

Social justice in the EU – Index report 2015 ^[1]

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Introduction

In the majority of EU countries, the extent of social justice relative to last year's edition of the Social Justice Index (SJI 2014) has at least avoided further deterioration. It appears that for the majority of countries, after several years of decline, the lowest point was reached between 2012 and 2014. This is in large part due to slight labor market improvements visible in the majority of countries after 2013. Nevertheless, a genuine and comprehensive turnaround in terms of social justice is not underway. To be sure, a certain stabilization with regard to economic affairs is evident in many countries, at least on the basis of some indicators. This is true even of crisis-battered European countries like Spain, Portugal and Ireland. However, only future SJI editions will show whether social justice in Europe can sustainably stabilize and improve again. Social conditions and participation opportunities for people in most EU countries remain considerably worse than in the pre-crisis period. In no less than 11 countries, among them Spain and Portugal, things have deteriorated once again compared to last year's survey.

Overall, a multidimensional approach is needed in order to ensure more just conditions for societal participation. There is not one single recipe that would solve all problems. And given the uniqueness of each country's socioeconomic makeup and their diverse political cultures, governments always have to find context-sensitive solutions. However, the dimensions of our Social Justice Index can help those looking to identify policy areas essential to advancing social justice and facilitating inclusive growth in Europe.

Policymakers should target the following areas in developing actionable measures:

Poverty prevention: Tackling child poverty must become a top priority in the EU and every member state. The Nordic countries show that low child poverty levels can be achieved when priorities are set and socially disadvantaged groups receive targeted support through a functioning tax and transfer system (e.g., effective child benefit and allowance schemes, housing benefits). However, combating poverty is not only a question of monetary support, it also depends on sound policies in other areas, such as education and employment.

Equitable education: Investing in early-childhood education is a key component of efforts to level the playing field in this regard. Moreover, integrative school systems in which children are not separated early on according to their performance are a better alternative in terms of learning success and educational justice. Sending the best teachers to socially "problematic" schools and ensuring that students with learning problems receive individual support is also a promising way of improving quality and fairness of education systems. Generally, in order to limit the impact of socioeconomic factors on educational outcomes it is important that economically disadvantaged families receive targeted support to increase their opportunities to invest in education (e.g., reduced fees for child-care, early-childhood education, tertiary education).

Labor market access: Creating incentives for high employment and enhancing upward mobility from non-standard to regular forms of employment are key challenges for almost all EU countries. Governments are well advised to invest in targeted qualification measures for low-skilled people and young people, who often find themselves in non-standard forms of employment. This is all the more important as low-skilled individuals are often also affected by long-term unemployment, which is one of the key drivers of poverty. The fact that there are still more than 12 million people in the EU who have been unemployed for over a year requires decisive political action. Between 2007 and 2014 the number of long-term unemployed doubled accounting for about half of the total number of unemployed. With regard to youth unemployment, which is a massive problem not only in the European crisis states, governments must seek to improve vocational training, reduce the number of early school leavers and improve the transition from the education system to the labor market. Often, there is a strong mismatch between labor market demands and the qualifications provided by the education system. Balancing supply and demand on the labor market by providing sufficient mobility of the labor force according to the needs of potential employers is therefore very important. The EU's recently launched "Youth Employment Initiative" together with the so-called "Youth Guarantee" is certainly a step in the right direction. In this regard, the EU and its member states also need a much more efficient means of reducing the gap between vacant positions (which still exist) and the very high number of unemployed people – not only within a country but across EU countries. A strong cross-border approach (e.g., through the effective cooperation of national employment agencies) is needed. Reducing bureaucracy regarding the mutual recognition of qualifications and creating easier ways to transfer social security entitlements to another country is important as well in order to increase labor mobility. Finally: Next to the particularly vulnerable groups of low-skilled individuals and young

people, inequalities in access to the labor market also often exist for women, people with a migrant background and elderly people. Measures that enable parents to combine parenting and work, legal provisions that preclude discrimination, efforts to enforce the principle of equal pay for equal work as well as creating incentives for lifelong learning are useful instruments to address such inequalities.

Social cohesion and non-discrimination: Strong economic and social inequalities not only impede sustainable growth, they also have very negative implications for social cohesion. Effective anti-discrimination legislation (and its implementation) is thus one crucial element in reducing inequality of opportunity. Countries such as Ireland, Sweden and the Netherlands are role models in terms of their anti-discrimination policies. Sound integration and immigration policies are also imperative to addressing the common challenge of demographic change. Most EU countries are increasingly economically dependent on immigration to rebalance the negative economic effects of societal aging. Policies fostering the integration of migrants should therefore ensure equal access to the labor market and education, opportunities for family reunion and political participation, the right of long-term residence as well as effective pathways to nationality. If policies are designed well and EU countries act on the basis of solidarity, the current “refugee crisis” can – in the longer run – also turn into a chance for Europe. Finally, the problem of social segregation in cities (for instance in France) is often not only confined to people with an immigrant background, but to socially disadvantaged people more generally. Discriminatory urban zoning laws and practices that make certain neighborhoods increasingly unaffordable for less well-off people should therefore be revised. In this context, governments could also consider establishing specific rent control regulations and social housing programs.

Health: Poor health conditions and health-related inequalities generate high social and economic costs. It is therefore important that health care policies aim at providing high-quality health care for the largest possible share of the population and at the lowest possible cost. These objectives are best achieved in countries such as Luxembourg, Netherlands and Belgium. Governments must strengthen preventive health measures and conditions of access. Doing so can save a lot of money and improve the state of individual health in a society. The latter aspect is important because opportunities for societal and economic participation may be constrained not only through structural injustices in a country’s health care system, but also as a result of individuals’ states of health.

Intergenerational justice: Improving opportunities for families through investments in child-care infrastructure, reducing the level of public debt and increasing the share of renewable energy are important policy measures in terms of greater intergenerational justice. As highlighted above, governments need to pay more attention to the interests of younger generations while pursuing policies that are equally sound for the young and old alike. Generally, the Nordic countries stand out in this regard. When it comes to pro-young and family-friendly policies, the provision of day care and preschool facilities as well as generous parental-leave schemes is still exemplary in these countries. Their successful approach to combining parenting and the labor market can thus serve as an inspiration for policy reforms in other countries.

Generally, it is important to note that the different dimensions of social justice are strongly interrelated: Weak educational opportunities translate into weaker opportunities on the labor market and – as a consequence – into weaker opportunities to achieve higher incomes. There is a danger of a self-reinforcing process and vicious cycle. This is why the EU member states as well as the European institutions need to adopt a holistic view regarding the causes of social injustice, its impacts and potential political interventions. With regard to the latter aspect, it is interesting to see that it is indeed sound policymaking that matters for achieving greater social justice – and not only economic prosperity.

A closer look reveals that countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia achieve a comparably high degree of social justice, despite only having average economic performance levels. These countries illustrate the fact that social policy plays a critical role in achieving social justice. Estonia’s good performance is primarily driven by the areas of education and intergenerational justice, while the Czech Republic excels in poverty prevention. By contrast, a country like Ireland has a high GDP per capita but only performs below average in the Social Justice Index.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: equality ^[4]

social policies and programs ^[5]

justice ^[6]

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