Indicators of Social Quality: Outcomes of the European Scientific Network

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Social Quality and Quality of Life

In October 2001, the Network Indicators of Social Quality started the process of creating social quality indicators. This project of the European Foundation on Social Quality was supported by the European Commission (DG Research) under Framework Programme 5 (van der Maesen et al. 2000). The Network consisted of representatives of universities from 14 partner countries and two European NGOs. Over its forty-two-month life the Network held four meetings. Three plenary meetings were organised with all assistants thanks to the financial support by the Dutch Scientific Foundation (NWO). Also through the creation of unique national reference groups on social quality, the Network has engaged more than a hundred scientists and policy makers in its work. The project was completed in April 2005. The intriguing question was how to theoretically legitimise the choice of social quality indicators compared to the indicators constructed in the context of 'quality of life' approaches, as developed for example by ZUMA of the University of Mannheim (Noll 2000; Berger-Schmit et al. 2000) and the European Foundation on the Improvement of Working and Living Conditions in Dublin (Fahey et al. 2002).

Contributors to the social quality approach argue, that while respect for differences and the openness of the future can be seen as the main themes of the intellectual debate among the social theorists and philosophers, the mainstream of the behavioural sciences has turned its empirical interest to individual perspectives on 'quality of life'. This can be seen as a way to address the question what 'the' quality of life might be from a scientific perspective, trying to avoid political and normative issues. This research has been conducted worldwide and produced numerous descriptions of 'quality of life'. As can be gathered from the many of thousand of titles of publications (cf. the website of the Australian Centre on Quality of Life, of Deakin University). Impressive in quantitative output as the research paradigm appears to be, it shows, overwhelmingly the many different

individual responses to many different questions. These responses do not point in a common direction. More importantly they presuppose different social and cultural contexts which cannot be methodologically explored in the same research programme. By merely reproducing the enormous diversity of individual perspectives this paradigm is prevented from articulating a perspective on 'social quality' as it takes the perspective of isolated individuals as the ultimate reality (Baars 2005). According to Peter Herrmann, life styles, living situations and life circumstances and wellbeing – essential themes in the quality of life approaches – are highly individualist concepts. This is even true if we acknowledge that they are concerned with the localisation of the individual in a social context. The unanswered challenge is that the social is not only assumed but, in addition, it is indirectly defined as an external entity, not needing a clear definition nor actually being constituted as part of this process (Herrmann 2005). In summary both quality of life and social quality are promoted as positive concepts that have the potential to benefit society. While social quality provides a vision for the future, a normative statement about how the social quality of the people of Europe can and should be improved, the quality of life approach aims to measure changes in objective living standards and subjective wellbeing through a series of social indicators. However the absence of a theoretical rationale for quality of life tends to undermine its usefulness in the policy world. Thus the inclusion or exclusion of particular domains may be a matter of common sense or up to the individual researcher or policy maker (Phillips 2006). In other words the content of any index constructed on the basis of quality of life is always likely to be open to question and, therefore, its role in the policy process may be, at best, contested and, at worst, manipulated to suit particular interests (a deficiency that the ZUMA group has tried top address in its comprehensive framework) (Walker et al. 2004).

For the elaboration of social quality indicators we have to explain some theoretical aspects of the social quality theory, with which to enable its application to policy-making processes. The legitimisation of specific 'social quality indicators' refers to the theory's applicability to interpret daily circumstances in Europe (its Member States, regions and cities) as a consequence of these processes. After that we will present some aspects of the methodology as outcomes of the Network's activities for addressing the connection between the theory and policies influencing daily circumstances. Based on this exercise the Network was able to develop the first stage indicators of social quality as explored empirically in fourteen countries. The outcomes of this exploration will be addressed in the following articles of this double issue. They are based on the fourteen national reports of the Network and its two reports, written by both NGOs, namely the

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European Anti Poverty Network and the International Council of Social Welfare. These reports were published in April 2005.[1]

Some Theoretical Questions

The theory of social quality is explained in two main studies up until now. The first paves the way for arguments with which to explain its rationale. The unequal relationship between economic policy and social policy, and the increasing tendency for the former to define the content and scope of the latter, was identified as the main source of the recent crises in European social policy (Beck et al. 1997). Another essential argument of the first study is the thesis that a clear understanding of the social vanished from social science itself. Over time, the interpretation of the social and the individual developed into a direction that confronts the two as distinct areas, relating as mutually external '*faits sociaux*' (the Durkheimian approach) and 'faits individuals' (the utilitarian approach). Moreover, individuals are seen as the actual core of life, confronted with a society which is a seemingly superior power.

