

Comparing Welfare Across Time and Space

Measuring Development, Setting Standards and Transnational Learning

Richard Rose

Centre for the Study of Public Policy, Strathclyde

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In the postwar era, every single country in the UN-European region has made progress in terms of infant mortality, literacy, secondary education, and gender equality as regards labour market participation. But that does not mean that all European and North American countries have been advancing equally well or that they are now equally well developed: by definition, one-half must be below the median for the UN-European region, and all but one must then be below the nation ranking first. Whether a country can catch up with leading societies depends upon its annual rate of improvement; distance can thus be measured in the number of years it would take to catch up with the median or leading country's present position. A comparison of current social conditions in Eastern and Western European countries emphasizes that a country's rank varies greatly with the topic at hand. For example, Eastern European countries tend to rank very high on gender equality in labour force participation, and equal to Western European countries in literacy, but behind Western European countries in infant mortality. Thus, there is no need to regard major differences in historical legacies and economic conditions as barriers to social advancement.

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