In project collaboration with
Fondazione Eurispes Roma

International Association on Social Quality
Bredeweg 20
1098 BR, Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Ph +31629011882
Email info@socialquality.org
RABO-bank: NL.47 RABO 01427.67.10
IBAN NL 47 RABO 01427.67.107
KvK 41216943
www.socialquality.org

Basic Principles of the Social Quality Perspective:

its' configuration of four frameworks as a starting point for new global political strategies?

by the IASQ Board, December 2024

The first (conceptual) framework as point of departure

The International Association on Social Quality (IASQ) aims the coming years to deepen the social quality theory, its methodology and policy application – together called the 'social quality perspective'. The contemporary policy challenge is how to understand current transformations in the (thematic approached) fields of (i) communication technologies, (ii) welfare in the broadest sense of the word, (iii) urbanization, and (iv) sustainability. Especially, how to understand reciprocal processes between these four fields. Which perspective should be applied for making way for those processes with which to stimulate human dignity all over the world?

The contemporary divide of the fragmented kaleidoscope parts of human sciences prevents the required understanding. The purpose of 'social quality perspective' is to contribute for going beyond this gradually undermining divide. From the side of the United Nations the harmfulness of this has already been pointed out some years ago.

A condition is to reach a consensus on our understanding of the essence of 'people'. It follows that therefore a main challenge remains the further substantiation of the concept of 'the social', in both its ontological as epistemological meaning. In the light of the transformations in the first and the fourth thematic field (see above) this discourse ends with reference to this. It regards the ***first (conceptual) framework***, which will pave the way for the understanding of all three other frameworks (see below). At this stage, 'the social' is conceptualized as the outcome of the dialectic between processes leading to forms of self-realization of people and processes leading to formations of collective identities. This refers to an affinity with Aristotelian principles. Other approaches (see below) have more affinity with Epicurean principles. With this in mind, 'social quality' has finally been defined as "*the extent to which people are able to participate in the dynamics of soci(et)al relationships under conditions that enhance their well-being, capacity and individual potential*. It refers to a certain understanding of 'the social' as the outcome of productive and reproductive interrelationships of people. But this is still too on-sided anthropocentric and requires further deepening.

Presentation of the issue on 'social quality' of daily circumstances in 1997

With the continued commitment from the side of the University of Sheffield (UK) since the mid1990s, academics in Europe (economists, political scientists, jurists, sociologists, social policy, public health and urban oriented scientists) started the development of the social quality theory and its policy application with the Amsterdam Declaration on Social Quality, namely: *"Respect for the fundamental human dignity of all citizens requires us to declare that we do not want to see growing numbers of beggars, tramps and homeless in the cities of Europe…. who have only limited access to health care and other welfare provisions. These and many other negative indicators demonstrate the current inadequacy of Europe to provide 'social quality' for all its citizens*." (Declaration June 1997, website/publications/declaration).The overarching understanding of the challenge of sustainability had not yet been properly understood by scholars, dedicated to human sciences (and social quality) at that time.

The analytical framework

With support of the European Commission, the first principles of the conceptual framework could be elaborated in the ***second book***, published in 2001. It became the point of departure of the ***second (analytical) framework*** as guideline for empirical research, to be applied first in the European Union.

This research concerned first the indicators of the conditional factors of daily circumstances, based on the theoretical reflection on 'the social' at that time. In other words, without an idea about the third and fourth framework (see below). But thanks to more understanding of the functioning of processes in four societal dimensions (see below), it can be established, that the second framework implies the analyses of the consequences of processes in the four societal dimensions (see the third framework below) for:

- The constitutional or subjective factors of life and its ***profiles*** as instruments to understand changes of : personal security, social recognition, social responsibility, personal capacities and eco-conscience, due to processes in the four dimensions.
- The conditional or objective factors of life and its ***indicators*** as instruments to determine the consequences of changes: socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, social empowerment and eco-reality.
- The normative or ethical factors of life and its ***criteria*** as instruments to judge the outcomes of the link between the changed constitutional and conditional factors: social justice and equity, solidarity, equal value, human dignity and eco- equilibrium.

