



# A collective and interdisciplinary analysis of social progress

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The recent decades have seen a decline in world poverty and an extension of democracy in many countries around the world. Nevertheless, many people have the feeling that this has also been a period of social setbacks, and there is a general atmosphere of skepticism regarding the possibility of long-term substantial social progress, not to mention a deeper transformation overturning the prevailing social injustices.

Most intellectuals shy away not only from utopian thinking, but from any long-term prospective analysis of social structures. The crisis of social democracy after the collapse of the Soviet empire seems, in the West, to have generated a decline of hope for a just society precisely when the conditions of life of hundreds of millions of people in emerging economies (especially in Asia) have dramatically improved. These countries, however, have also abandoned the search for a different path to development: the trend is to mimic the developed countries, rather than

inventing a new model, and social hardships reminiscent of the early phase of Western capitalism are widespread in these countries.

Yet neither the collapse of illusions nor booming development in most Asian developing countries should mean the end of the quest for justice. Given their special competence, social scientists ought to think about the transformation of society, together with scholars from the humanities and the hard sciences. If hope for progress is possible, they should provide it – if it is not possible, they should explain why. Social scientists

have never been so well equipped to assume such a responsibility, thanks to the development of all the relevant disciplines since WWII. But the expansion of disciplines, their growing specialization, and the globalization of academic production have made it impossible for even the brightest mind to grasp, on its own, the complexity of social mechanisms and make serious proposals for changes in institutions and social structures. Such a task must now be collective and it must be cross-disciplinary.

## International Panel on Social Progress

The IPSP ([www.ipsp.org](http://www.ipsp.org)) was developed to address this task. It brought together more than 300 academics (of all relevant disciplines, perspectives, and regions of the world – including 65 from Asia) willing and able to engage in a true interdisciplinary dialogue on key dimensions of social progress. Relying on state-of-the-art scholarship, these social scientists reviewed the desirability and possibility of all relevant forms of long-term social change, explored current challenges, and synthesized their knowledge on the principles, possibilities, and methods for improving the main institutions of modern societies.

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The Panel is a truly collaborative effort, in its organization as well as its multi-sourced funding. It seeks to work in a way that is true to the key values and principles underlying its mission: well-being and freedom, security and solidarity, as well as pluralism and toleration, distributive justice and equity, environmental preservation, transparency and democracy. The group has produced a three-volume report – “Rethinking Society for the 21st Century” – which covers the main socio-economic, political, and cultural dimensions of social progress, and explores the values, the opportunities and the constraints that underlie cutting-edge knowledge on possible improvements of institutions and policies. The report covers global as well as regional issues (including numerous references to Asia, Asian experience and Asian perspectives) and considers the future of different parts of the world – the diversity of challenges and their interplay.

The IPSP report seeks to gain insights into what the current main risks and challenges are, and how institutions and policies can be improved if the plagues of inequality, segregation, intolerance, exclusion and violence are to be fought. The full IPSP report is available at [www.ipsp.org](http://www.ipsp.org).

## The purpose of this Focus

This Focus is written for a wider audience interested in Asia to share the message of hope of the larger report: *A better society is indeed possible, its contours can be broadly described, and all we need is to gather forces toward realizing this vision*. Although it largely relies on some part of the report, it does not seek to summarize it with all its wealth of topics. It is an invitation to take these issues to heart and to explore them more deeply with the help of the full report.

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Above: International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) Book cover (detail).