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Needs and Wants: What Is Social Progress and How Should It Be Measured?

Lars Osberg

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THE REVIEW OF ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND SOCIAL PROGRESS | 2001

INTRODUCTION

When the United Nations Development Program published its *Human Development Report 2000*, its calculation of a Human Development Index put Canada in first place among all the world's nations. Norway, the United States and Australia were close behind, but for some observers the first-place ranking was all that mattered.¹ The Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP), however, ranked Canada 31st — approximately on a par with Hong Kong, marginally behind the United States and well below all European countries.²

By what criteria should one choose among indices of “social progress”?

If we are to agree on a measure of social progress we have to agree on the scope of the adjective “social” and the meaning of “progress.” It is clear that if we wanted to consider only the economic dimensions of well-being, there would be no need to use the term “social,” but it is equally clear that economic and social issues are closely linked. The linkage arises partly because economic

development and prosperity are important determinants of “sociological” change and partly because the resources produced by economic growth enable social policy expenditures. The relationship between economic and social issues is also reciprocal, since the process of economic production has social implications and social change strongly influences economic events. As a consequence of this interdependency, it is in practice very difficult to draw a clear dividing line between “economic” and “non-economic” issues, but it is clear that, whatever the line, economics is only part of life. Since a reasonable definition of “social” must reflect a broader conception of events than the purely economic, this article considers economic issues as a subset of social issues and social progress as referring to the progress of society on both social and economic dimensions.

What, then, is “progress”? The common meaning is “advance or development toward completion, betterment, etc: improvement” (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary* 1998, p. 1155). However, “betterment” or “improvement” implies some conception of “good” outcomes, and a process which approaches

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those outcomes. The idea of social progress therefore presupposes some conception of “the good” and some way of knowing whether society is getting closer, or further away. There are a broad variety of economic and social outcomes, each of which is experienced to a different degree by millions of individual citizens. Any summary index of social progress must therefore specify a list of social issues and find a way of weighing the relative importance of improvement or deterioration in each potential social and economic outcome for all persons — that is, a method of aggregating outcomes over individuals and across types of outcome. What criteria can guide this process?

In common usage, people often draw a distinction between needs and wants — and think of progress in terms of first meeting needs and then satisfying wants. This essay proposes the same hierarchy. The next section discusses how one might specify such a distinction. It argues that basic human rights should be thought of as needs, and that Canadian society has already committed itself to a definition of such rights in signing and ratifying a series of international covenants such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).³ One measure of social progress in Canada would therefore be the percentage of Canadians who actually enjoy their basic human rights.

Human Resources Development Canada (1997) notes that, after an extended dormant period lasting from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, “social indicators are back in vogue. Social analysts are showing interest once again in identifying and standardizing measurements of human well-

being.” While constructed by a variety of authors using an array of methodologies and calling themselves a variety of names (“quality of life indices,” Human Development Index, Index of Social Health, Index of Social Progress, etc.), all social indicators attempt to measure aspects of social progress. Hagerty et al. (2001) and Sharpe (1999) have recently surveyed the literature from their own perspectives. The subsequent section of the essay examines a few of the indices most commonly cited from the perspective of whether or not they measure the satisfaction of needs (i.e., basic human rights) or wants.

The essay concludes with a discussion of possible empirical measures of trends in social progress in a country such as Canada.

NEEDS

Rights and Needs

How can we decide what basic human needs are?

For some people, the issue is straightforward. Those who believe that the Word of God is directly revealed in an authoritative text will look to that text for guidance. For them, the only important issue in defining and measuring social progress is the correct interpretation of the sacred text. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan and fundamentalist Christians in Canada disagree about which text (the Koran or the Bible) should be regarded as the revealed Word of God, but they concur in their reliance on divine revelation. Other fundamentalist groups appeal to other holy books, and all fundamentalist groups must find a method of choosing between alternative versions of the sacred text and among interpretations of the text in the

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context of modern life. At least in principle, however, the line of moral authority is clear.

If this essay were being written a century ago, its social context would be a Canada in which official pronouncements reflected a widespread and largely unquestioned faith in the virtues of Christianity, the British Empire and a set of social practices somehow associated⁴ with both. Religious hegemony and the British Empire are now gone, and Canada, like other secular modern societies, has a more subtle problem. As a practical matter, when a number of groups of people believe in *different* sacred texts, peaceful cohabitation of the same geographic space requires some level of tolerance of alternative viewpoints. Tolerance necessarily implies that no particular sacred text should be granted precedence. In the Canadian context, as the pluralism of Canadian society has grown over time, it has become less and less possible to justify definitions of the good to which social progress corresponds by appeals to biblical references or the presumption of a “Judeo-Christian heritage” or the civilizing virtues for the Empire of “British values.” However, the historical evidence is clear that such appeals have been important in the past. What is to take their place?

