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Judith

Jennifer Santos

Chelsea Sessoms

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Decent Society Index: A Research Note¹

Judith Blau

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA

Jennifer Santos

University of Delaware, USA

Chelsea Sessoms

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA

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Abstract

People everywhere are discovering that their own views about a decent society are widely shared around the world. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights already made this clear in 1948 by referring to “a common understanding” of rights and freedoms and a “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.” A challenge for social scientists is to develop dimensions for an index that measures variation in the extent to which societies *are decent*. Such an index would be useful in research for comparative and analytical purposes, and it could also be useful to people who mobilize to made demands of their government for a better society.

Keywords

human rights, society, collective goods

A Decent Society is one in which all its members are committed to advancing equality and nondiscrimination, advancing the welfare of everyone, preserving social and cultural pluralism, and protecting vulnerable groups and people. Moreover, a Decent Society is one that promotes democracy, an equitable economy, environmental sustainability, and actively promotes peace. A Decent Society is one in which the government supports the advance of human rights and the common good through laws, policies and

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programs. Clearly these are ideals, achieved by no society, but shared by peoples everywhere around the world. These ideals do, in fact, motivate and guide practices and social action, at the grassroots level and by social movements, and also by governments that translate these ideals into official national laws, policies and programs. The constitutions of most countries do, in fact, encompass many of these principles.² Constraints of poverty, chronic natural disasters, ethnic conflict, and the legacies of colonialism impede progress, but the welfare of people in many countries has improved and this has been achieved through making human rights national priorities. This has especially been the case for women's rights, labor rights, and children's rights.

It is evident that there is empirical variation among societies with respect to the attainment of these ideals and how vigorously they are being pursued. There is also variation in the extent to which societies, as nation-states, formally commit to human rights and to protect the collective welfare. Yet there is no overall index of the Decent Society that would make comparisons possible. In this paper we outline possible components of such an index. That is, we simply list measures appropriate for inclusion in a Decent Society Index (DSI), and merely propose one analytical strategy. We start from the premise that a Decent Society is a society that upholds, promotes, and secures human rights and the collective welfare. This premise nicely clarifies the criteria for the selection of indicators. Within the past decade or so, there has been considerable effort devoted to developing individual measures that can be used comparatively to assess countries' human rights achievements on various dimensions. The international human rights framework has guided these efforts, and thus guides ours.

What is "society"? It is usually defined as a large number of individuals for whom there are connections, through patterns of interrelations, shared institutions and culture.³ Common usage, which we adopt here, is that society is coincident with the nation-state. In practice, all national laws and policies – in our case laws and policies dealing with human rights – apply specifically to those who make up a national society. Government plays the formal role of promulgating human rights laws and policies, while social actors (including citizens, NGOs, social movements) advance human rights through mobilization. Thus, universal standards for human rights are pursued in specific national contexts, but in ways that are consistent with the international human rights framework. We use country as the proxy for society.

²) Blau and Moncada 2006.

³) For a detailed discussion, see Blau and Moncada 2009.

Because our objective is to measure variation in the promotion of human rights and collective welfare, we selected measures as candidates for inclusion in the DSI that line up with human rights treaties, standards promulgated by the World Health Organization (WHO), the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the guidelines of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). We also include indications of severe civilian stress, such as the number of refugees. After reviewing how the term, “decent society” has been used by scholars, we summarize a few points about analysis before turning to the actual indicators.

Background

There is no precedence in empirical social sciences for the concept, “decent society.” However, the International Labour Organization has launched a campaign that stresses that people have the right to a “decent job” and the term conveys much more than simply earning a living, or “work” or “employment.” The ILO definition is worth quoting because of its scope.

Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives – their aspirations for opportunity and income; rights, voice and recognition; family stability and personal development; and fairness and gender equality. Ultimately these various dimensions of decent work underpin peace in communities and society. Decent work reflects the concerns of governments, workers and employers, who together provide the ILO with its unique tripartite identity.⁴

Our own thinking aligns with that of the ILO; that is, we wanted a term that conveys variation in the extent to which societies ensure members their dignity, promote welfare for all, and uphold human rights.

