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**SOCIETAL INDICATORS OF TERRITORIAL WELL  
BEING**

**YVES FRANCHET AND MICHEL RENAULT, (PEKEA) (1)**

The financial crisis shaking the world economy is only one revelation of a much broader dysfunction in the administration of our societies at all levels-global, European, national and local. As stated by the NGO PEKEA ([www.pekea.org](http://www.pekea.org)) since its creation, and by many other actors in the social life, the economic paradigms on which most decisions rely have eliminated the central role of individuals in social life, for the benefit of abstract and erroneous models. This contradiction has led to an explosion due to the ultraliberal phase of capitalism in the last decades. Many political leaders who did not pay attention to this kind of criticism are now more ready to listen, and look actively for solutions leading to a better equilibrium.

There is however a serious risks that these solutions be only a patch up of the previous status quo.

The proposals made at the last G20 meeting consist of a bit more regulation in international finance, improved accounting standards, more accountable financial notation agencies. The report of the Stiglitz Commission (2) to the French President seems also to narrow its objective to national measures of welfare integrating better than the present GDP wealth distribution and sustainable development across age generations. However the report also includes positive steps towards the implication of civil society in the indicators building processes.

It is far from certain that these limited measures will find the necessary international political consensus to be efficiently implemented. Still, they leave aside the fundamental criticisms addressed to the administration of our societies. In PEKEA, we have summarized the foundations of our criticisms in the Penvern declaration (3).

The contradiction between the signals sent by capitalism in its present form and the wishes of citizens is the most extreme at the local level in our countries. Local elected Governments in charge of implementing the nationally and internationally decided policy measures are daily aware of how of these measures are contradictory with the wishes of the citizens who have elected them. Many initiatives have been launched to develop local indicators expressing the status of social life and its relation with public policies. Beyond the usual role of these indicators, some of these initiatives call for new governance for economic and social life.

After a brief reminder of the origin and theoretical foundations of social indicators, this paper will describe the approach of an ongoing project in the French region Bretagne-project of territorial societal indicators (ISBET). It will then conclude by rendering explicit the required conditions for success, their potential and limits.

## **Origin and theoretical basis of social indicators (4)**

Originally, social indicators translate the willingness of sociologists to make abstract concepts operational with quantitative variables, and to test the validity of scientific assumptions.

In 1966, the « Social indicators » report by Bauer, Bidermann and Gross in the US leads to the development of social indicators to test normative references on progress, well being, and possible futures. It will be later the major source for the works of the Community Indicators Consortium, for which Jacksonville (Florida) has been a pioneer for the last 40 years.

At world level, the desire to measure differently wealth, progress, well being, has rapidly increased during the last decades. It translates in a research to go beyond a too economic and monetary interpretation of social life.

The Bruntland report and the Rio Conference-, notably through its Agenda 21 actions, put social and environmental considerations at the center of political decisions at world, national, and local levels. They also insist on the necessity to involve citizens in political decisions at all levels.

The UNDP also has proposed an emblematic development index-The human development index (HDI) which will lead to many projects at national or regional level, in particular in France with the projects of Jean Gadrey, Florence Jany-Catrice, Aurelien Boutaud etc..

The recent OECD intervention through its Istanbul declaration gives a new impetus to the subject. It is particularly welcome and interesting, coming from a profession-public official statisticians-usually hesitant towards innovative approaches on this issue, in particular because of the many difficulties linked to the measurement and comparability of social indicators.

Generally speaking, social indicators can fill three functions:

- information basis for decision making
- evaluation or audit of policies
- search for the definition of a collective future or a common good, and of how to reach it.

This last function questions the usual aggregative approach of economists to measure the well being. This aggregative mode acts as a coordination mechanism for a priori chosen preferences. It leads to the limitation of political choices to votes periodically expressed in local or national elections.

The approach requested to fill this third function relies on a pragmatic approach, which can be called transactional. The social actors involved define together collective social values. It seems then appropriate to speak of « societal indicators », which require an elaborative and cooperative procedure involving citizens.

In this framework, the works of J. Dewey (6) give a strong analytical and procedural basis. It is indeed a question of resuming with the essence of the democratic process, through dialogue and communication, to build a common future for all.

According to such a framework, the construction of societal indicators comes from a problematic situation defined by concerned actors. The choice of actors and the definition of the problem are not obvious, and call for the procedures and approaches of a participative democracy. The social survey processes in which the actors become involved require confronting divergent points of view and contradictory and multiple interests. The social survey relies on a communication process which makes a compromise possible, even if this compromise may be later revised. This is the basis of the transactional approach. Preferences of the actors are neither predetermined nor rigid, but change during the process.

According to this approach, the notions of conflict, dependence ,and order, which are usual in negotiation processes , play an important role.