Moral philosophers who attempt to articulate a vision of social progress that does not rely on explicit divine sanction or ethnic traditionalism must start somewhere. For many,⁵ the basic starting point has to be the individual — the conception, as Rawls⁶ puts it, that “each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override” (Rawls 1971, p. 3). The liberal project in political thinking starts from the conception that all persons have the right to choose the param-

eters of the life they personally value. “The presupposition of liberalism (as a philosophical doctrine), as represented by Locke, Kant and J.S. Mill, is that there are many conflicting and incommensurable conceptions of the good, each compatible with the full autonomy and rationality of human persons. Liberalism assumes, as a consequence of this presupposition, that it is a natural condition of a free democratic culture that a plurality of conceptions of the good is pursued by its citizens... The consequence is that the unity of society and the allegiance of its citizens to their common institutions rest not on their espousing one rational conception of the good, but on an agreement as to what is just for free and equal moral persons with different and opposing conceptions of the good” (Rawls 1982, p. 160).⁷

In this conception, social progress must be measured in the “enabling” sense that a society progresses when it enables more of its citizens to choose the kind of life they personally have reason to value. However, if individuals are to exercise their personal autonomy in a meaningful way, their choices must be free and informed. In the work of Rawls and other moral philosophers (see, for example, Elster and Roemer 1991), there is a clear distinction between the primary goods, such as equal basic liberties, which are *preconditions* for effective individual autonomous choice, and the *objects* of those free and informed choices.

If some social, legal and economic outcomes are preconditions for individuals to exercise autonomous choice in the satisfaction of their wants, then these “needs” must be distinguished from, and have priority over, “wants.” As well, if actual human individuals are both autonomous

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and social, embodying both a unique individuality which has a right to self-expression and a social personality that requires satisfying interpersonal relationships, the concept of “needs” must embrace the prerequisites of both autonomy and supportive relationships.

Although liberal, pluralist societies lack a common ethnic tradition or divinely ordained criteria for judging social progress, real-world decisions on public policy have to be made. Democratic societies claim legitimacy for these decisions from the institutions which produce them. These institutions function at a number of levels in the form of constitutions, treaties, legislation, regulations, judicial interpretations and administrative decisions, which constitute a hierarchy of legal status. Each level is constrained by the level above, but all ultimately derive their claim to legitimacy from some expression of consent of the citizenry, and the presumption that this consent is free and informed.

Constitutionalism in general and constitutionally embedded rights in particular are based on the idea that there should be a hierarchy of decision-making. The whole point of constitutions is that, although they are democratically adopted, they are hard to change and their provisions trump ordinary legislation. Because the framers of constitutions and the writers of treaties recognize that they cannot possibly anticipate the details of all future situations, constitutional provisions and international treaty obligations (e.g., under NAFTA) are often written in general language, as a framework for permissible later legislation and regulation. Since the provisions of ordinary legislation and regulations may also be somewhat

unclear in a particular context, a court system exists to interpret the law in concrete situations and to reconcile apparent conflicts in the law.

In thinking about how to define the basic human rights which are the primary needs of citizens, these institutional mechanisms are a great advantage. Social philosophers (e.g., Sen 1985, 1999) have attempted to reason from first principles to establish the capabilities, freedoms and rights which are essential preconditions for the autonomy of all citizens. However, their writings ultimately represent the reasoned opinion of the author alone, which may or may not be persuasive to others.⁸ It is unclear what percentage of the population needs to be convinced of the merits of a philosophical argument, or whether the criterion for acceptance is popular or academic opinion. Furthermore, the list of basic needs enumerated is invariably specified at a high level of abstraction and is often consciously incomplete (i.e., generally phrased and non-exhaustive).⁹

Philosophical discourse offers no way to verify the general acceptance of a specific list of human rights and has no mechanism for finding a balance among conflicting objectives or for interpreting general statements in a particular social context. Although, in practice, the political, social and economic rights enumerated by different authors have much in common, the ultimate arbiter of philosophical consensus is cogency of argument (as, for example, in the argument that literacy and basic education are prerequisites for the *informed* free choice of autonomous individuals).

Despite these difficulties, there is much to learn from philosophical debates. In particular, in the philosophical literature

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there is a general recognition of the interdependency of rights. As well, one can often read this literature as embodying an underlying conception of the “person in society” — Rawls (1982, p. 162), for example, refers to the “social bases of self respect” as one of the “primary goods.” However, limitations are also apparent. Writers in the liberal tradition tend to start from an emphasis on the desirability of ensuring freedom and autonomy in the choices that individuals have in society, even though interpersonal relationships of any depth inevitably involve some interdependence. As a consequence, some feminist scholarship (e.g., England 1993; Nelson 1995) places less emphasis on the “separative self” and builds on a conception of “individuals in relationships,” in which people have both unique individualities and social personalities and in which a basic need of individuals is to have satisfying personal relationships in a supportive community.

Because humans are both individual and social in their natures, these perspectives are best seen as complementary, but both are a distinct contrast to some types of economic thinking. In order to motivate discussion of efficient production, some economics texts use the “Robinson Crusoe” metaphor to explore how a person would behave if he or she were maximizing utility in complete isolation from other persons. In this story (the essential aspects of which are taught to both doctoral and introductory-level economics students), individuals derive satisfaction only from their own personal consumption of goods and services. When theorists define utility functions in which only a person’s own consumption of goods and leisure appear, it is (by construction) irrelevant what others do or consume. This economist’s story of indi-

viduals in isolation makes no sense in philosophy or politics. The concepts of justice, ethics and political activity are all inherently *social*. And since a “right” is a socially recognized entitlement, the lists of rights that flow from the concepts of justice or ethics are inherently social as well.