In this case, the used adjective 'social' is in theoretical sense connected with the noun 'the social' , thus as a consequence of the first framework. All eco-oriented factors are added after theorizing the challenge of sustainability from a social quality perspective since the 2012s (see below).

Soon after the broad indicators' research in Europe, followed many academics in Japan, Taiwan, Chinese Republic, India, Thailand, South Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Australia and Africa with this empirical research. Also in Southeast Asia seven international conferences are dedicated to this aspect of the social quality perspective. A crucial topic soon came to the surface, namely the difference between this perspective and (i) 'social capital', (ii) 'social development', (iii) 'social harmony',
(iv) 'quality of life', (v) 'human security', (vi) 'capability' In the first approaches the used adjective 'social' lacks a theoretical substantiation and in all approaches human beings appear as a self-evident entity. The explicit or implicit used adjective 'social' needs no explanation and refers seemingly to expressions of human interrelationships. A few Working Papers of the IASQ are dedicated to this issue.

The field of sustainability and the procedural framework

In the discourse on overall sustainability, from the side of the UN its - in the meantime iconic - Committee of Harlem Brundtland, Amartya Sen and others explained in a 1987-Report, that sustainability has an economic, a social and an environmental dimension or pillar. In 2010, a Dutch think tank started with support of the International Institute for Social Studies (IISS) in the Hague - to comment this Report from a social quality perspective. It presented a four dimensional alternative.

It explained in its Working Paper 11, published in 2012, to go beyond "*the confused and inadequate understanding of the 'social' dimension of sustainability. It arises from an inconsistent 'black box' thinking. Therefore this think-tank will also deliver an alternative to traditional based economic GDP-indicators, necessary for improving the quality of sustainability on a day-today basis. The incessant use of the adjective of 'social' as a black box is not merely a minor blemish but a fundamental root problem. It brings about a misunderstanding of well-being, as well as societal dynamics and also what could be effective policy responses. GDP-indicators measure the state-of- affairs of a small aspect of human existence. Used in isolation and as evidence sui generis they have devastating consequences."* (website/publications/ Working Papers, p-4). The three dimensional approach also ignores the all-pervading sociopolitical-legal dimension, and the influential sociocultural-welfare dimension, as well as the reciprocity between these dimensions.

Regarding the social quality theory at that time, this comment resulted into the recognition of the ***third (procedural) framework,*** underlying also the overall sustainability, namely the four-dimensional distinction, which became a new step for social quality scholars. The so-called 'social dimension' is changed below into the second and third dimension:

- the socioeconomic and financial dimension,
- the sociopolitical and legal dimension,
- the sociocultural and welfare dimension,
- and the socioenvironmental and ecological dimension.

Extra incentives for the application of the procedural framework

During the second part of the second decade a particular start is made – next to the incentives for empirical oriented social quality research on the base of the analytical framework (first its indicators) – with the application of the four dimensional approach. This resulted into the preparation and publication of the ***third sq-book*** for developing new guidelines, published in 2012 (and incorporating the outcomes of the above mentioned think-tank). With this in mind, an extra stimulus for also the four dimensional approach came from the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in 2015. This resulted into Working Paper 17/b (website/publications/Working Papers), published in 2019.

In the Foreword explained is, that: "*The present working paper is an outcome of a dialogue between scholars from Ukraine and scholars from member states of the European Union. The initiative for this in fact globally oriented dialogue has come from the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Its question formulated at the end of 2015 was, if – with support from the academic world connected with the IASQ – its evolving social quality perspective could be applied in this country, being in a state of transition. This led to the start of the previous International Joint Research Project Ukraine..*

This invitation particularly stimulated social quality scholars – next to (1) the application to societal processes in Ukraine by the IISS in The Hague - to focus the four dimensional approach on new themes as: (2) the sociopolitical and socioeconomic based destruction of forests by the Griffith University, (3) the socioeconomic caused pollution of oceans, causing the 'plastic soup' with support of the Plastic Soup Foundation, and (4) or the start and first outcomes of the platform of the BRICS-member states by Eurispes. All of these topics and others are published in the International Journal of Social Quality (IJSQ). Important is to notice first, that already in 1999 a start is made with the production of the European Journal of Social Quality, thanks to scholars of the Kingston University of London. Berghahn Books/ Journals of New York was the publisher After seven years this journal is changed into the International Journal of Social Quality as its successor, and also published by Berghahn. This happened with an enthusiastic support of the Zhejiang University in China and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Thanks to its actual 'free access' status, this journal may function as an instrument to pave the way for the anchorage of national based social quality networks. Second, noticed should be that the former European Journal was dedicated to aspects of the 'field of welfare' (as employment, public health, ageing, citizenship, cultural provisions) but without at that time a broader theoretical and practical context. This third framework opened new horizons.

