

# Reframing Social Policy for Welfare and Equal Opportunities in a Digital Culture

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*A primary and crucial goal of social policy is to ensure, within prevailing economic frames, equality and social justice in the pursuit of sustainable development. An integrated pattern of beliefs, values, customs, and goals in its wider meaning constitutes culture as a whole perspective in human life. In the globalizing world, cultural diversity exists that complicates the achievement of consensus in decision-making. However, a welfare culture is evolving based on new values and perspectives of the society. A digital culture is also strongly asserting itself, allowing new application methods such as quantum computing in problem-solving. Within the expanding horizons of social policy, many calculations and forecasts have made it possible to reduce poverty rates. However, poverty as a great divide still plagues the world.*

*Child poverty is a huge global as well as national problem. Lack of opportunities for education and employment is dividing our societies. Children and young people who are growing up in poverty, or at risk of poverty, also have inadequate nutrition, insufficient access to health services, and are thus not well equipped for employment on reaching working and productive age. Participation in early childhood care and education is nowadays given high priority in political agendas simultaneously with the effective organization of health care and social eldercare of the aging population. The economic recovery, getting started again in 2021 after strong efforts to curb the corona virus disease (COVID-19), together with good governance, guides transformative social policy. Risks and tensions have been shown to cause deviant and disruptive trends that require risk management actions to avoid, for example, cybercrime. Human-ethical principles become crucial supportive means to control and evaluate the effects of a rapidly increasing technological capacity.*

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*The purpose of this article is to awaken awareness of global inequality with focus on poverty causing social disadvantage. Responsible governance based on humane ethical values, new thinking together with acceptable risk management, could lead to a social policy aiming for social justice, solidarity, and equal values. Advanced technology could be efficiently used to assess these values in society, although concerns remain about the negative appearance of dark sides.*

**Keywords:** *social policy, poverty, technology, algorithms, quantum computing, cyber-crime, human-ethical principles*

### **Values and Choice in Social Policy**

The transformation of societies is pushing the boundaries further to promote freedom and opportunities, and to find optimal and cost-effective solutions to choices for maintaining wellbeing in accordance with prevailing and preferred values. An integrated pattern of beliefs, values, customs, and goals in its wide meaning constitutes culture as a whole perspective in policy actions and society (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Williams, 1986). In the globalized world, cultural diversity complicates the attaining of consensus in decision-making. The new welfare culture, derived from the cultural turn and paradigm shift in social sciences, and influenced by the economic and social changes, considerably changed the views and values of social policy (Kluckhohn, 1951; Kuhn, 1970). The digital culture shaped by the use of digital technologies in the interaction among humans evolves and asserts itself for new and advanced applications in problem-solving. Social policy, with the aim of maintaining social justice, solidarity, and equal values, in a creative decision-making process, provides not only financial support to individuals and families but also services for the promotion of social and life satisfaction (Bäckman, 2020, p. 65; Mohan, 2018, pp. 30–31). Banerjee and Duflo (2019, p. 322), who were awarded the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty, state: “The goal of social policy, in these times of change and anxiety, is to help people absorb the shocks that affect them without allowing those shocks to affect their sense of themselves.” The ideas of resilience in the digital culture, not “doing things” in traditional manners and supported by advanced communication technology, have provided new possibilities for efficient problem-solving. Social justice and equality should be pursued as fair and just relations between the individual and society (Rawls, 1971). Increasing attention is paid to the rapid expansion of regulation in welfare governance because of outsourcing and privatization of welfare provision with non-profit and for-profit agents. Assistance and aid should be used to achieve progress in challenges for a basic level of living, including health, education, water, and other basic services. Nudge policies, conducted by decision-makers and/or stakeholders, try to attract the attention of influencers to receive widely spread support for a crucial problem in decision-making and policy actions even in harsh periods through nudging actions (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019; Rosling, Rosling, & Rosling

Rönnlund, 2019; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Principles of social justice and equality, based on partnership among the government, international organizations, citizens, and other interested parties, as well as in the private sector, are increasingly recognized as a humanitarian commitment.

The quality of government or good governance, free from corruption and related phenomena, is a prerequisite for effective policy-making and achieving of goals and progress in social policy. The quality of government strongly correlates with a country's degree of economic development and is connected with good outcomes related to human wellbeing, a central goal of a social policy. Good government is also associated with low-income inequality, low child mortality, high level of social capital, happiness, and life satisfaction (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Rothstein, 2013, pp. 22–26). Social policy, also in the form of social work, directed towards planning for and implementation of social change and development, should be placed in a wider frame of world's social welfare, where human–social development plays an important role. Human–social development calls for unification of knowledge, technology, and the economic frames of social policy, in a comparative perspective, and embedded in the culture with its prevailing and preferred values (Mohan, 2015, pp. 125, 136–137; 2018, pp. 29–31).