However, the continued debate over these differing conceptions illustrates the fact that academic discourse has no general institutional mechanism for deciding between arguments or for judging the extent to which the reasoned arguments of particular writers are accepted as valid in the broader population. There is also no basis except “professional consensus” (which can be hard to find) for resolving apparent or real contradictions or ambiguities of interpretation. Philosophy cannot, therefore, provide specific guidance for the immediate decisions required in day-to-day life. Since some practical resolution of immediate issues is needed, it is the role of the international and domestic legislative and legal systems to define and arbitrate values.

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Law and Legitimacy

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) has argued:

At the core of United Nations action to protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms is the International Bill of Rights. The Bill consists of three instruments:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948);

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966);

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).

These three documents define and establish human rights and fundamental freedoms.

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They form the foundation for the more than 50 additional United Nations human rights conventions, declarations, sets of rules and principles.

The Covenants are international legal instruments. This means that members of the United Nations, when they become parties to a Covenant or other conventions by ratifying or acceding to them, accept major obligations grounded in law.

States parties voluntarily bind themselves to bring national legislation, policy and practice into line with their existing international legal obligations.

By ratifying these and other binding texts, States become accountable to their citizens, other States parties to the same instrument and to the international community at large by solemnly committing themselves to respect and ensure the rights and freedoms found in these documents.¹⁰

International law differs from domestic law in that international courts cannot appeal to an international police force to exercise coercive power to enforce judgements. However, as the above quotation makes clear, Canada's signature on international treaties, and the ratification of those treaties by Parliament, are seen by the international community as implying more than an empty, rhetorical gesture. Specifically, the human rights enumerated in the international human rights documents to which Canada is signatory are international legal obligations.¹¹ Furthermore, a system (the office of the UNHCHR) exists to weigh the validity of individual assertions of violation of human rights and to interpret any ambiguity in the wording of these documents, or their relevance to a particular real-world context. In human rights, as with commercial obligations incurred under the

World Trade Organization or the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canada's obligations under international law are interpreted by international institutions in which Canada has a voice and to whose jurisdiction Canada has formally agreed.

By repeatedly signing and ratifying international obligations to observe specified human rights, Canada has clearly accepted limitations on the legitimate exercise of domestic political sovereignty. In the same way and by the same process, Canada has accepted limitations on domestic legislation by agreeing to participate in the WTO and NAFTA. However, enforcement differs.

In practice, the contravention of trade protocols will affect the economic self-interest of corporate and industrial interests. These groups typically have the wealth and political influence to prod their national governments into making use of the trade sanction remedies built into trade treaties (as, for example, when the United States threatened punitive duties on Canadian steel exports, in retaliation for Canadian tax regulations which disadvantaged US magazines). The rich and the powerful have an interest in ensuring that the provisions of trade treaties are actually implemented, and international trade retaliation is a convincing mechanism for punishing those states which commit infractions.

By contrast, human rights violations are typically experienced by people without wealth and power. Although there is an important sense in which the *possibility* of being deprived of human rights such as free speech or shelter diminishes the freedom of everyone (even the affluent conformist), it is only a marginalized minority of the population who directly experience human rights violations on a day-to-day basis. Hence, if a government chooses to ignore

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its human rights obligations, people with economic or political power are usually not immediately affected, and governments typically face little short-run sanction other than the possibility of bad press.

However, human rights are central to national identity, social cohesion and democratic political discourse in a way that trading protocols can never be. Citizenship rights define important aspects of identity and mutual obligation in a pluralist society. Those ideas of what is “the right thing to do” are also crucial to voluntary compliance with the law, so a common understanding of human rights can be seen as essential to the rule of law.

A particularly important aspect of the idea that we live in a liberal society is the presumption that basic human rights are unconditional and inalienable. The right to free speech is not, for example, a reward for “good behaviour.” Free speech is not a privilege available only if individuals say the “right thing” or if they are morally praiseworthy on some other dimensions — and this concept of unconditionality is equally valid for the economic and social rights which Canada has repeatedly ratified in international covenants.¹² But there is no system of international sanctions to ensure that a nation actually lives up to its human rights treaty obligations. As a consequence, although the short-run penalty for human rights violations for a particular government may be small, the long-run cost to society of undermining the bases of political legitimacy may be very much greater.

The Interdependence of Rights

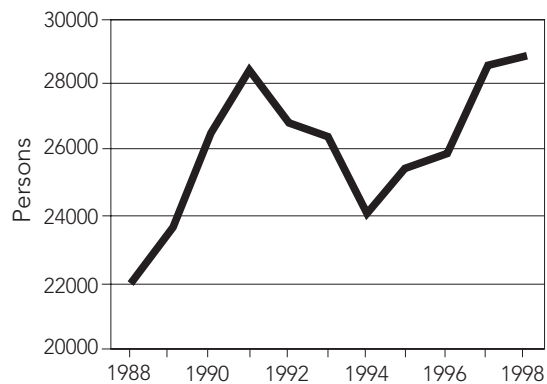
UN General Assembly Resolution 32/130 states: “The full realization of civil and political rights without the enjoyment

of economic, cultural and social rights is impossible.” In emphasizing that “all human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible and inter-dependent,” the Resolution of 1977 drew on the conception of effective citizenship in a democratic polity, and the rights which that requires. In voting for that resolution, and others, Canada agreed that human rights are essentially interdependent in their application.

