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EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN BELGIUM

(Received 30 May, 1979)

ABSTRACT. This paper deals with the evaluation of social welfare inequalities in order to establish a qualitative growth model for Flanders. As a base for the enquiry, quantitative, objective result indicators are chosen. The various quantified components are dealt with separately and different methods of aggregation are discussed. 32 indicators are selected on the basis of a specific definition of social welfare and taking account of the difficulties of collecting certain information. The indicators are aggregated in three different ways and in two stages: first per component for each region and secondly per region. The results show that major variations in the components are weakened by the aggregation and further that the different aggregation methods lead to only small differences. As a general conclusion one can speak of a regional homogeneity in Belgium.

0. INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to give a short synthesis of an enquiry to establish a qualitative growth model for Flanders. It is mainly based upon the development of an explanatory model of social welfare inequalities in the various regions of Belgium, and it intends to give a satisfactory picture of how well or badly the nation is dealing with its problems.¹

This study only deals with the problems connected with the evaluation of social welfare inequalities; this can be divided into 4 parts:

(1) A description of the theoretical approach.
(2) The methodological problems encountered in the evaluation.
(3) The selection of indicators.
(4) The results of the evaluation and their interpretation.

1. THE THEORETICAL APPROACH

As welfare cannot strictly speaking be quantified, we would prefer to use the term 'social welfare'. This in itself is a rather misleading term, because there are only a few aspects which can in fact be quantified. Neither can we completely take over the definition of 'social indicators' given in Toward a social

Social Indicators Research 8 (1980) 311–326. 0303-8300/80/0083-0311$01.60
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report', because it implies that social welfare is quantifiable. However, this definition does contain the core of the thinking process of this enquiry: the basic difference between 'means' and 'results' indicators can indeed be formulated clearly; this, however, is often neglected in publications dealing with the quality of life. One of the most typical examples of this can be found in attempts at evaluation of the health of a population, where more often attention is paid to the existence of a medical infrastructure rather than to its use.

Literature on this subject identifies two fundamental — though different — approach models. We shall call the first 'subjective' and the second 'objective'. The subjective approach means that enquiries are made amongst a certain number of people. Following these enquiries, scales are drawn up, based on the level of satisfaction of the people questioned in relation to their actual situation in society.

This approach is fundamentally different from the objective approach, which tries to give a general picture of social welfare or of quality of life, on the basis of concrete information (mostly official statistics).

Experience gained from both of these methods shows that the 'subjective' approach, as it is generally applied, is far too superficial. We consequently share Ackoff's criticism saying:

I constructed measures of both satisfaction with one's current situation and of progress toward an ideal. But these measures are sufficiently difficult to apply to make it unfeasable to apply them to a large enough sample of individuals over a large enough sample of their states to produce useful statistics, representative of a society.

This does not mean, however, that we want to over-estimate the value of the 'objective' approach, but the indicators do produce factual information, which — if adequately analyzed — create a source of information within a certain social and political framework.

The enquiry is therefore concerted as follows: on the basis of 'objective result indicators' we will try to express the social welfare of the different regions of Belgium in quantitative terms.

2. METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Two criteria should be taken into consideration when selecting the indicators:

(a) to give the most complete picture of the component to be quantified;

(b) to evaluate the smallest possible number of factors that have no connection with the components.