In the second study the social quality approach tries to oppose such a position, claiming that individual and social can fundamentally be grasped as a constitutive entity (Beck et al. 2001). Furthermore, it is by taking such a relational view that we can understand the social – and its quality – as distinct from interactions. This study presents the theoretical design of the social quality approach with which to start the application of the theory in the empirical world. It delivered the starting points for the Network. An important aspect of the theory is that we can distinguish between four conditional factors of social quality (Beck et al. 2001). The challenge is to measure the nature of these factors in the Member States, their regions and cities, by means of social quality indicators.

The Network started to elaborate the theoretical understanding of these four conditional factors on the basis of both deductive forms of reasoning and inductive forms with the help of first order explorations in fourteen countries. Their connection enabled the creation of a consensus by the Network's participants about the definitions of the four conditional factors in relation to the theory's interpretation of 'the social' (Van der Maesen et al. 2005). The theory says that the processes of self-realisation of individual people and the formation of collective identities will influence each other. Therefore between them there exist a constitutive interdependency. This interdependency will happen in the context of two basic tensions, illustrated by the horizontal axis and the vertical axis. The horizontal axis refers to Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action (Habermas

1989, p. 309), which claimed to go beyond Lockwood's theory about the distinction between system integration and social integration (Lockwood 1999). But the social quality theory does not understand the relationship between both poles of the axis as being antagonistic. It regards the horizontal axis as the field of interaction between unequal actors. In other words this axis emphasises the interaction between people and systems. The horizontal axis is confronted with processes referred to by the vertical axis. They correspond with the theory of Wilhelm Heinz about the tension between societal developments and biographical developments. According to Heinz, modern societies create contingencies for the life course, which force people into flexible responses in the sense of self-reflexive decision-making and risk-taking. Biographies do not follow pre-determined life-course patterns anymore Weyman et al., 1996). We may illustrate both basic tensions as follows:
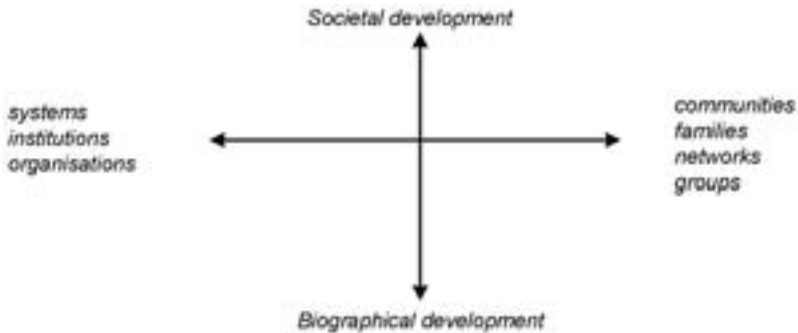

Figure 1 Two basic tensions as the context for the constitutive interdependency

According to the theory of social quality, the social world is realised in the interaction (and interdependencies) between the self-realisation of individual people as social beings and the formation of collective identities which occurs in the context of both basic tensions. We call this the constitution of 'the social'. Four basic conditions determine the opportunities open for these processes or social relations to develop. People must have the capability to interact (social empowerment); the institutional and structural context must be accessible to them (social inclusion); they must have access to the necessary material and other resources that facilitate interaction (socio-economic security); and the necessary collective accepted values and norms, such as trust, that enable community building (social cohesion). In the light of these considerations social quality is defined as: the extent to which people are able to participate in the social and

