

## First Things First – Social Justice in an Imperfect World

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Social justice and equality are contested terrain as much among ordinary people as among philosophers. In the absence of divine or natural justice, and of an objective definition of socially fair outcomes, post-enlightenment thinkers have in recent decades focused more on just institutions and fair processes than on a substantive definition of justice. Unfairly simplifying this debate, justice should be based on a rational, democratic and transparent public discourse that defines a set of rules and institutions that provide genuinely equal opportunities. Unequal outcomes would be accepted as fair, by and large, if these conditions are met.

While the concept of equal opportunity sounds rather liberal at first glance, taking it seriously requires comprehensive policy initiatives to correct the inequality continuously generated in market economies. This raises many complicated questions, such as: Should society compensate for the unequal distribution of beauty or talent? How much more does a disabled person need to enjoy equal opportunities? And how much inequality is a legitimate price to pay for innovation and productivity growth?



In the latter case, the billions of Bill Gates might be justified, while it seems more of a challenge to justify those of Paris Hilton.

Even more difficult and more fundamental is the question of whether the precondition for “perfect justice” – a public discourse free of power, vested interest, xenophobia and prejudice – is realistic in today’s world. It is theoretically fascinating and of undeniable intellectual value to debate institutions and procedural rules for a fair society, but there is a risk that the best is the enemy of the good. In other words, since the conditions for rational discourse cannot be met, we cannot reach consensus on a set of universally accepted rules and institutions for achieving social justice.

There can be no doubt in today’s world, however, success does not depend mainly on merit or individual efforts. It is rather colour, gender, class and place of birth that matters. Middle-class girls in western societies are the most likely to go to university.

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The chances of working-class children going to university are much higher in Sweden than in the US, and a hairdresser in Luxembourg makes easily 50 times the income of an hairdresser in Mumbai doing exactly the same job. A black boy in the US has a 50% chance of being in prison at least once in his life, and 50–100 million girls in the developing world never see the light of the day because the parents wanted a boy and opted for abortion.



Given the difficulties of defining social justice and creating the necessary institutions that would possibly generate universally accepted fair outcomes, I am for policy purposes much attracted by the rather pragmatic recent proposal of Amartya Sen. We might fail to agree on an ideal world of social justice, but it should be easy to identify situations and circumstances that by any public reasoning are extremely unjust.

For instance, who would deny that 5 million children dying of malnutrition and hunger every year violates any concept of justice, or that it is unfair that the educational achievements of children are largely determined by the wealth of their parents? Who would deny that wages below the poverty line are unacceptable, that freeing the rich from contributing to social security is unfair, or that tax havens and other means of tax evasion are incompatible with a concept of social justice? Likewise, who would argue that we can ask the poor to protect the rainforest while we are booking our Easyjet flight for a fun weekend in Paris, that productivity gains of society should be nearly exclusively be pocketed by a tiny rich minority, or that abusing economic power and shifting entrepreneurial risk to underpaid and precariously employed workers is fair and just? Who would argue that for the sake of intellectual property the poor are denied access to cheap, life-saving pharmaceuticals, or that the persistent gender pay gap is fair?

Instead of debating what would be an ideal and just society, let's fix what is deeply and undisputable unfair today. Here is my short list:

- Free education for all. Schools with more than 50% children from migrant and working class background get 50% more resources than average schools to reduce the educational gap.
- Contributions to the social security systems are based on all sources of income and not just wages.
- Poor countries are exempted from payments related to intellectual property rights on pharmaceuticals or can freely use cheaper generic products.
- A legal minimum wage is established that guarantees an income above the poverty line.

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- Closure of all tax havens. Any bank or other financial institution operating in a tax haven is banned from doing business in Europe.
- Creation of a European tax floor to stop tax arbitrage and of a unitary tax on multinational companies, reflecting their size, turnover and employment in the different countries.
- Support for collective bargaining agreements and their legal extension in order to avoid a race to the bottom with regard to wages and working conditions.
- Combating precarious and atypical employment, through protective national and international labour standards.
- A contribution of 1% GDP by every country to a global UN fund, to secure a basic social floor to put an end to malnutrition, preventable diseases and extreme poverty.
- Wealth and heritage taxes that generate at least 6% of GDP annually.

This would not solve all the questions of social justice, but it would reduce some of the most obvious scandals of inequality both in society and at the global level.