Collective or social choice can be traced to Arrow's (1951, 1963) impossibility theorem, which stresses upon the need to go beyond democracy, voting, and election in participatory practices for the understanding of rationality, freedom, and social justice (Sen, 2020). Advanced technology, algorithmic solutions, and the revolutionizing quantum computing have permitted more efficient calculations and forecasts for optimal decision-making. Quantum computing calculates solutions in a superior, fast, and reliable manner to combat, for example, poverty and climate change. It can also contribute to development of medicines and vaccines (Jacobs, 2018; Mehta, 2020). The explosive growth of internet-connected internet of thing (IoT) devices (a network of connected smart devices providing big and rich data), along with edge computing and 5G fast wireless cellular technology, allows for smart applications close to the location where they are needed, rather than in centralized repositories (Bäckman, 2020; Mehta, 2020). The advanced quantum simulations and applications can be efficiently used in the settings of digital culture to assess their values to society. The revolutionizing quantum computing thus supports sustainable growth and development.

### **Global Poverty: Still a Great Divide**

The battle against poverty and social exclusion has long been a great challenge for social policy and economics. In the turbulent 1930s, the Great Depression caused a drastic decline in economic activities, and severe unemployment plagued populations in many countries. The issue of poverty and inequalities as obstacles to growth and development did not disappear, although the British welfare state after World War II, according to the Beveridge Report (1942), gave priority to combating poverty and social exclusion. In the 1960s, during the “Golden

Age,” economic forecasts inspired western countries to make social policy efforts to achieve “A Great Society.” In the 1970s, however, a change in direction again took place because of global crises and stagnant economic growth and national transformations. The observed trend of the clustering of uncertainties, problems, and risks began to put pressure on welfare states largely because of expanded commitments in social policy (Pierson, 2001, p. 80). Tension and conflicts further shake the world. According to the UNICEF statistics, about 400 million children in conflict-affected areas are lacking opportunities for a good and satisfactory life.

Policy actions, supported by new digital and algorithmic culture, have succeeded in decreasing the poverty rate from 35.0 in 1990 to 10.7 in 2015. Still 700 million people live on less than \$1.90 a day (World Bank, 2018). Poverty often forces people to exploit the environment, which results in inappropriate dump sites leading to unhealthy living conditions, overexploitation of natural resources, and impermissible clear-cutting of forests. Insufficient knowledge of agricultural practices leads to a decline in crop yield and productivity, inadequate nutrition, etc. (Banerjee, 2015; Stiglitz, 2015, pp. 108, 178–181). Child poverty, in spite of policy actions, has remained for long a huge global and national problem (Figure 1).

Although child poverty is not a new policy issue, it has received renewed attention with the adoption of sustainable development goals of the United Nations, including the target to halve child poverty (as measured through national definitions) by 2030. Child poverty not only threatens the individual child but is also aggravating inequality in society. Children and young people who are growing up in poverty, or are at risk of poverty, have inadequate nutrition, insufficient access to health care services, and are thus not well equipped for employment later at reaching working and productive age. The aging society calls for an effective organization of health care and social eldercare.

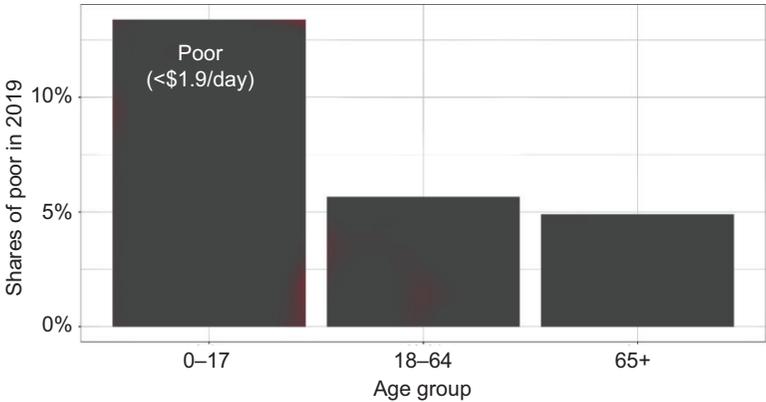


Figure 1 Global extreme poverty by age group 2013.

Source: Fenz and Hamel (2019).

Income poverty is the most common form found in Europe, affecting 17.3% of people.