economic life and development of their communities under conditions which enhance their wellbeing and individual potential. Thanks to this capacity they will contribute to society and the outcomes will influence the conditions for their self-realisation.
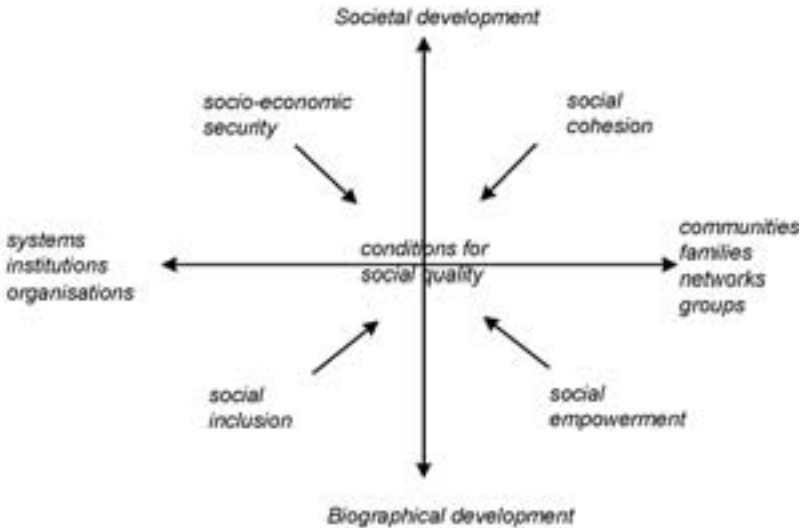
The quadrangle of the conditional factors takes this shape[2]:

Figure 2 The quadrangle of the conditional factors for social quality

Based on the second study and collaboration by the participants of the Network to apply their knowledge about the circumstances at the national levels and the European level they defined precisely the four conditional factors. This iterative process produced the following definitions of the essential aspects of each factor:

- Socio-economic security is the extent to which people have resources over time.
- Social cohesion is the extent to which social relations, based on identities, values and norms, are shared.
- Social inclusion is the extent to which people have access to and are integrated into the different institutions and social relations that constitute everyday life.
- Social empowerment is the extent to which the personal capabilities of individual people and their ability to act are enhanced by social relations.

Some Policy Issues

As has been said, the Network was focused specifically on the development of indicators by which to measure the four conditional factors determining social quality. The project was intended as an exploratory, path clearing, exercise and, therefore, its key scientific objectives reflected this: to design a preliminary index of social quality, to identify data gaps and requirements, to create the basis for a new yardstick with which to assess the impact of social and economic policies and to develop benchmarks for social quality. Other scientific objectives related to the processes involved in this work, engagement with wider research and policy communities and dissemination. The Network's policy objectives were as follows. It should, first, contribute to public policies – employment, ageing, urban development, public health and so on – by exploring the four conditional factors in order to assess more effectively the impact of structural changes on the quality of citizens' daily circumstances. Second, the Network should contribute to such a consistent system of relevant public policy categories that will create a basis to address different policy areas from the same social quality perspective. Third, it will deliver new types of contributions, with help of the outcomes of the first and second objectives, to stimulate the interconnectedness of (i) the Lisbon Strategy, (ii) the Social Agenda policies, (iii) the development of the Constitution, and (iv) the enlargement of the EU. This would help to counteract the indefensible neo-functionalistic form of reasoning. Thereby the Network will contribute to an alternative approach to the social policy classification in terms of three models or regimes which squeeze all Member States into different categories. Also the dynamism of European welfare states is down-played by such broad comparisons, especially the rapid development of the Southern and the Eastern States and the degree of policy convergence within the European Union. Of course these objectives are highly interrelated to each other (Beck et al. 1997).

Some Methodological Questions

In addition, the Network had explicit theoretical and policy objectives concerning the creation of a more rational and theoretically grounded basis for policy at national and EU levels. Linking theory to processes of public policies in order to measure their outcomes we need a specific methodology as an intermediary. We may illustrate this as follows.
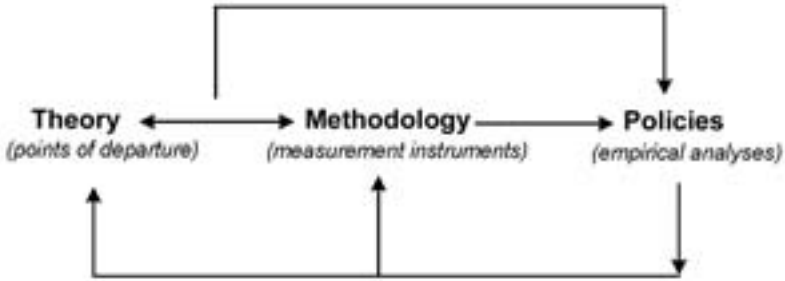
Figure 3 Relationship between theory, methodology and policies