The interdependence of rights arises in part from the fact that specific rights represent dimensions of a more basic underlying conception. For example, underlying the enumeration in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) of such rights as freedom of opinion and expression (Article 19), assembly and association (Article 20), and participation in government and elections (Article 21) is the conception that all individuals have the right to participate freely and responsibly in the political and social life of democratic communities. Arguably, Article 26 (which establishes the right to education) is also a prerequisite of the right of citizens to participate in an *informed* manner in a democratic polity. Each one of the enumerated rights is valuable in itself, but each is also part of a larger conception. As well, interdependence of rights stems partly from the practical realities of life. A right to privacy (Article 12) is in practice empty without a right to housing (Article 25). Privacy requires control over a definable personal space, which, in a market economy, generally requires the ownership of property or the income with which to rent property. As the US courts have noted, “One of the main rights attaching to property is the right to exclude others,”¹³ and the homeless have no such property rights. A legal “right

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CHART 1
Recent Trends in Homelessness in Toronto
Annual Hostel and Shelter Admissions
Total Individuals, 1988-1998



Source: City of Toronto, Community and Neighbourhood Services, Shelter, Housing and Support Division.
<http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/homelessness/index.htm>

to privacy,” or a constitutional right to protection against unreasonable search and seizure, is therefore meaningless unless an individual also has rights to a definable personal space. If there is an enforceable “right to shelter,”¹⁴ individuals may get such a space from the State, but in its absence they need to purchase ownership or leasehold rights to a personal space. The homeless do not have such a space.

Homelessness in Canada has been increasing in recent years (see Chart 1), and it is an issue with manifold implications for human rights. If a person does not have a home, where do they “live”? Where do they exercise their right to vote? Article 6 of Canada’s Constitution Act of 1982 may, for example, say that all Canadians have “the right to move to and take up residence in any province” — but that right is hollow for the homeless. As the UNHCHR notes:

With the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the

right to adequate housing joined the body of international, universally applicable and universally accepted human rights law. Since that time this right has been reaffirmed in a wide range of additional human rights instruments, each of which is relevant to distinct groups within society. No less than 12 different texts adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations explicitly recognize the right to adequate housing.... The indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights find clear expression through the right to housing. As recognized by several human rights bodies of the United Nations, the full enjoyment of such rights as the right to human dignity, the principle of non-discrimination, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to freedom to choose one’s residence, the right to freedom of association and expression (such as for tenants and other community-based groups), the right to security of person (in the case of forced or arbitrary evictions or other forms of harassment) and the right not to be subjected to arbitrary interference with one’s privacy, family, home or correspondence is indispensable for the right to adequate housing to be realized, possessed and maintained by all groups in society.

At the same time, having access to adequate, safe and secure housing substantially strengthens the likelihood of people being able to enjoy certain additional rights. Housing is a foundation from which other legal entitlements can be achieved. For example: the adequacy of one’s housing and living conditions is closely linked to the degree to which the right to environmental hygiene and the right to the highest attainable level of mental and physical health can be enjoyed. The World Health Organization has asserted that housing is the single most important

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environmental factor associated with disease conditions and higher mortality and morbidity rates.

This relationship or “permeability” between certain human rights and the right to adequate housing show clearly how central are the notions of indivisibility and interdependence to the full enjoyment of all rights.¹⁵

As an empirical matter, homelessness is the extreme end of a continuum. As Rossi (1991, p. 9) puts it, “literal homelessness is a condition of extreme deprivation; but it is only a step away from being precariously housed — having a tenuous hold on housing of the lowest quality. Like the literally homeless, those with precarious homes are extremely poor. ...extreme poverty is at the root of both literal homelessness and being precariously housed. Although there is clearly a line between those with homes and the literally homeless, that line is easily crossed. A life of extreme poverty is one of extreme vulnerability.” That vulnerability is addressed in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: “The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.”¹⁶

Measurement Difficulties

If social progress consists, first of all, in an increase in the number of citizens who actually enjoy all their basic human rights, how can one tell objectively when social progress occurs? How can one tell if a basic human right is not fully available to the citizens of a country?

Both constitutions and the international treaties which define human rights and commercial obligations are always phrased in fairly general terms. Their application depends on the availability and interpretation of more detailed specifications. Although there is a process (through the UNHCHR) for the more precise definition of basic human rights, and that process has produced some fairly detailed specifications, there is always some level of judgement necessary in applying those criteria to a concrete situation.

To take the example of housing, the UNHCHR has specified that the right to housing entails: “1. Legal security of tenure 2. Availability of services, materials and infrastructure 3. Affordable housing 4. Habitable housing 5. Accessible housing 6. Location 7. Culturally adequate housing.” Each aspect has been specified further — for example, affordability has been defined as implying that “personal or household costs associated with housing should be at such a level that the attainment and satisfaction of other basic needs are not threatened or compromised. Housing subsidies should be available for those unable to obtain affordable housing, and tenants should be protected from unreasonable rent levels or rent increases.”

Although human rights covenants offer, in principle, a guide for the construction of indices of social progress, there are important empirical problems in measuring the extent of their implementation. The interdependence and multidimensionality of basic human rights make it difficult to argue for a simple “box score” of the number of rights actually enjoyed by a specific person. Although on any given issue there is a court-like process in Geneva which can attempt to ascertain whether the specific situation of a particular

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individual represents an infringement of a specific right, that process is far too expensive and too difficult to replicate for general statistical purposes. If time trends for the population as a whole are to be discerned, some statistical rules of thumb must be agreed.