There are major differences between countries, and more specifically between two Europes—a protective northern and western Europe, and a southern and eastern Europe in difficulty—even reflecting differences between welfare regimes (Eurostat, 2019). Countries of the post-socialist group have the highest poverty rates (Romania 35.7% and Bulgaria 38.9%). Inequality exists in the United States in the form of skewness in income distribution, and insufficient access to health and justice. According to Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz (2012, 2015), countries following the US welfare model show a similar pattern.

The Nordic countries are still fairly distinct as a group and different from most other countries in maintaining small income inequalities and provision of services. In Romania and Bulgaria, 42% of the children and young people aged less than 18 years are at a risk of poverty and social exclusion. In the other post-socialist countries, such as Hungary and Lithuania, the proportion is also high (32%). In the Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, Italy, and Spain, about one-third of this age group is at a risk of poverty and social exclusion. Fairly distributed opportunities creating inclusive growth as a change driver for social policy and other forms of welfare arrangements, such as environmental justice, are also supported by nudge policies even in difficult times (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013; Banerjee & Duflo, 2019; Rosling et al., 2019; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Japan with a population of 127 million, and more than 30 million people aged more than 70 years, has, in spite of decreasing population due to low nativity and modest natural resources, kept afloat because of the export of technical products. In the aging Europe, the economic activities have been stimulated by massive European Union (EU)-financial packages.

### **Advanced Technology in Policy-making**

In scholarly works, poverty and inequality are scrutinized from different perspectives: How capital accumulation has led to concentration of wealth (Piketty, 2014, pp. 23–25, 333, 345); how a wider perspective on the ways in which inequalities affect all areas of the society is needed (Atkinson, 2015, pp. 3–4, 303–304); and how population activities, good governance, and new thinking about values are crucial when great divides endanger our society and the future (Mohan, 2015, pp. 32–34; 2018, pp. 53, 97–98).

The research began to expand to scrutinize poor living conditions not only as a consequence of unequal wealth distribution but also considering the idea of environmental justice, which has gained acceptance as a means to maintain wellbeing and life satisfaction through the use of services in infrastructure and green space (see Mohan, 2018, pp. 31, 104–105; Sachs, 2015, p. 450). Advanced technology also began increasingly to shift and further modernize the society into an economy based on communication technology, automation, and computation. Digital transformation and new digital culture, the use of advanced technologies based on

prevailing values in decision-making processes, began to offer possibilities to look at past experiences of changed economic and social developments in the form of new trends, risks, and needs in order to provide welfare and security by means of social arrangements in social policy. The changing society is increasingly depending on new knowledge and solutions brought about by advanced technology in decision-making (Bäckman, 2020, pp. 65–66). It has been considered important to place social arrangements and opportunities in social policy within the frame of life satisfaction and happiness (Block & Kuchenbecker, 2019; Layard, 2005). The availability of IoT permits increased connectivity through which it is possible to get experiences of the world and to plunge into the future. Information is shown to spread according to a fast regularity among connected people (Fowler & Christakis, 2009).

About two-thirds of the world population live in cities, and the scarcity of green space in urbanized settings has reduced opportunities for recreation and wellbeing. The dilemma is that neglecting culturally important actions to enhance access to urban services and promote their quality and performance, restrains human development. The United Nations' (2019, pp. 3–4) Human Development Report draws attention toward understanding the various dimensions of inequality that are most important for people's wellbeing, and what is behind these dimensions, while the development of smart cities has incorporated information and communication technologies (ICT) for smart solutions and promotion of sustainable development (Weeber, 2020). Although advanced technology has increased the opportunities for rapid communication in wider networks, loneliness and exclusion, also connected to a wide range of problems, are plaguing both young and old people alike. The rise of digital culture allowing the use of advanced technological applications, such as algorithmic solutions for problem-solving, has made it possible to obtain large data sets analyzed computationally, revealing trends and patterns of inequalities for policy-making (see, e.g., Beer, 2017; Mehta, 2020; Striphas, 2015). The ability to accept new visions and directions in welfare provision is associated with good governance in different welfare regimes.

The Nordic countries have succeeded in continuously improving their public service sector in the new digital era, providing their citizens with efficient public services. Measured by the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) (European Commission, 2017), which sums up relevant indicators on Europe's digital performance, the Nordic countries have the most advanced digital economies in EU. Although Sweden is ranked behind Denmark and Norway in the DESI, it is still far above the EU28 average. Sweden has been for years at or near the top of international digitalization rankings, and leads the way in the areas of investment and use of human capital, internet usage, and e-government. The number of individuals using the internet to interact with public authorities (eGovernment users) is higher in the Nordic countries than, for example, in the United Kingdom and Germany. This is to some extent associated with income distribution, which is more equal in the Nordic countries and gives the households and individuals better opportunities to purchase modern technical equipment for using the internet and communication than in many other countries (Bäckman, 2020, p. 145).

