total health care expenditure
HE2. Health-adjusted life expectancy	HE5. Long-term care
HE3. Infant mortality	
EQ1. Relative poverty	*EQ7. Total social spending*
CO5. Drug use and related deaths	

1. Indicators in italics are those that, while presented in another sub-section, are also relevant for an assessment of equity outcomes.

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4.5. *Social cohesion*

Simultaneously promoting social cohesion and combating social exclusion are central goals for social policy in many OECD countries. However, there is no commonly accepted definition of either social cohesion or social exclusion, which makes identifying suitable indicators all the more difficult. The approach taken in this volume is to assess social cohesion through indicators which identify the extent to which citizens participate in societal life and derive satisfaction from their daily activities. Frequency of contacts with other persons in socialising activities (CO2) and membership in groups and associations (CO3) are two important dimensions of the extent to which individuals are well integrated and taking part in social life.[5] Survey data on subjective life satisfaction (CO1) are also important "direct" measures of the well-being of individuals and of the cohesion in society as whole: while this indicator is included for the first time in *Society at a Glance,* the consensus from the substantial literature that has developed on the validity and comparability of these data is that responses to questions about one's own happiness and life satisfaction are meaningful and reasonably comparable across groups of individuals and countries.

It is easier to identify indicators of various pathologies and conditions that put affected individuals at greater risks of exclusion from mainstream society. Both suicide rates (CO6) and drug use and related deaths (CO5) point not just to personal breakdown, but also to risks of social exclusion. Similarly, the prevalence of teenage births (CO4) can indicate risks of social exclusion and social distress for both the affected mothers – who most often leave the education system without qualifications, and face barriers in getting a foothold in the labour market – and their children. Beyond these indicators of *social status, context* indicators, which describe the general condition of the population, highlight the existence of different groups and households within society, some of which may be at special risk of social exclusion.

It is much more difficult to identify relevant response indicators. Few interventions are specifically directed at alleviating or remedying the consequences of the various dimensions of social exclusion identified in this report, while – conversely – all of the policies that are relevant to other dimensions of social policy (self-sufficiency, equity and health) will also impact on social cohesion.

List of social cohesion indicators[1]

Social status	Societal responses
CO1. Subjective well-being	
CO2. Social isolation	
CO3. Group membership	
CO4. Teenage births	
CO5. Drug use and related deaths	
CO6. Suicides	
SS2. Unemployment	
SS3. Jobless households	*EQ5. Public social spending*
EQ1. Relative poverty	*EQ6. Private social spending*
SS9. Youth Inactivity	*EQ7. Total social spending*

1. Indicators in italics are those that, while presented in another sub-section, are also relevant for an assessment of equity outcomes.

5. What you can find in this publication

For each issue covered in this report, the text describes the scope and definition of the relevant indicator(s), what can be discerned from the underlying data and what measurement problems, if any, may exist. Countries differ in too many ways for it to be possible to pretend that some of the indicators are precisely defined: there are, inevitably, differences in data quality across countries. Where this is the case, the text tries to make this explicit. For example, the indicator of poverty shown in this report is not fully standardised: as a result, small differences in the value of the indicator between two countries may reflect "statistical noise" rather than real differences in underlying conditions. On the other hand, changes *within* a country over time are usually much reliable.

The "definition and measurement" box is followed by a section which describes trends and cross-country differences in the indicator, and provides some explanation as to why these may occur. This volume does not describe individual country experiences at length. In general, each indicator contains information for one year and for all OECD countries for which information is available, and presents trends for a selection of countries. In some cases, information is also presented on values of the indicator by gender, age, etc., but this varies with data availability. The text describing each indicator also draws attention to the links between the indicator in question and other indicators. Each section also contains cross-references to other social indicators (excluding context indicators). Evidence is presented in the form of charts and tables, and each section provides selected references for "further reading" and the full titles of publications from which the indicators are derived.

5.1. *What you can find elsewhere*

For the vast majority of indicators, the data underlying the charts and tables can be disaggregated by age of individuals, gender, and family type. Time-series data are nearly always available. But short of having an extraordinarily long publication, it is not possible to publish all these different dimensions of all the indicators collected. The raw data underlying each individual indicator are available on the OECD Web site (*www.oecd.org/els/social/indicators*) or, for the "electronic books", by clicking on the "source" of each table and chart.

Notes

1. The PSR framework is in turn a variant of an approach which has also given rise to the "Driving force – State – Response" (DSR) model used by the UN Committee for Sustainable Development; and the "Driving force – Pressure – State – Impact – Response" (DPSIR) model used by the European Environment Agency.
2. This grouping differs somewhat from the PSR model. In the environmental indicators, pressure indicators relate to flows (emissions, waste generation, and resource use) that affect stocks of environmental goods (water or air quality, bio-diversity), while response indicators may refer to either flows or stocks. There is no corresponding analogy in social policy: whilst it is often possible to separate flow and stock data ("flows onto benefit", "number of people on benefit at any one point in time"), this will not always be true for all policy areas.
3. For example, emission of some airborne pollutants is a key indicator determining the quality of air, land *and* water resources (OECD, 2004d).
4. Insufficient medical services in some geographical regions can also lead to implicit rationing to which better regional planning may offer solutions.
5. Hence, these two indicators capture an important dimension of *social capital*, *i.e.* "the networks of shared norms, values and understanding that facilitate co-operation within and between groups" (OECD, 2001).

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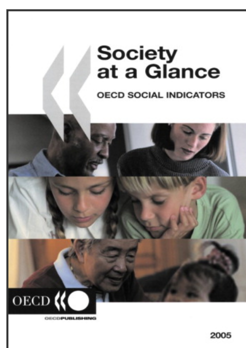

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