

Preface

The coexistence of deep and persistent inequalities as well as increasing prosperity is a paradox of our time, a paradox that calls into question global development and processes of modernization in today's world. Despite a fall in global levels of economic inequality, driven in part by the reduction of poverty in India and China, inequality within countries has risen over the past forty years and has recently accelerated further, especially following the 2008 financial crisis.

Economic inequalities in income and wealth, social inequalities in health, education and access to welfare services, gender and racial inequalities, cultural and religious discrimination, barriers to political participation, all are main instances of inequalities, global in scope, often intertwined and influencing each other. All these inequalities go against widely shared values of social justice, equitable and sustainable development, individual freedom and collective empowerment, cultural pluralism and peaceful coexistence. As a matter of fact, deep inequalities among social classes and groups undermine social cohesion and the legitimacy of political institutions. High differences in educational and health levels, and discrimination based on gender, dramatically reduce the potentiality for individual self-realization, as well as the amount of human resources available for societal progress. Uneven income distribution hinders economic growth as it implies a reduction of the consumption power of majority of the population that cannot be compensated for by the extra spending of the wealthiest 1 per cent. Repression of ethnic, religious and political minorities fosters waves of exploited migrants and asylum-seekers. While the processes influencing declines or increases in inequality are global and interlinked, the responses to these processes are specific, heterogeneous and uneven.

Inequality is a longstanding – and even foundational – topic of research for the social sciences. Rousseau's discourse on the origins of inequality, Marx's critique of capitalism, Weber's analysis of class, status and party, Pareto's theory of elites, Keynes's general theory of employment and others are classical examples of the centrality of the interest in this subject. Social science literature on the manifestations, causes and consequences of inequality is vast and multidisciplinary, spanning sociological research on social stratification and mobility, economic analysis of labour markets and income distribution, gender studies, and also comparative research on welfare policies. However, social research on inequality is flourishing particularly now, with new studies opening up new perspectives. The increasing availability of big datasets used to analyse inequalities over time and space helps the advancement of knowledge on the reproduction of inequality, and its effects. Major recent theories of inequality, such as those outlined in Deaton's *The Great Escape* (2013) and Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), have reignited debate on the origins and causes of inequality, as well as on the impact of inequality on growth, patterns of modernization and models of development. These questions are central. The sunset of trickle-down economics and the 2008 financial crisis have laid bare the need for a new examination of understandings of growth and progress, and of the confluences of global challenges we are facing. Which models of growth, production patterns and consumption styles are sustainable in a world with limited natural resources? Will emerging economies follow the same development patterns as those that went before them, and how will inequalities be affected? The comparative analysis of different modernity paths in the contemporary globalized world can be of help in answering these questions.

Social scientists have long been studying the various dimensions of inequality both among and within countries, with the help of different theoretical paradigms and research methods. But more and more political leaders and concerned citizens are now becoming aware of the relationships and intersections between different forms of inequality and also other global challenges, including climate change and sustainable development, peace and conflict, corruption and crime, education and health. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in September 2015 helped formally recognize the intersectionality of these challenges, while achieving a crucial step towards a new global agenda for development. In addition to specific goals relevant to inequality, the articulation of the agenda, and indeed the overall commitment to 'leave no one behind', illustrate the extent to which inequality is understood as a multifaceted, urgent problem that requires our joint efforts as a global community.

Much of the knowledge needed in achieving the SDGs is generated by increasing inter- and cross-disciplinary work, and articulates the social, economic and biophysical dimensions of human development.

Inequality is a crucial economic and political concern which is also rising up on the agenda of public discourse. A 2014 Pew Research Center survey found that a majority of people in all of the forty-four countries polled described the gap between rich and poor as a problem for their country. In twenty-eight nations, the majority of those polled found that the wealth gap was a very serious issue. Public concern about inequality is also translating into visible action. According to a working paper by the Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2013), between 2006 and mid-2013, over 13 per cent of all protests worldwide were mainly about economic inequality.

At the heart of this Report is a call for a revitalized research agenda on inequality, one that is global in its outlook and participation, and that draws from across the disciplines. This call means recognizing and challenging inequalities in social science research itself. While they draw on a long legacy of research on inequality, many of the key thinkers, and the vast majority of publications, come from the global North. Divides in knowledge production on inequalities constitute a real challenge to our understanding of inequalities and to the development of appropriate responses. This Report aims to correct the scale, through the inclusion of a wider range of voices, and a deliberate effort to highlight aspects of inequality that have hardly ever been featured in the many reports and think pieces published on inequality in recent years.

As the primary body representing the full scope of social scientists at the global level, the ISSC is uniquely positioned in bringing together research communities to co-develop research agendas around the most pressing issues of our time. The evidence presented in this Report makes it clear that social scientists, as a global community, must keep their attention on inequality in the years to come. The agenda for future research presented indicates the kinds of priorities that may lead such efforts.

Through its various programmes and activities, the ISSC aims to provide global leadership on advancing the social sciences in all parts of the world. This Report, which brings together the contributions of over 100 authors from some forty countries worldwide, is the culmination of a much larger discussion with many hundreds of social scientists worldwide that began to take shape at the 2013 ISSC General Assembly, where the topic of this Report was chosen by the ISSC's members. An international consultation of scientists followed. An international expert meeting, co-organized with UNESCO in 2014, started the process of identifying the topics that a new Report on inequality had to cover. The 2015 World Social Science Forum on the topic of Transforming Global Relations for a Just World was also critical in identifying further topics and potential contributors. The Forum took place in Durban, South Africa, under the leadership of my predecessor as ISSC president, Olive Shisana. To her we express our appreciation for overseeing this thought-provoking gathering.

Our work on the Report has been greatly enriched by our collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), based at Sussex University (UK), and most of all by the professionalism, networking and collegiality of Melissa Leach, John Gaventa and Patricia Justino. It is the first time that the ISSC has invited a research institute to help coordinate one of its reports, and it has been a very rewarding decision.

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