In spite of programs of policy actions to curb the new spreads of corona virus disease (COVID-19), economic and social inequality, biodiversity, waste problems, low welfare, and wellbeing exist in different parts of the world. At the same time, as the world learns to live in a new reality changed by COVID-19, climate change is escalating and devastating lives and livelihoods every year. Through nudge policies based on quantum and edge computing, crucial information can be provided to authorities, organizations, and private sectors. Enlightened and trustworthy governments have the ability to tackle these problems.

Different risks require risk management. Digital transformation impacts society at several levels. The delivery of public information and services has changed, and the way citizens interact with authorities and other service units has improved. Although digital technologies have been praised for progress in human–social development, the appearance of dark sides in digital culture has caused new concerns. Cybercrime is increasing, and cybercriminals may target data from public services and other institutions as well as private information. Cybercrime conducted by hackers may paralyze the infrastructure or parts of it. Attacks that damage or put vital functions of society out of action, such as oil and gas, electricity, transportation, telecommunications, etc., have serious consequences.

Ethics or moral philosophy recommends and defends what is correct and incorrect. A connection with active citizenship prevails because people have legal rights and obligations to control and to get access to information about matters that concern them. The acceptance of these principles for maintaining a good and safe life for people is facilitated if the governments are free from corruption and thereto-related problems in the planning of care for people with weakened capability of decision-making in matters concerning them. The basic human values refer to the core values and principles, including peace, truth, honesty, love, etc., that constitute the prerequisites of a good life for people, and are important for a well-functioning democracy. Human values in ethics, formed on the basis of interests, choices, needs, desires, and preferences, are essential for positive human behavior and actions in our daily lives.

## **Visions and Strategies**

The government is the primary institution through which people, politicians, administrators, and planners act collectively to solve problems and make decisions about social policy goals. Growing dissatisfaction, social hope, and visions of a new development, as well as new thinking about values and goals of social policy in a welfare culture, call for policy actions on a broad front based on relevant information that can increasingly be produced by advanced technology. The derived and preferred pictures of a well-functioning society, connected with values, reflecting problems and dissatisfaction in economic, sociocultural, and political contexts, provide useful information for value premises as ideals for welfare actions in social policy (Pfaueffinger, 2005, p. 5). Risks involved in advanced technology are common, as cybercrime is increasing, and criminals target data

from public services and institutions as well as private information. The availability of extensive information is a condition for finding appropriate answers to questions about the effectiveness of social policy, that is, seeking optimal performance or “how to get the right things done” and “how to do things right.”

Banerjee and Duflo (2019) have emphasized, including an aspect of wellbeing and social policy, on development in difficult economic times. The troublesome social and economic problems connected to technological changes and globalization, intertwined in politics thru complicated ways, can contribute to new development through facts and the ways the facts are interpreted (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019, p. 238). Enlightened governments control policy actions by relying on scientific knowledge and nudge theory and policies proposing ways to influence behavior of the influential in social policies and economics.

Visions and the grand strategy aim to ensure the ability to act and create freedom of action in the pursuit of prosperity and security. It configures the interests of prosperity and security within a new framework of economic, social, and environmental issues. The advanced mathematical–statistical methods and models, in connection with the development of technosciences and computer applications, have, for example, by using algorithmic solutions, changed the nature of and strategies for the identification of problems to find potential and optimal solutions (Christian & Griffiths, 2016). In predicting the success of plans, and searching for consensus and optimal solutions, the interested parties in social policy are guided by a long tradition of research in this field and models of choice issues in policy-making (Ostrom, 1998). The seven pillars of social practice (mission, education, service, empathetic humility, liberatory assistance, transparent effectiveness, and buoyancy) force us to rethink the genesis of social problems and our world view toward a better future (Mohan, 2018, pp. 31, 94). Resilience, as the capacity to deal with difficulties and concerns, is increasingly accepted in social policy. Social policy is pushing further the boundaries to promote freedom and opportunities. A reduction in inequalities requires comprehensive policy actions such as use of technological progress in policy-making, increase in public investments, control of personal and income capital taxes, renewal of social insurance and child benefits for all children, and the finding of optimal and cost-effective solutions to choices for maintaining wellbeing. The ideas of resilience in the digital culture, not “doing things” in traditional ways, and supported by advanced communication technology have provided new possibilities for effective problem-solving.