To measure, for example, whether a “right to housing” is in practice being honoured, statisticians need empirical criteria. In almost all instances, one can think of the fulfilment of a “right” as multidimensional. On some dimensions of adequacy one may observe discrete changes (e.g., the presence or absence of indoor plumbing or running water), but on others (e.g., floor area per household member) continuous variation is possible. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation determines the percentage of Canadians in core housing need using the criteria of adequacy (no major repairs needed), suitability (enough bedrooms for each person over age five) and affordability (costing less than 30 percent of before-tax household income). In 1996 approximately 18 percent of Canadians were in core housing need according to one or more of these criteria.¹⁷

Since housing adequacy differs on a number of dimensions (such as space and state of repair) and since minimum requirements differ among societies, the measurement of a right to housing has a cultural relativity problem similar to the measurement of poverty more generally. In the context of poverty, Sen (1992) comments: “*Relative* deprivation in the space of *incomes* can yield *absolute* deprivation in the space of *capabilities*. In a country that is generally rich, more income may be needed to buy enough commodities to achieve the *same social functioning*, such as ‘appearing in public without shame.’ The same applies to

the capability of ‘taking part the life of the community’ ” (p. 115).

To again use the example of the right to housing, although the UNHCHR specifies that this entails “sustainable access to clean drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation and washing facilities,” that definition is sufficiently broad to encompass the reality of sub-Saharan Africa and Canada. In the context of Tanzania or Nigeria, “adequacy” does not generally require a source of heat and might well be considered satisfied with outdoor plumbing and communal water taps. In all parts of Canada, people without heat will freeze in winter and indoor plumbing and running water would be considered minimal (indeed, in present-day Canada, houses without indoor plumbing or running water are legally substandard and can be ordered demolished).

The argument over how best to define basic social and economic rights has much in common with the debate over how best to measure poverty. In both cases, it is widely granted that the dividing line between “deprivation” and “non-deprivation” is imprecise — but this does not imply that the distinction is meaningless. In both cases, it is widely recognized that standards may change over time, and will often differ across countries.

In the poverty debate, defenders of the idea of an absolute poverty line argue that poverty is not a purely relative phenomenon and should be measured with reference to a “budget standard” — a specific list of commodities whose cost defines the poverty line. In the measurement of economic and social rights, defenders of a similar “absolute” conception of rights would presumably argue that similar methods should

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be used with respect to specific social and economic rights.¹⁸

An alternative conception of basic human rights would see them as absolute in the space of capabilities but relative in the space of resources. In this view, the norms which define housing adequacy or suitability depend implicitly on what is the “normal” state of repair and amount of space available to the population as a whole. “Housing need” would therefore be defined with specific reference to community housing standards.

As with many issues in economics, the real objective in the measurement of social and economic rights is reliable comparisons over time, or across jurisdictions, rather than absolute accuracy in estimating the level at a particular place or time. To take the example of homelessness and the right to housing, careful observers will agree that it is difficult to make accurate statistical observations on a transient population and to distinguish between precarious housing and homelessness. As well, there are people who choose to sleep in a cardboard box in the middle of winter — although for the marginally mentally ill the concept of “choice” can be problematic.

But there is nothing unusual about these sorts of measurement difficulties. One can compare them to difficulties in the measurement of unemployment, in which there are important statistical ambiguities and a continuing controversy over the percentage of “voluntarily” unemployed. Because of these measurement difficulties, the “headline number” on *the* unemployment rate is actually only one of a range of calculable unemployment rates, each corresponding to particular technical measurement choices.¹⁹ However, despite these difficulties the unem-

ployment rate remains a useful statistic as long as the same concept of unemployment is being compared, over time or across jurisdictions, and as long as there is no persuasive reason to believe that measurement difficulties or the percentage of “voluntarily” unemployed have suddenly changed. Likewise, comparability is the important issue in measurement of trends in rights.

This section has argued that international human rights agreements have distinct advantages over the reasoned introspection of economists and social philosophers as a guide to the measurement of social progress (i.e., formal approval by a democratic process, relatively clear specification and an institutional mechanism for interpretation in particular contexts). The interdependence of human rights and the difficulties of measuring them do, however, create significant empirical problems. To what extent can the human rights perspective be empirically embodied in operational measures of social progress?

INDICES OF SOCIAL PROGRESS

This essay has argued that Canada’s international legal obligations with respect to human rights should be used as a guide in identifying the “needs” of Canadians and determining whether they have been met. It has also argued that social progress consists of first meeting “needs” and then satisfying “wants.” To illustrate some of the divergences of existing measures from this standard, this section examines a few of the available quantitative indices of social progress, using the prism of human rights. No attempt is made to be comprehensive and cover all published indices, since Hagerty et al. (2001) have

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already covered the field (using a different set of criteria). Rather, this section is intended to be illustrative, and to indicate how a human rights perspective might be used as a criterion of social indicators.

Human Development Index (HDI)

The Foreword to the UNDP's *Human Development Report 2000* begins with this statement: "The goal is to achieve all human rights — civil, cultural, economic, political and social — for all people. Access to basic education, health care, shelter and employment is as critical to human freedom as political and civil rights are" (United Nations Development Program 2000, p. iii). However, basic human rights considerations play little role in the actual calculation of the Human Development Index. The HDI is calculated as the average of three components: (1) average life expectancy at birth; (2) the logarithm of adjusted per capita GDP (measured in Purchasing Power Parity adjusted US dollars); and (3) a combination of the adult literacy rate (two thirds weight) and the combined gross primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment ratio (one third).

