

# Panel records progress

## Jeff Hearn writes about the work of the International Panel on Social Progress

The International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) was conceived around 2012 and early 2013 as a large independent non-governmental social science operation, paralleling in some ways the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change. The idea was discussed at the Think Global conference in Paris in May 2013 (<http://bit.ly/2QG8ifd>), and then officially started in the summer of 2014, with the first meetings of the steering committee in New York, and of the scientific council in Paris in January 2015. The key leaders of this process have been Marc Fleurbaey, Princeton, and Olivier Bouin, Fondation Réseau Français des Instituts D'études Avancées, with the support of many leading social scientists such as Amartya Sen, Helga Nowotny, Ravi Kanbur and Elisa Reis.

The overall aim of the project has been to: produce comprehensive coverage of the dimensions of social progress; make up-to-date social science more accessible and relevant; feed social actors and citizens, including, but not only, governments, with ideas about possible futures; influence public debates; and increase interest in social justice and a long-term future-orientated perspective among scholars.

It was in April 2015 that I received an invitation to what was the first large-scale author congress, with up to 200 leading social scientists from across the world, held in August 2015 in Istanbul. More precisely, the invitation was to join one of its 24 (now 22) sub-groups or chapters, entitled 'Pluralizing family, gender, sexuality'. That sounded very interesting, and so I agreed. As it happens, between the invitation and the event, 'Pluralizing family, gender, sexuality' became renamed as 'Pluralization of families'. This meant for some a rejigging of who was in which sub-group, and eventually I ended up in one of the two concluding chapters, 'The multiple directions of social progress: ways forward', as well as working collectively on gender dimensions across the chapters. A second large congress was held in Lisbon in January 2017, while chapter teams have also held many further meetings and collective discussions themselves.

It is difficult to specify the exact number of social scientists who have been involved. There are over 282 authors, including contributing authors. Adding in various



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committee and scientific board members, the total goes up to about 350. Initially, at least, political scientists made up about a quarter of the authors, with sociologists and economists each providing just under a fifth, and the remainder from other social sciences, with a few from humanities. A majority was from Europe and North America, along with a substantial minority from across the globe, and about 60% were identified as male.

Key IPSP principles have included: working in a bottom-up, peer-based collegial way; having non-binding support and funding from around 50 partner funders, universities and other institutions independent from governments, lobbyists and so on; and giving a high value to pluri-disciplinary approaches and stakeholder feedback. The authors were encouraged to handle disagreements with humility – by acknowledging the limits of expertise – and with respect, and to agree to disagree. IPSP has also aimed to be conditionally prescriptive: 'if your objective is this, then the best way is that'. Key elements of social progress are identified as: equal dignity, basic rights, democracy, the rule of law, pluralism, well-being, freedom, non-alienation, solidarity, esteem and recognition, cultural goods, environmental values, distributive justice, transparency, and accountability.

The outcome of this work has been three large collective volumes, *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel on Social Progress*, along with a multi-authored single volume, *A Manifesto for Social Progress: Ideas for a Better Society*, all from Cambridge University Press. IPSP authors are also active in many fora, such as the T20 (Germany 2017, Argentina 2018), The Conversation, journal special issues, and a docu-film: [www.instagram.com/a\\_new\\_society](http://www.instagram.com/a_new_society)

Some idea of the spectrum of concerns can be seen from the broad chapters in the three volumes. Volume 1, Socio-economic Transformations: social trends and new geographies; social progress: a compass; economic inequality; economic growth, human development, welfare; cities; markets, finance, corporations; future of work; social justice, wellbeing, economic organisation.

Volume 2, Political Regulation, Governance, and Societal Transformations: paradoxes of democracy and rule of law; violence, wars, peace, security; international organisations, technologies of governance; governing capital, labour and nature; and media and communications.

Volume 3, Transformations in Values, Norms, Cultures: cultural change; religions; pluralization of families; global health; education; belonging; multiple directions of social progress; the contribution of the social sciences to policy and institutional change.

For each topic, the current situation, historical and prospective trends, directions of change inspired by social justice, and drivers and barriers for such change are examined. Cross-cutting topics are: science, technology and innovation; globalisation; social movements; health; and gender.

Overall, the IPSP report has sought to gather state-of-the-art knowledge about the possibilities for structural social change, and to synthesise knowledge on the principles, possibilities and methods for improving the main societal institutions. Many recommendations are made, for example from the penultimate chapter, on: overcoming obstacles to sustainable social progress; expanding non-capitalist forms of market activity and the role of the state or community in meeting human needs; building a vibrant co-operative market sector; converting capitalist firms into co-operatives and worker take-overs; democratising large capitalist corporations; introducing unconditional basic income and universal care services; naming and changing the powerful and the privileged in institutions and policy; building transnational, inter-organisational alliances for policy development with learning from the global South; extending equality agendas into 'unmarked' and transnational policy arenas; democratising democracy; and using participatory budgeting. Discussions on a new cycle of IPSP are due to begin soon.

– Jeff Hearn is Professor of Sociology, University of Huddersfield; his most recent book (co-edited) is *Engaging Youth in Activism, Research and Pedagogical Praxis*, Routledge, 2018.