Megatrends are often considered to occur at global level, and the development is often believed to continue in the same direction. They differ from trends that may emerge without warning, and these call for quick reaction and solution and can otherwise produce long-term changes such as the slow-moving megatrends. Demographic shifts, poverty, urbanization, environmental justice, etc. generate problems changing toward megatrends. The use of advanced technological applications for the future goal-setting has made it possible to obtain large data sets analyzed computationally, revealing megatrends and patterns of inequalities for

policy-making. Megatrends are complex and intertwine combinations of economic, social, political, cultural, philosophical, and technological factors in their origin, and have far-reaching effects on society and its welfare arrangements.

## Conclusion

New thinking about culture, values and norms, and traditional “ways of doing things” in connection with the economic slowdown has given rise to a new welfare culture contributing to new politics and policies, and to redesigning of social arrangements. All this is included within a framework of economics and social policy as good economics even in hard times, that is, opportunities for potential output or boost to economic growth for progress and welfare with the aim of maintaining social justice, solidarity, and equal values. According to forecasts, the global growth is estimated to be weak in the coming years, mainly reflecting weakness in economic activities and tensions and crises prevailing in the world, such as geopolitical tensions and trade political conflicts as well as the continued spread of coronavirus and its mutated variations. The second wave gathers pace across the continent, resulting in new restrictions with impacts on economic activities, welfare, and wellbeing. The transformation associated with globalization is accompanied by a weakening or loss of national sovereignty, fostered by encouraging the growing importance of transnational political structure. The European Parliament has updated the EU’s climate target for 2030, backing a 60% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by the end of the decade, up from current 40% reduction.

Environmental justice, especially climate change, affects economic activity around the world. A prerequisite for all economic activities is human capital–economic values, such as skills, education, and health that promote growth in productivity. It is essential for raising living standards and achieving development goals. The trust in government actions is a prerequisite for a well-functioning society and new developments and social investments, for example, in the form of inclusive growth for control of welfare, could be made in changing circumstances. The digital culture, and especially the advanced technology, largely through new and effective solutions, facilitates planning and decision-making. The understanding and planning of changes in the global economy, technology, demographic structure, and commitments in social policy call for megatrend analysis to drive sustainable growth, human development, and wellbeing. The megatrend analyses aim to reduce uncertainty. The analyses also stimulate us to guide our efforts, and help us to avoid mistakes and focus on factual aims. By 2050, two-thirds of the global population will live in cities. Governments have responsibilities to take care of nature in our cities, and citizens can in return receive benefits in the form of wellbeing and health. Loss of biodiversity is associated with ecological changes in ecosystems, landscapes, and the global biosphere. Natural ecological disturbances, such as wildfire, floods, and volcanic eruptions, change ecosystems drastically by eliminating local populations of some species and transforming whole biological

communities (United Nations, 2020). Enlightened and trustworthy governments have the ability to tackle these problems,

The COVID-19 pandemic, experienced as a severe shock, has caused not only economic difficulties but also social suffering for individuals and families. Now the crucial question is as follows: How long will it take economy to recover from the spread of virus? The United Nations has estimated that the COVID-19 can still throw 83–132 million people into hunger and poverty. There is an urgent need of humanitarian aid in the form of food and nutrition assistance for millions of people rendered undernourished. The direction of global change toward complicated and intertwined connections of economic, social, political, and above all technological developments, as well as climate change, is now increasingly highlighted as the future megatrend to boost economies and to protect the world population from sufferings caused by a wide range of inequalities. Social investments in children and young people as transformative social policy to ensure the health and working ability of the population of productive age have to be planned to fit demographic and economic changes.

The appearance of dark sides in digital culture has caused new concerns, which may lead to caution in policy actions. The revolutionizing progress in technology is pushing the frontiers of activities forward for inclusive growth, also aiming at equity, through protective social policies of global economy. Technological change is widely regarded as one of the main drivers of long-term economic development, also with far-reaching effects on people's daily living. The fifth generation (5G) technology standards for cellular networks that began to be deployed worldwide in 2019 will further facilitate connectedness and policy actions. The IoT, which brings together billions of connected smart objects, will get a major boost from 5G technology, thus boosting the connectivity of our world. The revolutionizing quantum computing, which allows downloading and processing of exceptionally huge amounts of data in relatively few quantum bits, calculates solutions in a superior fast and reliable way solutions to combat, for example, climate change. Data and algorithms are crucial in the government's shift toward data-driven policy-making in digital and algorithmic culture. Trust in government actions is a prerequisite for a well-functioning society and new developments. Enlightened governments with optimism about the future, and with far-reaching plans based on megatrends, have better opportunities to assert themselves with the use of advanced technology and human-ethical principles.

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