An interesting example of a different approach is presented by Tony Atkinson and his colleagues in their study about indicators of social inclusion. This group assumes, first, that thanks to ZUMA, a very clear account is provided of the relation between concepts of quality of life, social cohesion, social capital, and social exclusion. They argue as follows:

> in seeking to establish analytical foundations, one can draw on academic research in statistics, sociology, social policy, geography, welfare economics, and political science …. we do not attempt to provide a thorough grounding for the terms 'social exclusion' or 'social inclusion' – even though the latter appears in our title. These terms are employed in a wide variety of different ways. While this part of their (political) appeal, it can undermine their value in an analytical context …. However, in line with our pragmatic objective of contributing to the policy-making process, we simply accept here the use of the terms as shorthand for a range of concerns considered to be important in setting the European social agenda. (Atkinson et al. 2002)

This group explicitly did not define the concept of social inclusion and proposed a pragmatic approach, aiming at the description of life situations. In other words, they did not reflect the connection between theory, methodology and policy research and therefore their methodology did not aim at going beyond descriptive explorations. The absence of the definition of social inclusion prevents an understanding of 'indicators of social inclusion' and the application of these indicators for analysing policy outcomes. What is missing is a connection with a theory of social inclusion. Thus it is unclear what social inclusion means in the field of policy making and what the outcomes of social inclusion policies can be in the daily circumstances of people. In fact they did not accept the logical connections illustrated in Figure 3. Recent work of this group shows the shortcoming of this approach. They highlight the necessity of defining the political aims of social inclusion policies according to which they want to frame an

elaborated empirical description. However this requires a theory of social inclusion and a related methodology (Atkinson et al. 2005).

The measurement tools of the conditional factors are indicators. As has been said, the Network's challenge was to develop a robust set of these indicators. A condition was to clarify and to elaborate the social quality theory. This was done by applying deductive and inductive approaches that increased substantially the understanding of the nature of the four conditional factors (Beck et al. 2001). Thanks to four plenary sessions of the Network's participants and three plenary sessions of their assistants all those engaged could reach an agreement on the final definition of the four conditional factors (see above) and elaborated their domains and sub-domains. This delivered the consensus necessary for the development of indicators for all sub-domains that are relevant to understand of the nature of the conditional factor in question. The steps the Network followed are illustrated in Figure 4.

By following the steps from A to D (see Figure 4) the basis has been created for a new approach to measuring the quality of the social context
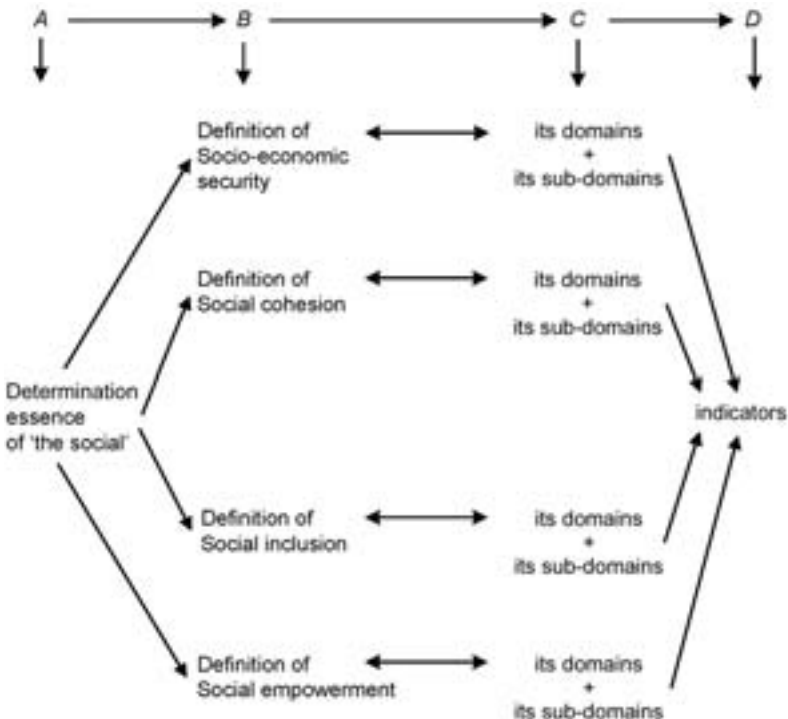

