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The history of the social quality approach: From the European Foundation on Social Quality to the International Association on Social Quality

This working paper distinguishes **four stages** of the social quality approach (SQA) with regard to the (i) social quality theory (SQT), (ii) the social quality methodology (SQM) and (iii) the social quality policy application (SQAP). The results may be appreciated as a collective endeavour by a large number of scientists in Europe, Asia and Australia, inspired to give new answers to current and upcoming societal questions and aiming to contribute from the 'academic world' to the development toward overall sustainability. This also implies new politics and policies to realize adequate societal circumstances (complexities) in a sustainable urban context.

The pre- and the first stage leading to the idea of social quality (1995-2001)

In the 1990s many European scientists (economists, political scientists, sociologists, social-policy and public health scientists) criticized the 'one-sidedness' of the European unification and the lack of an adequate theory to fill this gap. The **first book** on social quality, published in 1997 by the new European Foundation on Social Quality (EFSQ) addresses this[1]. The authors argued that due to the exclusive focus on economic and monetary issues of the European Union it was moving towards a policy deadlock. The call for a creative dialogue between policy-makers oriented on economic policies and those of all other policies to enable acceptable societal circumstances – the sine qua non of a citizen's Europe – demands a clear focus and a realistic vision which sets aside the traditional duality between economic and all other policies. Based on empirical explorations in Europe, the first book presented **preliminary ideas** to change this narrow focus, which is based on the dominant utilitarian neo-liberal orientation. The plea for new policies is summarized in the **Amsterdam Declaration on Social Quality**, discussed during the Dutch Presidency of the EU in June 1997. It was presented to the President of the European parliament in October 1997 and supported by more than 1000 scientists from all over Europe. To transcend this non-defendable duality implies a new understanding of 'the social', which encompasses socio-economic/financial, socio-political/legal, socio-cultural/welfare and socio-environmental aspects (or dimensions) of societal circumstances (and their complexities). A start was made to theorize 'the social' and to compare this with other approaches as: quality of life, social capital, human

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[1] *The Social Quality of Europe*, 1997, published with Kluwer Law International

development, capability, human security and (later) social harmony. Social quality scholars were raising unprecedented questions on the significance on the adjective ''social'' used by policy-makers advocating 'social progress'. They claim that 'the social' as noun does not describe an independent identity nor an aggregate of individuals. It is a result of the never ending dialectic between processes of self-realization of people (as social beings) and the formation of collective identities, resulting into the 'productive and reproductive interrelationships of people in everyday life'. This assumption rejects the utilitarian points of departure. These scholars and a number of EU civil servants contributed to the 'social quality conference' of the Social Democratic Party of the European Parliament. This marked the launch of the European Journal of Social Quality and a manifold of European workshops and projects.

The second stage resulting into the first design of the social quality approach (2001-2006)

The kick-off was the presentation of the second **book** enhancing the social quality theory, oriented on the nature and change of many policy areas in the EU: public health, employment, income, aging, urban context, housing, welfare provisions etc.[2] One of the main objectives here was to enhance the 'social empowerment' of people to play a responsible role in the constitution of their daily circumstances in the manifold of policy areas in an urban context. The realisation of 'the social' takes place in the interplay of two basic tensions: between political systems, institutions, companies etc and the circumstances of families, communities etc (horizontal) on the one side and the development of societal complexities and biographical developments on the other (vertical). The book seemed to inspire the European Commission to adopt the social quality approach in their 'social agenda for Europe'. However, in the end the EC failed to grasp the essence of the new interpretation of 'the social' and maintained the duality of 'the economic' and 'the social'. Furthermore two projects financed by the EC and participating universities were based on the book: the application of this first design on the policy area of **employment** in nine Member-States as well as the construction and application of **social quality indicators** in fourteen Member States to understand the changes of policy areas in these States. Finally empirical oriented projects started concerning urban strategies, public health, aging and the role of citizens. This work and all related expert-meetings and workshops all over Europe enabled collaboration with the Italian Institute for Economic, Political and Social Research, **Eurispes.** Especially this institute organized various European conferences on the 'European Social Model' and the relation with the social quality approach.