## Further resources

### ILO Publications

- ILO. 2011. [\*Social protection floor for a fair globalization: Policy coherence and international coordination\*](#) (pdf 232 KB) (Geneva)
  - [Français](#) (pdf 317 KB) • [Español](#) (pdf 240 KB)
- ILO. 2010. [\*Employment and social protection policies from crisis to recovery and beyond: a review of experience\*](#) (pdf 819 KB), an ILO report to the G20 Labour and Employment Ministers Meeting, Washington, DC, 20–21 April 2010 (Geneva).
- ILO. 2010. [\*Employment policies for social justice and a fair globalization\*](#) (pdf 1.55 MB), Report VI, International Labour Conference, 99th Session, Geneva, 2010 (Geneva).
- ILO. 2010. [\*Extending social security to all: A guide through challenges and options\*](#) (pdf 2.35 MB) (Geneva)
- ILO. 2010. [\*Progress report on the implementation plan on the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization\*](#) (pdf 540 KB) (Geneva)
  - [Français](#) (pdf 705 KB) • [Español](#) (pdf 484 KB)
- ILO. 2010. [\*Social protection floor initiative\*](#) (pdf 221 KB) (Geneva)
  - [Español](#) (pdf 217 KB)
- ILO. 2010. [\*World social security report 2010/11: providing coverage in times of crisis and beyond\*](#) (pdf 6.20 MB) (Geneva).  
Executive Summary: • [English](#) (pdf 204 KB) • [Français](#) (pdf 213 KB)

- [KB](#) • [Español \(pdf 208 KB\)](#)
- Press Release: • [English](#) • [Français](#) • [Español](#)
- ILO. 2009. [Building decent societies : rethinking the role of social security in development \(pdf 179 KB\)](#) (Basingstoke).
- ILO. 2009. [ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization \(pdf 134.87 KB\)](#) (Geneva).
  - [Français \(pdf 1.59 MB\)](#) • [Español \(pdf 144.50 KB\)](#)
- ILO. 2009. [Social protection floor initiative : the sixth initiative of the CEB on the global financial and economic crisis and its impact on the work of the UN system : manual and strategic framework for joint UN country operations developed by the group of co-operating agencies and development partners \(pdf 306 KB\)](#) (Geneva)
  - [Français \(pdf 372 KB\)](#) • [Español \(pdf 332 KB\)](#)
- ILO. 2009. [The financial and economic crisis : a Decent Work response](#) (pdf 603 KB) (Geneva)
  - [Français \(pdf 834 KB\)](#) • [Español \(pdf 759 KB\)](#)
- ILO. 2009. [The International Labour Organization and the quest for social justice, 1919-2009 \(pdf 62.57 KB\)](#) (Geneva).
  - [Français \(pdf 75.64 KB\)](#) • [Español \(pdf 70.03 KB\)](#)
- ILO. 2008. [Social security for all : investing in social justice and economic development \(pdf 458.23 KB\)](#) (Geneva).
  - [Français \(pdf 566.78 KB\)](#) • [Español \(pdf 527.17 KB\)](#)
- ILO. 2005. [Social protection as a productive factor](#) (pdf 129 KB) (Geneva)
  - [Français \(pdf 129 KB\)](#) • [Español \(pdf 130 KB\)](#)
- ILO. 2004. [Organizing for social justice : global report under the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work : report of the Director-General \(pdf 454.96 KB\)](#) (Geneva).
  - [Français \(pdf 511.71 KB\)](#) • [Español \(pdf 937.61 KB\)](#)
- ILO. UNDP. 2011. [Successful Social Protection Floor Experiences](#) (pdf 4.70 MB) (Geneva)
- ILO. WHO. 2010. [Social protection floor initiative](#) (pdf 688 KB) (Geneva)
  - [Français \(pdf 694 KB\)](#) • [Español \(pdf 694 KB\)](#)
- ILO. WHO. 2009. [The social protection floor : a joint crisis initiative of the UN chief executive board for co-ordination on the social protection floor](#) (pdf 152 KB) (Geneva)

## ILO Videos

- [What Does Social Justice Mean to YOU? - !\[\]\(cdf2842d82858164c68c92720a337fb9\_img.jpg\)](#)
- [Juan Somavia, ILO Director General - Voices on Social Justice - !\[\]\(3973dad7f2f3eafb2c144deb79d5c822\_img.jpg\)](#)
- [Michelle Bachelet, Head of UN Women - Voices on Social Justice - !\[\]\(78688513da7a924039ac16e546d7bf8b\_img.jpg\)](#)
- [Kofi Annan, Nobel Prize Laureate and Former UN SG - Voices on Social Justice - !\[\]\(508a1136d49b79584e89f03b586dfa9e\_img.jpg\)](#)
- [Marlee Matlin, Actress - Voices on Social Justice - !\[\]\(857a1917d2813fe7f9df1c2d3a9286e1\_img.jpg\)](#)
- [Achieving the Millennium Development Goals with Social Protection - !\[\]\(6c12030baa33d7760a5e4c7c9e008d93\_img.jpg\)](#)
- [Michelle Bachelet on Social Protection Floors as a Response to Demands for Social Justice - !\[\]\(38d8e1eba6db628aa66110ffbf829043\_img.jpg\)](#)

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## ILO Websites

- [Social Protection Floor Advisory Group](#)
- [Global Extension of Social Security](#)
- [Global Jobs Pact](#)
- [Social security](#)
- [ILO Global Job Crisis Observatory. Social security](#)
- [Decent Work](#)
- [Online Information Resources on Social security](#)