Figure 4 The Network's analytical schedule

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Socio-economic Security
Financial resources
Housing and the environment
Health and care
Work
Education

Social cohesion
Trust
Other integrative norms and values
Social networks
Identity

Social Inclusion
Citizenship rights
Labour market
Services (public and private)
Social networks

Social Empowerment
Knowledge base
Labour market
Openness and Supportiveness
of Institutions
Personal relations

Figure 5 Domains of social quality

of everyday life and to assessing the impact thereon of social and economic developments and policies. The painstaking process involved in creating these indicators is described in the Final Report (van der Maesen et al. 2005). The list of proposed indicators were not plucked from thin air but, rather, each of them was chosen iteratively according to their relationship with the core theory of social quality. This is not to suggest that the indicators are unique to social quality. What is unique is the process of deriving them and, of course, the social quality framework itself.

First of all it re-defined and analysed the four conditional factors separately in relationship to the ontologically based ideas about 'the social': this regards the step from A to B. Each of these analyses will comprise a chapter in the forthcoming third main study based on the outcomes of the Network Note-3). Secondly, the Network derived the domains from the new precise definitions of the conditional factors: it regards the step from B to C. This was a decisive one for the determination of the indicators of the four conditional factors. The outcomes are shown in Figure 5.

Thirdly, the Network determined the nature of the related sub-domains in order to formulate the indicators of these sub-domains and, therefore, of the conditional factors compromising these sub-domains: it regards the step from C to D. The final outcomes are presented in the following section.

Indicators of Social Quality

The Network was able to reach a consensus about the indicators of the sub-domains of social quality in the middle of 2003. The outcomes were

discussed later by extensive email communication. Finally, the Network could start the exploration of these indicators in fourteen countries in order to test their applicability and for the assessment of data availability. The question is, first, if the indicators really measure essential aspects of the sub-domains and, second, are there data in the Member States with which to measure these aspects? In the Network's Final Report both questions are addressed. In this section we will present the final list of the social indicators as developed by the Network (see Tables 1–4).

Table 1 Indicators of socio-economic security (Keizer et al., 2003)

Domains	Sub-domains	Indicators
Financial resources	Income sufficiency	Part of household income spent on health, clothing, food and housing (in the lower and median household incomes).
	Income security	How certain biographical events affect the risk of poverty on household level. Proportion of total population living in households receiving entitlement transfers (means-tested, cash and in-kind transfers) that allow them to live above EU poverty level.
Housing and environment	Housing security	Proportion of people who have certainty of keeping their home. Proportion of hidden families (i.e., several families within the same household).
	Housing conditions	Number of square meters per household member Proportion of population living in houses with lack of functioning basic amenities (water, sanitation and energy).
	Environmental conditions (social and natural)	People affected by criminal offences per 10,000 inhabitants Proportion living in households that are situated in neighbourhoods with above average pollution rate (water, air and noise).
Health and care	Security of health provisions	Proportion of people covered by compulsory/ voluntary health insurance (including qualitative exploration of what is and what is not covered by insurance system).
	Health services	Number of medical doctors per 10,000 inhabitants. Average distance to hospital, measure in minutes, not in metres. Average response time of medical ambulance.
	Care services	Average number of hours spent on care differentiated by paid and unpaid.

Table 1 (continued)

Domains	Sub-domains	Indicators
Work	Employment security	Length of notice before employer can change terms and conditions of labour relation/contract. Length of notice before termination of labour contract. Proportion employed workforce with temporary, non permanent, job contract. Proportion of workforce that is illegal.
	Working conditions	Number of employees that reduced work time because of interruption (parental leave, medical assistance of relative, palliative leave) as a proportion of the employees who are entitled to these kinds of work time reductions. Number of accidents (fatal/non-fatal) at work per 100,000 employed persons (if possible: per sector) Number of hours a full-time employee typically works a week (actual working week).
Education	Security of education	Proportion of pupils leaving education without finishing compulsory education (early school leavers). Study fees as proportion of national mean net wage.
	Quality of education	Proportion of students who, within a year of leaving school with or without certificate, are able to find employment.