The need to add a policy framework.

The application of the four dimensional approach proved after some time to be a bridge for connecting insight about daily life in communities - on the basis of the analytical framework, see above - with the overarching societal processes resulting into changes of the nature of the four thematic fields as proposed subject of the policy framework. An argument for the fourth framework is derived from the increasing outcomes of natural science analyses about worldwide drastic global ecological changes. They cause the unavoidable necessity to understand these outcomes, because they touch unrelenting the heart of the matter of societal processes. Therefore, in a fairly embryonic sense, already in Working Paper 17/b a proposal is formulated to add the ***fourth (policy) framework.*** Suggested is that the application of the four dimensional approach stimulates as well as also the importance for a new understanding of the meaning of a comprehensive approach of significant thematic fields because the global ecological changes, but also and at the same time for understanding the intrinsic relationships of processes in and between the thematic fields and delivering herewith a better context of daily circumstances.

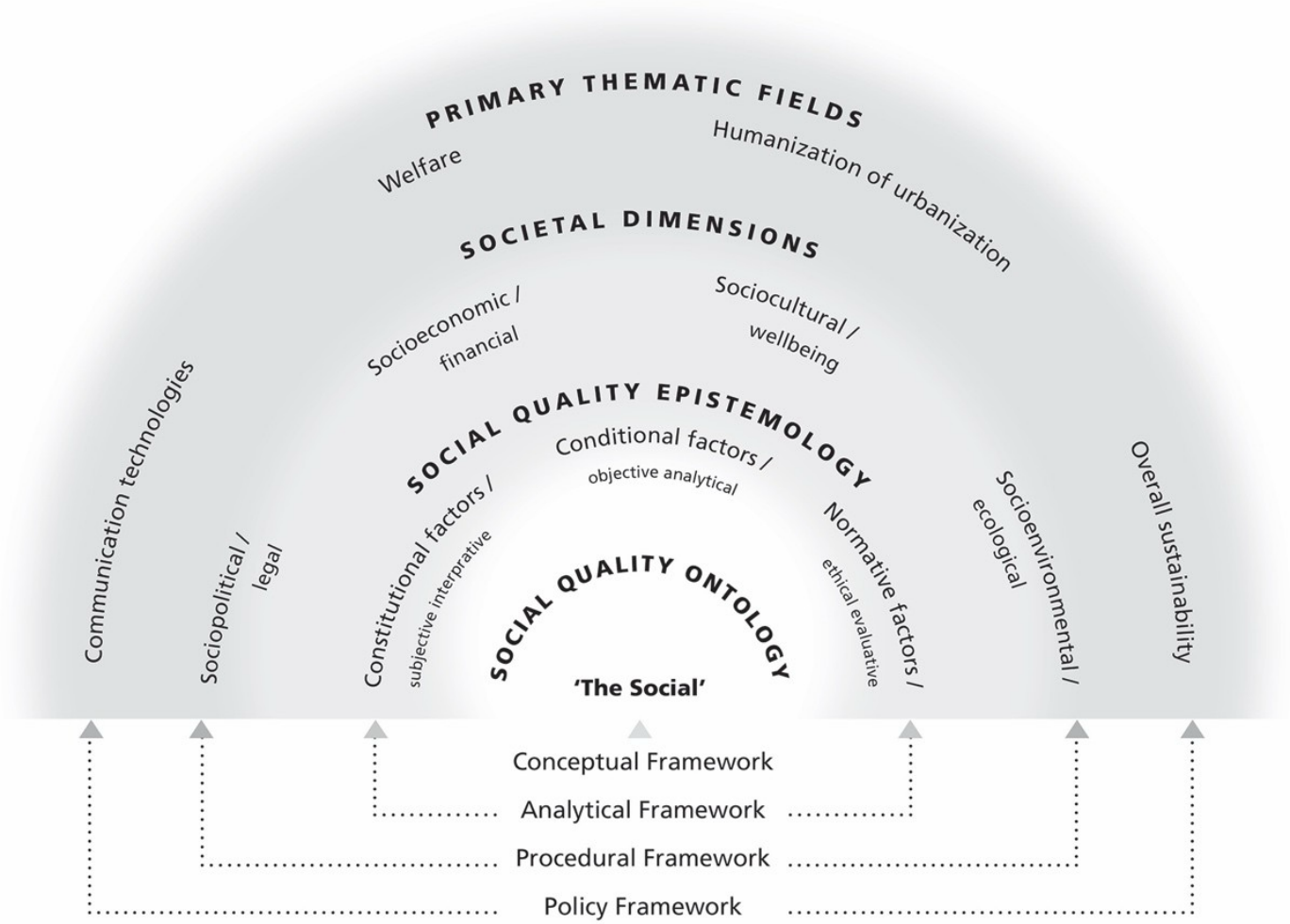
This again implies the enhancing of the conceptual, as well as the analytical framework. A start is made with the study, published in 2023 in Working Paper 20 (website/publications/working papers). In this working paper, not only the concept of 'the social' is deepened thanks to the past work, but also an accent is given to four thematic fields, namely:

- the field of the new communication technologies,
- the field of welfare in the broadest sense of the word,
- the field of the humanization of urbanization,
- the field of overall sustainability.

A new perspective for going beyond traditional social development and sustainability thinking?

As argued, with the recent attention on this policy framework, the previous dedication to the analytical framework requires to be situated on a higher theoretical level in order to be made useful for analyses related to each thematic field and their mutual influences. This paves the way for a comprehensive understanding of actual societal changes. A preliminary example is given in the double themed issue on the societal impacts of the COVID pandemic in twelve countries all over the world (IJSQ, Volume 11 (1&2), 2021). In Working Paper 20 the whole of this configuration of frameworks has been further elaborated. If the arguments are plausible, that the traditional three dimensional approach to ***overall sustainability*** does not contribute to understanding of fundamental environmental/ecological processes, and that the applied concept of ***social development*** by circles in the United Nations - because of a similar reasoning
- also lacks a theoretical substantiation, required is a new approach. The proposed renewal of political strategies to enhance and deepen the mutual fertilization of social development and the overall sustainability are not defensible. This lack causes stagnation and cannot stimulate a change of the existing non-cooperation between natural and human sciences and the fragmentation within the human sciences as condition for the success of these strategies. This is discussed in a study published in the IJSQ (Volume 10 (1), 2020). Needed is a new perspective.

SOCIAL QUALITY CONFIGURATION OF FRAMEWORKS
ANNO DECEMBER 2023



The ontology of 'the social'
refers to the dialectical between processes of self-realization of people and the formation of collective identities. Processes through which both individual humans and societal formations evolve

The always changing outcomes of these processes
concern the productive and the reproductive interrelationships of human beings concretized in structures, practices and conventions

Primary orientation of social quality is
the extent to which humans are able to participate in societal relationships as outcomes of these processes under conditions which enhance their welfare, wellbeing and potential.

The application and deepening of the configuration. The field of urbanization as example and the plea to change course

In the Introduction of Working Paper 20, argued is, that one of the goals of this study is to present an alternative approach, grounded in a further philosophical-theoretical deepening of also 'the social'. The resulting configuration of four frameworks aims to understand the complex nature of today's global challenges, such as the (1) transformation of communication technologies, (2) increasing huge scale production and financial systems and herewith related sociocultural upheavals, (3) contemporary unbridled urban politics and the need for humanization of urban and rural relationships, as well as the cancellation of slumps on many continents, and (4) developing new strategies to cope with ecological transformations: "*This will be a theoretical search, based on thirty years of social quality-oriented studies, to offer suggestions for how readers [of this Working Paper] can more sharply address this complexity (….) With this study for deepening our understanding of 'the social,' we aim to initiate a global dialogue on developing an adequate theoretical perspective to thoroughly address these challenges, bridge scientific divides, and move beyond current political animosities and tensions.*"