The term, “decent society” is also used in moral philosophy although in two distinct ways. John Rawls refers to decent societies as those non-liberal political societies in which political rights and freedoms are respected in spite of their being on the margins of the western, liberal political tradition.⁵ Our research diverges from that of Rawls in that we have a more pluralistic conception of political and constitutional traditions and consequently challenge his definition of decent society. Our understanding lines up better with that of philosopher Avishai Margalit, who defines decent societies

⁴ International Labour Organization 2008.

⁵ Rawls 1999.

as those that do not humiliate their citizens.⁶ We build on this while developing empirical indications of the Decent Society.

Dimensions of the Decent Society

It is useful to organize the presentation of items roughly along the lines of the categories of human rights, as they formally evolved: civil and political rights; socioeconomic rights; cultural and environmental rights, along with humanitarian justice.⁷ As noted, we distinguish between a country's standing with regard to formal norms (treaties) and empirical indicators. There are no missing cases for the treaties, and our empirical indicators have few or no missing cases. What this approach fails to capture is the extent of group variation and group disparities (that is, inequality) within a society. However, it would not be difficult to incorporate measures of group inequality into the Index. We already do include the Gini Index of income inequality, and there are statistical measures that are available to summarize indications of group inequalities, which could be treated as items in the DS Index.⁸ Our approach reflects the view that human rights are not static categories, but rather fluid and overlapping.

The next analytical step would be Principle Components Analysis or a similar procedure that would yield dimensions or subscales. There are many questions to ask. Do the various categories of human rights, as conventionally conceived (e.g., political rights, economic rights, and so forth), empirically cohere? How closely related are laws and practices? Using lagged procedures, it would be possible to look at the temporal relations between date of treaty ratification and empirical progress in particular areas. How does GDP relate to the DSI and to its various components?

Most importantly, our objective is not to promote research for its own sake, but to provide researchers with a tool that they can share with human rights advocates. National governments are often unresponsive to the appeals and demands made by NGOs and individuals to adopt new programs that will enhance peoples' welfare, better protect citizens' rights, promote economic equity, and improve the environment. Human rights advocates are better prepared to make their case when they have hard data on hand.

⁶ Margalit 1996.

⁷ Blau and Moncada 2005, pp. 51–52.

⁸ Blau and Schwartz 1984, pp. 11–12, 177–179.

1. Political and Civil Rights

1A. Formal Norms

1A.1. Whether or not a country has ratified the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights⁹

1B. Empirical Indicators

1B.1. Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Scales:¹⁰

Freedom of Speech
Freedom of Religion
Freedom of Movement
Freedom of Assembly and Association
Electoral Self-Determination

1B.2. Broadband Access¹¹

1B.3. Freedom Index¹²

1B.4. Press Freedom Index¹³

1B.5. Electoral turnout¹⁴

1B.6. Death Penalty¹⁵

2. Nondiscrimination and Protection of Vulnerable Groups

2A. Formal Norms

2A.1 Ratification of UN human rights treaties and signature on other declarations¹⁶

⁹ UN Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.

¹⁰ Cingranelli and Richards 2008.

¹¹ UN International Telecommunications Union 2007.

¹² Freedom House 2008a.

¹³ Freedom House 2008b.

¹⁴ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2008.

¹⁵ Amnesty International 2007.

¹⁶ UN Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d..

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

2.A.2. Constitutional provisions for GLBT rights

2.A.3. Constitutional provisions for disabled persons

2.A.4. Constitutional provisions for migrants

2B. *Empirical Indicators*

2B.1. Gender Equity Index Scales¹⁷

Education Gap

Economic Activity Gap

Empowerment Gap

2B.2. Gender Equality Indices¹⁸

Gender Related Development Index (GDI)

Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)

2B.3. Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset¹⁹

Women's Political Rights

Women's Social Rights

2B.4. GLBT rights²⁰

2B.5. Children's Wellbeing²¹

2B.6. Migration: Female and Total²²

¹⁷⁾ Social Watch 2008.

¹⁸⁾ UN Development Programme 1007/08a.

¹⁹⁾ Cingranelli and Richards 2008.

²⁰⁾ Amnesty International 2008.

²¹⁾ United Nations Children's Fund 2008.

²²⁾ UN Population Division. 2005.

3. Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

3A. Formal Norms

- 3A.1. Ratification of the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights²³
- 3A.2. Ratification of the Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expressions²⁴
- 3A.3. Number of International Labour Organization Conventions Ratified²⁵

3B. Empirical Indicators

3B.1 Social Watch's Capabilities Index²⁶

Percentage of children who reach fifth grade,
Mortality among children under five
Percentage of deliveries attended by skilled health personnel

3B.2. Nutrition, Food Intake, and Hunger²⁷

3B.3. Labor statistics; e.g., Occupational injuries, unemployment²⁸

3B.4. Human Development Index (HDI): life expectancy, educational attainment and income²⁹

3B.5. Health Indicators³⁰

3B.6. Housing, Sanitation, Water, Traditional Fuel, Persons per Room; Housing Rights, Solid Waste Disposal; Slum Population; Roads³¹

3B.7. Civil Society: Number of Nongovernmental Organizations³²

²³ UN Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.

²⁴ UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2008.

²⁵ UN International Labour Organization: 2008a.

²⁶ Social Watch 2008a.

²⁷ UN Food and Agricultural Organization 2008.

²⁸ UN International Labour Organization. 2008b.

²⁹ UN Development Programme 2007/08b.

³⁰ UN World Health Organization 2008.

³¹ UN Habitat 2003.

³² World Association for Nongovernmental Organizations. 2008.

4. Humanitarian Justice

4A. Formal Norms

- 4A.1. Ratification of the Rome Statue for the International Criminal Court³³
- 4A.2. Ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the Covenant for Civil and Political Rights, Aimed at Abolishing the Death Penalty³⁴
- 4A.3. Ratification of the Convention against Torture³⁵

4.B. Empirical Indicators

- 4B.1. Incarceration: prisoners per capita³⁶
- 4B.2. Subscales on the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset.³⁷
 - Extrajudicial killings
 - Disappearances
 - Torture
 - Political Imprisonment
- 4B.3. Number of Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, Internally Displaced Persons, and Stateless Persons, by Origin³⁸
- 4B.4. Death penalty country data³⁹

5. Collective Goods

5A. Formal Norms

- 5A.1. Ratification of environmental treaties⁴⁰

³³ Human Rights Watch 2008.

³⁴ UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.

³⁵ UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.

³⁶ King's College London. International Centre for Prison Statistics 2008.

³⁷ Cingranelli and Richards 2008.

³⁸ UN Refugee Agency 2007.

³⁹ Amnesty International 2007.

⁴⁰ Center for International Earth Science Information Network 2008.

Basel Convention: Hazardous Wastes
Biological Diversity
Endangered Species
Migratory Species
Ramsar Convention: Wetlands
Kyoto: Climate Change
Vienna: Ozone Layer
Montreal: Protocol of the Ozone Layer Treaty

5A.2 Ratification of Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction⁴¹

5B. *Empirical Indicators*

5B.1 Peace Index⁴²

5B.2 Democracy Index⁴³

Scales: Electoral process; Government Functioning; Political Participation;

5A.2 Gini Coefficient:⁴⁴

5B.4 Corruption Perception Index⁴⁵

5B.3 Happy Planet Index⁴⁶

5B.4 Environment Indicators⁴⁷

5B.5 World Resources⁴⁸

Conclusions

Countries' economies have been meticulously measured for the purposes of trade, finance, and investment. We propose that compliance with human

⁴¹⁾ Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining 2008.

⁴²⁾ Vision of Humanity 2007.

⁴³⁾ Economist Intelligence Unit 2007.

⁴⁴⁾ UN Development Programme 2007/08b.

⁴⁵⁾ Transparency International 2007.

⁴⁶⁾ New Economics Foundation 2006.

⁴⁷⁾ World Bank 2006; 2008.

⁴⁸⁾ World Resources Institute 2008.

rights be similarly documented and measured, and that human rights be conceptualized for these purposes as robustly as they are defined by United Nations agencies and many national and international NGOs. They encompass civil and political rights, socioeconomic rights, cultural rights, environmental rights, nondiscrimination, and special protections for vulnerable populations. They spring from an enlightened vision about the common good and the indivisibility of rights and responsibilities.

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