Conclusion

As well as the joint efforts towards the creation of indicators of social quality each national partner in the Network undertook an analysis of the trends affecting social quality. Summaries of these reports form the major contents of this issue. Here we conclude by emphasising the policy dimension of the Network's research and outlining the next steps.

Recent years have seen a huge expansion in the statistical data available to policy makers and the general public in Europe, including statistical digests from Eurostat, DG Employment's Social Situation report and the Quality of Life in Europe series from the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions (EFLWC). While this expansion of information is a positive step, because such information is part of the life-blood of democracy, it has a paradoxical dimension. As vital as statistical data is to both policy making and political participation it tends to reinforce policy fragmentation, which makes it hard for policy makers to tackle problems in a holistic way and for citizens to comprehend what is happening to society.

Table 2 Indicators of social cohesion (Berman et al., 2004)

Domains	Sub-domains	Indicators
Trust	Generalised trust	Extent to which 'most people can be trusted'.
	Specific trust	Trust in: government; elected representatives; political parties; armed forces; legal system; the media; trade unions, police; religious institutions; civil service; economic transactions.
		Number of cases being referred to European Court of law.
		Importance of: family; friends; leisure; politics; respecting parents. parents' duty to children.
Other integrative norms and values	Altruism	Volunteering: number of hours per week.
		Blood donation.
	Tolerance	Views on immigration, pluralism and multiculturalism.
		Tolerance of other people's self-identity, beliefs, behaviour and lifestyle preferences.
	Social contract	Beliefs on causes of poverty: individual or structural.
		Willingness to pay more taxes if you were sure that it would improve the situation of the poor.
		Intergenerational: willingness to pay 1 percent more taxes in order to improve the situation of elderly people in your country.
		Willingness to actually do something practical for the people in your community/ neighbourhood, such as: picking up litter, doing some shopping for elderly/disabled/sick people in your neighbourhood, assisting neighbours/community members with filling out (fax/municipal/etc.) forms, cleaning the street/porch/doorway.
		Division of household tasks between men and women: Do you have an understanding with your husband/spouse about the division of household tasks, raising of the children, and gaining household income?
Social networks	Networks	Membership (active or inactive) of political, voluntary, charitable organisations or sport clubs.
		Support received from family, neighbours and friends.
		Frequency of contact with friends and colleagues.
Identity	National/ European identity	Sense of national pride.
		Identification with national symbols and European symbols.
	Regional/ community/ local identity	Sense of regional/community/local identity.
	Interpersonal identity	Sense of belonging to family and kinship network.

Table 3 Indicators of Social Inclusion (Walker et al., 2003)

Domains	Sub-domains	Indicators
Citizenship rights	Constitutional/ political rights	Proportion of residents with citizenship. Proportion having right to vote in local elections and proportion exercising it.
	Social right	Proportion with right to a public pension (i.e., a pension organised or regulated by the government). Women's pay as a proportion of men's.
	Civil rights	Proportion with right to free legal advice. Proportion experiencing discrimination.
	Economic and political networks	Proportion of ethnic minority groups elected or appointed to parliament, boards of private companies and foundations. Proportion of women elected or appointed to parliament, boards of private companies and foundations.
Labour market	Access to paid employment	Long-term unemployment (12+ months). Involuntary part-time or temporary employment.
Services	Health services	Proportions with entitlement to and using public primary health care.
	Housing	Proportion homeless, sleeping rough. Average waiting time for social housing.
	Education	School participation rates and higher education participation rates.
	Social care	Proportion of people in need receiving care services. Average waiting time for care services (including child care).
	Financial services	Proportion denied credit differentiated by income groups. Access to financial assistance/advice in case of need.
	Transport	Proportion of population who has access to public transport system. Density of public transport system and road density.
	Civic/cultural services	Number of public sport facilities per 10,000 inhabitants. Number of public and private civic & cultural facilities (e.g., cinema, theatre, concerts) per 10,000 inhabitants.
Social networks	Neighbourhood participation	Proportion in regular contact with neighbours.
	Friendships	Proportion in regular contact with friends.
	Family life	Proportion feeling lonely/isolated. Duration of contact with relatives (cohabiting and non-cohabiting). Informal (non-monetary) assistance received by different types of family.