Since Article 26 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right to education, the last component of the HDI might be seen as loosely linked. However, the enrolment number used in calculating the HDI is an aggregate of overall levels of education. Therefore it would be possible for the index to increase if some people were denied access to primary school — as long as others attended school for a sufficiently increased length of time. In general, indices which are constructed from underlying population averages will not necessarily reflect violations of human rights. Statistics such as the

logarithm of GDP per capita or average life expectancy are completely insensitive to the distribution of income and the distribution of life expectancy, and therefore cannot reflect the denial of basic rights to part of the population. Even if an increase in the average is attained at the cost of greater and extreme deprivation of some, the index will increase as long as the gains of the winners are sufficiently large to cover the losses of the disadvantaged.

Hence the HDI is, despite its introductory rhetoric, quite insensitive to denials of human rights. Although the HDI does not in fact reflect human rights issues, it is at least calculated in a straightforward and easily understood way. This ease of understanding undoubtedly aids its acceptance by the broader public.

Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP)

Ease of understanding of the underlying calculations is not a characteristic of the WISP. Hagerty et al. (2000, p. 47) summarize the WISP as a measure of "adequacy of social provision":

"Adequacy of social provision" refers to the changing capacity of governments to provide for the basic social, material, and other needs of the people living within their borders (e.g., for food, clothing, shelter, and access to at least basic health, education, and social services, etc.) (Estes 1984).

The ISP consists of 46 social indicators that have been subdivided into ten sub-indices: Education, Health Status, Women Status, Defense Effort, Economics, Demographic, Geography, Political Participation, Cultural Diversity, and Welfare Effort. All 46 indicators "are known to be valid indicators of social development; indeed, the majority of the

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ISP's indicators are employed regularly by other scholars of socioeconomic development" (Estes 1997, p. 3) ...Estes has subjected them to a two-stage varimax factor analysis in which each indicator and sub-index was analyzed for its relative contribution toward explaining the variance associated with changes in social progress over time. Exactly how this "changes in social progress over time" criterion for the factor analysis is defined is not specified in Estes's articles. To determine this...Estes (1988) must be consulted. Standardized scores of the component indicators then were multiplied by the factor loadings to create weighted sub-index scores which then were summed to obtain the "Weighted Index of Social Progress."

The WISP can therefore be seen as a measure that begins with a conception of social progress which is quite close to the human rights agenda but whose link to human rights — in speaking to an academic audience among whom technical sophistication in statistical methodology is highly valued — loses clarity of linkage to human rights. In a sense, the WISP is adding up many of the "right things" but in a way that is so unclear that one is unsure as to the answer.

Why does the WISP rank Canada so low, when the HDI ranks it so high? Since the HDI puts heavy weight on average life expectancy and overall educational delivery, Canada does well, and the logarithmic transformation of GDP per capita tends to scale down the US advantage on that dimension. The WISP, however, also considers such issues as the relative position of women and the extent of welfare state policy effort, on which Canada does much more poorly in comparative terms. Hence, the probable rea-

son for Canada's fall from first (HDI) to 31st (WISP) in international ranking is the greater breadth of coverage of the WISP — but the complexity of the WISP calculation prevents a clear comparison.

Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI)

However, although the WISP is very complicated in its methodology, simple addition is not a good solution if one adds up things unrelated to human rights. As Sharpe (1999) argues: "The GPI can be broadly split into two blocks: a measure of current economic welfare and a measure of sustainable economic development. Elements of current economic welfare consist of consumer spending, government spending, nonmarket production and leisure, and external factors. Sustainable economic development includes depletion of natural resources [non-renewable energy and farmland]; net investment in produced business fixed assets; net foreign lending and borrowing; long-term environmental damage [greenhouse effect and ozone depletion]; and long-term ecological damage resulting from loss of wetlands and harvesting of old-growth forests."

Viewed through the prism of basic human rights, since the measures of current economic welfare included in the GPI consist of economy-wide aggregates (such as total consumer spending or total change in leisure time), the GPI is insensitive to any event which causes deprivation of individual human rights as long as the gains of the winners are larger than the losses of the losers. In particular, as the history of the US income distribution from 1980 to 1995 illustrates, average consumer spending and extreme deprivation can easily rise at the same time if the gains of the very affluent are larger than the losses of the poor.

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Those parts of the GPI which refer to environmental issues are potentially relevant for a measure of environmental progress. The international environmental commitments which Canada has made to other nations and the global community (e.g., in Kyoto) are in principle relevant to defining environmental progress, in the way that the human rights commitments of Canada are relevant to social progress. In practice, however, the environmental component of the GPI is heavily weighted to such issues as the cutting of old-growth forests and the preservation of wetlands. Although some environmental issues (such as depletion of the ozone layer and the rising risk of skin cancer) concern the health and well-being of humans, others are of a quite different dimensionality. Protection of old-growth forests may be of symbolic, ecological or cultural value, but it does not protect human well-being or human rights in the sense of human rights protocols. Most of the environmental component in the GPI is thus not relevant for a human rights-based approach to social progress.²⁰

In short, the GPI is not linked in any discernible way to social progress, as interpreted from a human rights perspective.