The third stage and extension to Asian and Australian universities (2006-2011)

The third stage is marked by the start of a 'permanent European expert-group' to operationalize the design of the social quality approach. This was complemented by the work of an 'International expert-group' oriented on comparative research with the 'human security approach', stimulated by a new project-collaboration between the EFSQ and the international **Institute of Social Studies** (ISS) in The Hague, formally

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[2] *Social Quality: A Vision for Europe*, published by Kluwer Law International, 2001.

agreed at the end of 2007. Extra attention was dedicated to the approach of public health in the UK and The Netherlands and the analysis and contribution to urban strategies of the Dutch city of The Hague. Essential for this work was the extension of the collaboration with Asian and Australian universities resulting in a number of international conferences on social quality in Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea, Hong Kong and mainland China and the launch of the **Asian Consortium for Social Quality** (ACSQ). This enabled explorations between Dutch urban strategies and the strategies of the Chinese metropole Hangzhou, in the framework of a collaboration with **Zhejiang University**. Especially the Asian-Australian universities started to adjust the social quality indicators to societal circumstances (complexities) of their regions and they organized two series of surveys in seven Asian-Australian regions, under the methodological lead of National Seoul University. This extension of the social quality work stimulated four new types of activities. First to connect the social quality approach with the urgent issue of overall sustainability, followed by the establishment of a Dutch 'think-tank sustainability', preparing a working paper to be sent to participants of the UN-conference on sustainability in Rio de Janeiro, June 2012. In this paper the IASQ criticized the traditional distinction in the global debate on sustainability between the 'economic, social and environmental dimension'. From a social quality perspective the 'social dimension' is a rag bag of everything non-economic or environmental. In the working paper this non-existent dimension is changed in two other dimensions: the socio-political/legal and the socio-cultural/welfare dimensions. Second, the increase of the attention for 'sustainable urban development', also thanks to the work carried out in The Hague and Hangzhou and following the UN-Habitat. In the Hague this resulted in participation to a 'demonstration project sustainable urban development' supported by the European Commission and the Municipality. In China this was followed by participation in a Chinese-European project on environmental protection: the Jiaxing model. Third, the transformation of the European Journal into the **International Journal of Social Quality** supported by Zhejiang University, followed by comparative work on policy areas in European countries and beyond (urban strategies, migration, public health, ageing, income and employment) with the social quality approach.

The fourth stage (2011 and further)

The results of this empirical work (see third stage) were theorized again to deliver new input for policy-makers. The results were published in 2012 in the main **third book** on social quality[3]. It implied an important and serious turnover of the approach. First, the social quality approach should be oriented on main challenges seen in a global perspective with regard to: (i) the development and change of societal complexities, (ii) the overall sustainability and (iii) sustainable urban development, as well as their interrelationships. Second, to change the original focus on affairs of the European Union into European, Asian, and Australian affairs (and potentially to other continental processes as well) from this global perspective. Third, to analyse changes of policy areas in societies on local level from this perspective and not 'as such'. The underlying argument is to really understand daily circumstances as a

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[3] *Social Quality: From Theory to Indicators*, published by Palgrave/Macmillan, 2011.

consequence of encompassing trends and contradictions. Furthermore, the urgency for this turnover is strengthened by the ICT-revolution which will radically transform the generation of knowledge and information and, thus, the productive and reproductive relationships of people. For example the internet is changing the production and distribution of goods and services (and therefore the nature and organization of employment, see the project precarity) but also redefining the relationship between governed and the governing. The former are no longer going to be willing to take at face value the presumptions of the latter. With this in mind, the main theme of social quality – strengthening 'social empowerment' of people in order to create a sustainable world stimulating social justice, solidarity, human dignity and human capacities (the four normative factors of social quality) – will get new significance. The current projects are redefined in this context and the European Foundation was therefore altered in the **International Association on Social Quality** (IASQ). It initiated the start of a European Observatory on Social Quality (located in Rome) and an Asian Observatory on Social Quality (located in Hangzhou) as successor of the Asian Consortium. The aim is that both are especially supported by respectively the La Sapienza University and the Zhejiang University and their 'interdisciplinary social quality teams'. Schematically this is represented as follows:

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General Agreement (2007)
General Protocol   (2014)
& business-plan   (2014)

Zhejiang Univ

Sapienza Univ

Interdisci-plinary team Zhejiang Univ

interdisci-plinary team La Sapienza

IASQ ISS

international journal of SQ

AOSQ of Asian universities

EOSQ of European universities (Eurispes)

AOSQ-projects   **IASQ-global projects**   **EOSQ-projects**