Table 4 Indicators of social empowerment (Herrmann, 2003)

Domains	Sub-domains	Indicators
Knowledge base	Application of knowledge	Extent to which social mobility is knowledge-based (formal qualifications).
	Availability of information	Per cent of population literate and numerate. Availability of free media. Access to the Internet.
	User friendliness of information	Provision of information in multiple languages on social services. Availability of free advocacy, advice and guidance centres.
Labour market	Control over employment contract	Percent of labour force that is member of a trades union (differentiated to public and private employees). Percent of labour force covered by a collective agreement (differentiated by public and private employees).
	Prospects of job mobility	Percent of employed labour force receiving work-based training. Percent of labour force availing of publicly provided training (not only skills based). (Please outline costs of such training if any.) Percent of labour force participating in any 'back to work scheme'
	Reconciliation of work and family life (work/life balance)	Percent of organisations operating work life balance policies. Percent of employed labour force actually making use of work/life balance measures (see indicator above).
Openness and supportiveness of institutions	Openness and supportiveness of political system	Existence of processes of consultation and direct democracy (e.g., referenda).
	Openness of economic system	Number of instances of public involvement in major economic decision making (e.g., public hearings about company relocation, inward investment and plant closure).
	Openness of organisations	Percent of organisations/institutions with work councils.
Public space	Support for collective action	Percent of the national and local public budget that is reserved for voluntary, not-for-profit citizenship initiatives. Marches and demonstrations banned in the past 12 months as proportion of total marched and demonstrations (held and banned).
	Cultural enrichment	Proportion of local and national budget allocated to all cultural activities. Number of self-organised cultural groups and events. Proportion of people experiencing different forms of personal enrichment on a regular basis.

Table 4 (continued)

Domains	Sub-domains	Indicators
Personal relationships	Provision of services supporting physical and social independence	Percentage of national and local budgets devoted to disabled people (physically and mentally).
	Personal support services	Level of pre-and-post-school child care.
	Support for social interaction	Extent of inclusiveness of housing and environmental design (e.g., meeting places, lighting, layout).

This is where the social quality concept comes in. As noted previously a key aim of social quality is to overcome the present fragmentation of policy, for example at the EU level, between social policies, economic policies and employment policies. By creating a coherent, theoretically grounded, concept that not only embraces all policies but also all stages of the policy process it is intended to furnish both policy makers and the general public with an analytical tool with which to understand society and to change it. For example, while the ranking of countries (out of ten) for the quality of their health services in the European Foundaion for Living and Working Conditions report – from 8.1 for Austria to 3.7 for Slovenia – is informative, it is not apparent how it should be used in the policy process (EFLWC, 2004). A similar ranking derived from the social quality concept would point directly to policy domains in socio-economic security, social inclusion and social empowerment and the connections between them.

This is precisely why the activities of the Network on Social Quality Indicators is such an important first step in realising a practical measure of social quality. As outlined above, so far the Network has identified a draft list of ninety-five indicators linked to eighteen domains and forty-nine sub-domains. Obviously this is too unwieldy in its present form and, therefore, the next stage of work on social quality indicators will comprise the refinement and reduction of this list and its testing in a representative survey. Parallel methodological work will be conducted on the subjective dimensions of social quality and on the combination of these with the indicators of the conditional factors. These next steps are dependent on European research funding. Meanwhile, we welcome contributions to the refinement of the indicator list presented here.

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Notes

1. These sixteen reports – more or less sixty pages each – were published by the European Foundation on Social Quality in April 2005. They can be downloaded from www.socialquality.org

2. In the coming third main study by the European Foundation on Social Quality the theory, the methodology and the application for analysing the consequences of policies in daily circumstances will present the themes addressed in this article in a more extensive way. Explained will be that the indicators with which to measure the outcomes of the conditional factors regard the objective dimensions. The constitutional factors and the profiles as measurement instruments regards the subjective dimensions. The Network is oriented on the question of the conditional factors and their indicators.

3. The third book by the European Foudnation on Social Quality about the indicators and their meaning for analysing daily circumstances and the outcomes of European policies will be published in 2007.