At the end of past year, PAGUS – a platform of urban experts from all over the world and related with also social quality networks – published a ***Manifesto*** to argue for a new political-strategic change. A part of this manifesto says: *"As academics, experts, and researchers worldwide, we invite the global range of authorities and organizations to stimulate and support all initiatives that are focused on addressing the severe challenges of our time, especially concerning the urbanization issues. We regard it as vital to mitigate the impacts resulting from the deepening climate change and to face the challenge of improving the overall living conditions for humankind on planet Earth (.) The contemporary, one-sided, emphasis on technical and economic solutions, to address issues of urbanization, requires a drastic re-evaluation. It is responsible for losing sight of the conditions facing humanity in cities (…) A profound review of the current settlement approach is needed. There have been similar calls since the 1970s. But the extent of the current crisis in cities, and to reduce and prevent the growing negative impacts, requires urgent action. The imposed paradigms of the 20th century are no longer responding to the 21st century challenges. (….) the PAGUS initiative aims to challenge and change the current approach to urbanization. It addressed the growing imbalance of urban/peripheral areas. It identifies these impacts as responsible for a significant share of climate change, and the degradation of all Nature. The initiative will significantly contribute to the protection, redevelopment and sustainable use of ecosystem services and natural capital (….) We consider that the world is at a pivotal juncture. It requires a strategic action to pave the way for the proposed* ***'paradigm-shift'*** *to a more balanced distribution of human scale settlements".*

This plea for a paradigm-shift – thus implicitly that traditional interpretations of 'social development' and 'overall sustainability' of the past twenty years requires reconsideration in order to make alternatives possible – may be seen in connection with the this paper's supposition about the current and dominant interpretation of both concepts, as referred to in previous section.

In conclusion: the need of the articulation of the most crucial challenge to achieve an adequate paradigm-shift

In the Abstract of a recent article in the International Journal of Social Quality - 'A rightful Place for Nature: The Loss of Relationality and Modern Humans' Relationship with Nature' (Volume 13.2, 2023, p-66) – we read suppositions, which will underpin the 'social quality perspective' in the near future. It concerns a 'supportive addendum': "*It is beyond dispute that socioenvironmental/ecological questions are a persisting major challenge for humankind and nature. What are the reasons that we are still on the wrong path? And why do so many not recognize and give the same weight to what matters to all humans with regard to nature? Looking at mainstream views and debates, this problem is rooted in perceptions that presuppose a radical (Cartesian) dichotomy in the relationship between humans and nature: "Here man, there nature." They are permeated with "anthropocentrism" and "mechanical utilitarian" notions that are conducive to the exploitative subjugation of nature. In this article, we focus on the impacts of the "loss of relationality," specific deployments of "rationality," Spinoza's view on "Natura," and the inescapability of dialectical ontology."*

Humankind's relationship with nature in the social quality theory has been elaborated as the factors eco-consciousness, eco-reality, eco-equilibrium, the socio-environmental/ecological societal dimension and the policy field overall sustainability. These relationalities regarding nature as yet are not expressed in the definition of 'the social' as ontological foundation of the epistemological frameworks of the social quality theory and approaches. The present theory to this regard seeks to conceptualize adequate relationships from the point of view of mankind with natural entities, expressing equal concern for nature as for humans. It though in its present ontology by this the theory basically is 'anthropocentric' in its orientation. Incorporating an 'overall ontology', reflecting both the dialectics between people and their societies, as well as the processes between humans and nature has not yet been achieved. Conceptualizing of hereupon oriented ontology is a condition for an adequate paradigm-shift as is already advocated concerning the field of urbanization (see above). This enhancement of the 'conceptual framework' of the 'social quality perspective' may be identified as one of the great challenges for the near future. A start is made with the above mentioned study about the preliminary heuristic meaning of this conceptual framework, for exploring new possibilities for the collaboration of human and natural sciences (Volume 10 (1), 2020). This was further considered in the above-mentioned Working Paper 20 and again advocated in the above mentioned recent article (Volume 13.2, 2023).