

Challenging Inequalities to Leave No one behind: A Global Agenda
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Inequality: What Can Reduce it?
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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be back at UNESCO and to join current staff and my former ADG colleague Pierre Sané for this session on *Challenging Inequalities to Leave No one Behind*.

I last spoke at one of AFUS' *Club Mémoire et Avenir* events in 2016. The topic was sustainable development and, with colleagues from successive generations of the Secretariat, we reviewed UNESCO's past, current and future contributions to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals that are the UN's target now.

Today our topic is *Inequality*, which is one of the major obstacles to the achievement of those development goals and, also, quite possibly, to the continued stability of some countries and communities.

I first pay tribute to the author who has put the issue of inequality front and centre in today's political discourse, Thomas Piketty. I am sorry that he was not available to join our session.

La première phrase de son livre résume bien notre thème aujourd'hui :

« Chaque société humaine doit justifier ses inégalités : il faut leur trouver des raisons, faute de quoi c'est l'ensemble de l'édifice politique et social qui menace de s'effondrer. »

Il ajoute : « De (notre) analyse historique émerge une conclusion importante : c'est le combat pour l'égalité et l'éducation qui a permis le développement humain et le progrès social, et non pas la sacralisation de la propriété, de la stabilité et de l'inégalité. »

In my short intervention, I shall not attempt to summarise Piketty's compelling writing on the growth, persistence and ideologies of inequality. I shall simply summarise the perspectives of several other recent books on three key questions about inequality:

- Is inequality getting worse?
- What promotes greater equality?
- How do you and I address the politics of inequality?

First then, is inequality getting worse?

My reference here is Anand Giridharadas book: *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*.

A lot of his book focuses on the USA. Giridharadas starts by pointing out how fast inequality has grown in the US over recent decades.

Pretax income of the top 10% has *doubled since 1980*

Pretax income of the top 1% has *tripled since 1980*

Pretax income of the top 0.001% has *risen by 7 times since 1980*

But over the same period the average pretax income of the bottom half of Americans has stayed almost precisely the same.

While the USA may be an extreme case it is also an important example of the impact of growing inequalities. American society appears to suffer from an increasing range of social and political pathologies. But I'll come back to the spread of populism shortly.

I ask next, what can be done to reduce inequality? Or putting it positively, what promotes greater equality?

For this topic, I recommend Walter Scheidel's magisterial tome: *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the 21st Century*.

As the title implies, Scheidel works on a large canvas. He looks at four phenomena that have reduced inequality over the course of human history.

- Mass mobilization warfare – such as the First World War.
- Transformative revolutions – e.g. the French Revolution and the Russian revolution.
- State failure or system collapse – seen now in examples like Venezuela and Libya.
- Severe epidemics – such as the Black Death in the 14th century.

Let's take them one by one:

The First World War – the Great War – certainly reduced inequality. It gave workers more power and brought women into the labour force. However, it's hard to imagine that kind of war with mass armies happening again – and it was a horrible process.

Revolutions are now out of fashion, and to judge by examples like the French revolution and the Russian revolution they do not reduce inequality much in the long term. A new elite replaces the old one.

The same can be said for state and system failure – it often leads to civil war and the poor don't benefit much from that.

Finally, the Black Death killed a large part of the population of Europe in the 14th century and reduced inequality by giving the surviving workers more power. But it's hard to imagine a devastating epidemic like that happening again – and we wouldn't want it anyway.

I conclude that we cannot look to catastrophes like these to create a fairer balance of incomes in countries today. We must look instead to the political processes of taxation and social support. These are slow and difficult but they do yield results. Let's compare a few countries using the Gini coefficient.

A Gini coefficient of 0 (zero): means complete equality – everyone in the country has the same income.

At the other extreme a Gini coefficient of 1 (one) (100%): means that one person has all the income and the rest of the population have none. No country has Gini co-efficients at either of these extremes.

Here are a few examples of where real countries do lie. Remember that the higher the number, the more unequally income is distributed in that country.

In this table, South Africa is at the top. It is a country where a small elite have very high incomes while most of the population live in poverty.

Of the countries that I have chosen here, Norway is at the bottom, meaning that public policy in Norway, through the tax system and social programmes, prevents large differences in income between poor and rich.

You will note also that Canada has a lower Gini co-efficient than the United States. In terms of income distribution Canada is more like Norway and the USA is more like South Africa.

The greater equality in Canada, compared to the USA, partly results from Canada's better and more egalitarian education system. The rest of the world often sees Canada and the USA as essentially similar, yet their distinct social and educational policies produce different results

This table shows the 2015 results, for Canada and the USA, of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA focuses on two aspects of education systems, pupils' average performance, which is a surrogate for quality, and the gap between the best and the poorest performers, which measures the inequality of outcomes from the education system.

You can see that Canada has both a higher mean score and also greater equality of outcomes, with a lower proportion of poor performers.

Such results and comparisons are vital background to UNESCO's work towards the Sustainable Development Goals of 2030.

On this slide of the Gini co-efficient around the world, dark green means low, dark red means high. You can see that, by and large, the southern hemisphere has more countries with very unequal distributions of income than the northern hemisphere. Expanding the quality and reach of secondary education is probably the greatest force for turning more the map green.

So, to my last question: how do we address the personal politics of inequality? The politics of inequality is inspiring a torrent of books. One with a broad perspective is *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy*.

This argues that when ordinary people see the rich getting much richer while their own incomes stagnate, they rebel against the political system that allows this.

In essence populist politics means urging ordinary people to be hostile to the elite. It's not the same as conventional left-wing politics. The right-wing version of populism, well demonstrated by Trump, urges the majority to be hostile to the elite but also to minorities such as immigrants or foreigners that these populists accuse the elite of favouring.

So far, to judge by the results of our national election held earlier this week, populism has not taken much hold in Canada. Our liberal democracy seems to be holding. I hope it stays that way.

In conclusion, I recommend a final book with insights about how we might address populism personally.

It is the *Road to Somewhere; The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* by David Goodhart.

Goodhart divides people into two broad groups;

A '*Somewhere*' is a person who is rooted in a particular community or country; he or she hasn't travelled much and does not have a higher education.

An '*Anywhere*' is someone who is globally mobile and often has a university degree.

Goodhart explains the rise of populism, the election of Trump and the UK Brexit vote as a rebellion of the 'somewheres' against being ruled by the 'anywheres'. You might add the *gilets jaunes* to those two phenomena.

I assume that everyone in this room is an 'anywhere'. It goes with being on the staff of UNESCO!

My parting advice to you, if you want to reduce inequality of esteem and combat the rise of populism, is to keep in touch with the 'somewheres'. Do not let your international experience and perspective cut you off from the majority of the population and lead you to become objects of resentment in wider communities that you came from.

That is how you can make a modest contribution to combatting inequality.