Index of Economic Well-Being (IEWB)

In a series of papers, Osberg (1985) and Osberg and Sharpe (1999, 2000) outline a methodology for calculating an index of economic well-being (IEWB), which is a weighted average of measures of per capita consumption, aggregate accumulation, income distribution and insecurity. Trends in the index for Canada in the 1990s and their relationship to economic performance are discussed in the paper by Osberg and Sharpe

later in this volume. As the name indicates, the index is intended as a measure of economic well-being only, and does not pretend to indicate overall social progress, which is a broader concept. Since the index is calculated as a simple weighted average of four components, the authors stress that observers who differ in their values can choose the relative emphasis they wish to place on (for example) income distribution, compared to trends in average consumption. Most of the work involved in construction of the index arises in attempting to get a better measure of trends in aggregate accumulation or average consumption than is available for the System of National Accounts. GDP statistics do not include consideration of many issues (like trends in leisure time, life expectancy or economies of scale in household consumption) which affect the utility individuals derive from consumption and ignore the accumulation or dissipation of real wealth in the form of human capital, the environment or research and development — but the IEWB does include these items.

The components of the IEWB that are based on societal aggregates (i.e., average consumption or total wealth accumulation) are insensitive to human rights issues in the same way that the GPI and the HDI are. However, the IEWB is clearly related to the human rights agenda in its insecurity component, which is explicitly based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25 of which states: “1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment,

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sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

The insecurity component of the index is explicitly based on the risks of unemployment, sickness, “widowhood” and old age. The income distribution component (which is a weighted average of aggregate inequality and poverty measures) allows for some variation in the relative emphasis on inequality among “middle class” persons or poverty (which is a summative index of the named items of food, clothing and housing identified in Article 25). Since the IEWB, by construction, lets observers select the weights they personally consider appropriate, it is open to a human rights emphasis in a way that many other indices are not.

Furthermore, in providing a fuller measure of economic well-being, the IEWB offers a way of measuring progress in the satisfaction of “wants,” should Canadian society get to the point where “needs” are satisfied. Although it may not be for a while, one can at least hope that Canada will be in the position, at some point in the future, where all the fundamental social and economic human rights are actually the lived experience of all Canadians. At that point, improvements in average consumption and accumulation will become relevant for a measure of social progress.

CONCLUSION

This essay has used the basic human right to housing as an example of Canada’s international commitment to a set of criteria that define minimal citizenship rights — but the human rights agenda is clearly much

broader.²¹ In examining what a human rights agenda might bring to the assessment of social progress, the essay has also examined a number of existing indices of social progress through the prism of a human rights perspective. The general moral is threefold: (1) data based on population means or totals cannot reveal the denial of rights to a minority; (2) social progress is about human outcomes, and is thus distinct from many environmental issues; and (3) excess complexity in data-processing can obscure the meaning of any underlying link to human rights.

However, existing indices are necessarily based on whatever statistics happen, now, to be gathered by statistical agencies. In principle, statistical agencies could collect new types of data, and obtaining reliable statistics on homelessness is an example of the type of data-gathering initiative that a human rights perspective on social progress would suggest. However, new data are not always necessary. In some instances, one may have good grounds for believing that proxy measures are available now and are a reliable guide to rights attainment. For example, the right to “adequate food, clothing and housing” is highly likely to be satisfied for the non-poor — so existing statistical sources on poverty trends may well suffice. In other instances, closer attention to existing data may be all that is required — for example, the issue of whether the “right to vote” is actually delivered can be checked by using census records to examine the percentage of Canadians who are not on the voters list.

In constructing summary statistics (as in an index of social progress) one needs to be clear about: (1) the population whose outcomes are relevant; (2) the outcomes, and their measures, that are being considered;

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and (3) the aggregation function that sums across outcomes and individuals. This essay has started from the point of view that the relevant population is all the residents of a country. It has proposed that “needs” be given priority over “wants” and that the list of outcomes that are considered “needs” be drawn from the international covenants on basic human rights that a country has democratically agreed to. Adding up the lack of a particular basic human right involves a fairly straightforward calculation of the rate of non-satisfaction. A much more difficult issue is whether and how to aggregate across different outcomes. For the moment, however, it would represent significant progress in understanding if statistical agencies were to publish data on the percentage of the Canadian population who now enjoy each of the fundamental human rights which Canada has promised to deliver.

NOTES

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1 The UNDP Human Development Index was .935 in Canada, .934 in Norway and .929 in both

the United States and Australia. See United Nations Development Program (2000, p. 178).

2 The WISP ranking scored Canada at 77.8, Hong Kong at 77.7 and the United States at 79.9. By contrast, the top five countries were Denmark (98.4), Norway (95.6), Austria (93.2), Sweden (93.1) and France (91.9). See http://caster.ssw.upenn.edu/~restes/praxis/tab_3.htm

3 The ICESCR was ratified by Canada on 19 May 1976. A complete listing of human rights protocols can be obtained at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/issecon.htm>

4 In the Canada of 1901, social norms included widespread racism, sexism and homophobia — women did not yet have the vote, some legislation (e.g., on immigration) was quite explicitly racist and homosexual relations were illegal. The majority of Canadians in 2001 would count the degree of demise of such norms as part of the social progress of the past century — and a human rights perspective would concur.

5 Hayek (1944/1972) remains a classic statement of the individualist position. It argues (pp. 64-65) that no “common ethical code” exists that could define the “social goal” of economic activity.