Several correlative dimensions are present:

- structural dimensions, relative to the practices for the organization of discussions, deliberations, consultations, and the definition of negotiation spaces,
- cognitive dimensions, relative to shared codes and languages, to representations and common values, representing an important benefit from these deliberative processes,
- relational dimensions, relative to emotional and affective modalities, which are part of an educative process.

The «negotiations» made necessary by the social survey include several interdependent dimensions through which the implied social actors will have to find the consensus required for the development of societal indicators:

- the object of the negotiation
- the mode of negotiation
- the level of symmetry (sharing power)
- the level of complexity and technical ability
- the level of flexibility
- the level of systematicity
- the level of directivity

These processes imply a redistribution of resources, powers, and modes of governance

This analytical approach gives a sound theoretical basis for the development of societal indicators. It is the basis on which the ISBET project described below has been built.

### **The ISBET Project (Indicateurs Sociétaux de Bien Etre Territorialisés)**

Started in 2007, the ISBET project has benefited from its beginning of the support of numerous territorial collectivities in Brittany, at the region, department and city levels. Phase 1 of the project consisted of elaborating human development indicators (HDI) at the regional and sub regional levels (departments, cantons, communities of communes). These indicators are then compared with GDP. The eventual discrepancies between the evolution of the two types of indicators should lead afterwards to more targeted local policies, often linked



to specific indicators (e.g. indicators on infancy). These tasks are developed in line with the ongoing experiences of the Nord-Pas de Calais region. Their results have been analyzed and discussed in many meetings of locally elected authorities and associations.

Phase 2 of the project started in 2009 and is about the development of well being societal indicators. It relies on a methodology adapted from the Council of Europe methodology. As described before, it goes beyond the expert approach and associates citizens to the qualitative and quantitative analysis. PEKEA is here in the logics of the OECD Istanbul declaration, of the Council of Europe research work, and in the perspective of the collective group FAIR. In France, the Social, Environmental and Economic Council recently recalled about sustainable development indicators that it is essential to « invent modalities to associate citizens to their definition, quantification being only meaningful if at the service of qualification ».

The elaboration with citizens is both the preamble and the core of the process : it is about defining together what is a common well being.

It implies a large communication campaign with all the existing channels on the concerned territories (municipal boards, local press, bill postings...) to raise the awareness of the citizens and make them understand the interest of such an approach. A local play company has been involved to present and discuss the project. Local links have been created to associate business, trade unions, agricultural associations, the young, the elder... Several public meetings have been held on well being, and have led to the creation of homogeneous or heterogeneous working groups to define well being and its shared dimensions on a specific territory. On this basis, social situation indicators have been collectively elaborated and a questionnaire built. The objective is here to participate in the definition and the development of public policies aiming at well being for all.

It is too early to present results and the impact of this approach on public policies. It is already worth noting the high interest raised by this type of approach-the meetings which attract a significant level of participation, according to local authorities-. Another result of the process concerns the social links and networks created. This activity crosschecks also the need for a renewal of the democratic process and the modes of governance, both felt by a large share of the citizens as an essential issue.

### **To conclude:**

The transactional approach used in the ISBET project emphasizes the need to strengthen and transform local governance through participative processes.

Three aspects require a particular attention to deepen this approach:

- strengthen the theoretical basis of social indicators, and in particular the difference between societal and aggregative values,
- strengthen research on the links between local, national, and international governance, the problem of articulation between networks being an essential point,
- keep working through networks (FAIR, CIC...) to share and discuss practices between the many groups active on this issue. It has already started ,e.g. with OECD to prepare this forum, by PEKEA –with OECD and CoE-in a colloquium in Rennes last october, by CoE to prepare a methodological guide about the development of social indicators with citizens, by the group FAIR...

## Notes

- 1) Yves Franchet is President of PEKEA, and Michel Renault is assistant professor /researcher in Rennes 1 University, director of the ISBET project, and member of PEKEA
- 2) Think tank Commission on measuring well being, created in 2008 by French President Sarkozy, and chaired by Nobel prizes Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen
- 3) <http://www.pekea-org/AttachNLetter/Fr-Consensus-2008-final.pdf>
- 4) From a communication of Michel Renault to the RIUSS Colloquium, Barcelona, may 2008. See also: Mike Salvaris (2000) *Community and social indicators, How citizens can measure progress*. (Institute for social research, Swinburne University of Technology)
- 5) P.M.Boulanger (2004) *Les indicateurs de développement durable, un défi scientifique, un enjeu démocratique*
- 6) J.Dewey, A.F.Bentley, *Knowing and the known*  
J.Dewey, Logic, the theory of inquiry/Logique, la théorie de l'enquete  
J.Dewey, The public and its problems/Le public et ses problemes