6 For economists, Rawls is probably most familiar for his maxi-min criterion of distributive social justice — that social progress should be judged by the increase in well-being of the least advantaged. It is worth stressing that Rawls himself put this as a secondary priority. He saw a just society as incorporating two principles — the equal right of all citizens to basic liberties (primary goods) and a maxi-min criterion of distributive justice with respect to income. As he put it: “The first principle has priority over the second, so that all citizens are assured the equal basic liberties; similarly part (b) of the second principle (i.e. fair equality of opportunity) has priority

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- over part (a) (i.e. the maxi-min principle)” (Rawls 1982, p. 162).
- 7 Historically, some societies have emphasized collective goals — for example, public discourse in the United States in the 1800s often referred to a national “Manifest Destiny” and in China today reunification is seen as an issue that is unaffected by the wishes of the individuals actually living in Hong Kong or Taiwan. This essay does not follow that tradition.
 - 8 As an example, just to make the point, it could be argued that humans need a little beauty in their lives, at least as much as they need religion. (After all, the aesthetic impulse in humanity has been evident since the earliest days, often closely associated with religion.) If an argument for a “right to beauty” were to be made (and, one must hasten to add, it has *not* been made by any of the social philosophers cited in this article) it might or might not be persuasive to other philosophers. However, the process of philosophical discourse offers no clear way of resolving arguments with finality, in a specific context.
 - 9 See, for example, the use of “etc.” in Sen (1999).
 - 10 Fact Sheet #21, *The Human Right to Adequate Housing*. Available: www.unhchr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs21.htm
 - 11 A listing of Canada’s international human rights obligations, and the date of ratification, can be obtained at www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf.
 - 12 While it was in force, the Canada Assistance Plan reflected this unconditionality of human rights in making need the sole criterion for assistance. However, the introduction of the CHST in 1996 allowed provinces to make social assistance payments conditional, implying that the “undeserving” (however defined by the local legislature) have no right to assistance when in need, or as defined under the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25.
 - 13 The Connecticut Supreme Court, in the matter of *Connecticut vs. Mooney*, on the appeal of a murder conviction which turned on evidence seized from the belongings of a homeless person, without benefit of search warrant.
 - 14 Despite Canada’s signature on numerous human rights documents, there is no such enforceable right to housing in Canada, in contravention of the fact that international law obliges states to act to give effect to their treaty commitments. The UN does note that: “Three phrases are particularly important for understanding the obligations of Governments to realize fully the rights recognized in the Covenant, including the right to adequate housing: (a) ‘undertakes to take steps . . . by all appropriate means’; (b) ‘to the maximum of its available resources’; and (c) ‘to achieve progressively’.” None seem able to excuse Canada’s inaction (indeed backsliding, in the funding of low-income housing).
 - 15 Fact Sheet #21, *The Human Right to Adequate Housing*. Available: www.unhchr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs21.htm. For links to websites on homelessness see www.canadiansocialresearch.net/homeless.htm
 - 16 Hayek (1944/1972, p. 133) distinguished between security in the sense of “certainty of a given minimum of sustenance for all” and “security of a given standard of life.” Writing in 1944, when per capita real GDP in Canada was 32.5 percent of its level in 2000, he stated: “There is no reason why in a society which has reached the general level of wealth which ours has attained the first kind of security should not be guaranteed to all without endangering general freedom.”
 - 17 See “Research Highlights” Issue 55-1. Available at: www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/Research Brandolini and D’Alessio (2000) use Italian data to illustrate how measurement of deprivation depends, to some extent, on the relative weight of attributes in construction of a measure of housing deprivation.
 - 18 In Australia the “budget standard” method of measuring poverty has dominated public debate,

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partly because it was, historically, closely linked to their “wages awards” system of industrial relations. As a consequence, it is probably the world’s most highly developed. Focus-group, polling and expenditure data are used to gauge explicitly social norms. The “low cost standard” aims at allowing “social and economic participation consistent with community standards” — which is arguably the norm implicit in UN human rights covenants. The resulting estimates are in practice approximately 70 to 75 percent of the median living standard; see Saunders (1998, pp. 14-16). Andrew Sharpe has suggested that if the incomes of the poorest remain unchanged while rising incomes among the affluent produce a greater demand for housing, rising rents may imply that homelessness increases as housing becomes unaffordable. In this case, the cost of purchasing a constant amount of shelter depends on the trend in average incomes.

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- 19 For example, the Canadian Labour Force Survey counts as unemployed those jobless people who looked for work in the last month. If job search in the last two weeks were the criterion, fewer people would qualify as unemployed and the measured unemployment rate would be lower. Alternatively, a longer reference period would increase the measured unemployment rate. Choosing a reference period of two, four or six weeks is essentially arbitrary, and measurement choices do not affect the actual reality of labour markets — but since what we really want to do is make unemployment comparisons, the crucial issue is standardization of measurement.
- 20 Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes “the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” and specifically mentions “The improvement of all aspects of environmental and industrial hygiene.” Environmental degradation

that affects the personal health of humans can therefore be seen as a human rights issue — but *not* issues that affect “the environment” in some more general sense.

- 21 For example, by signing the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 7), Canada also committed to ensuring: “(a) Remuneration which provides all workers, as a minimum, with: (i) Fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind, in particular women being guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal work; (ii) A decent living for themselves and their families in accordance with the provisions of the present Covenant.”

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