

Socially perceived necessities of life across EU countries: Structures and consensus¹

Paul Dickes

University of Nancy 2, France & CEPS/INSTEAD, Luxembourg

Alessio Fusco²

CEPS/INSTEAD, Luxembourg & CEMAFI – University of Nice Sophia Antipolis

Eric Marlier

CEPS/INSTEAD, Luxembourg

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Abstract: The EU Council of Ministers in 1975 defined the poor as “individuals or families whose resources are so small as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life of the Member State in which they live” (Council, 1975). This widely quoted definition leaves room for discussion about what can be considered a “minimum acceptable way of life” in different countries.

The paper explores this issue by exploiting data from a Eurobarometer survey on “Poverty and exclusion”, carried out in 2007 in all 27 EU Member States and aimed at assessing which items EU citizens consider to be necessary for people to live an “acceptable” or “decent” standard of living in the country where they live. This survey constitutes a major breakthrough as it is the very first dataset that allows an EU comparative investigation of socially perceived necessities of life.

The paper assesses the (in)variance of the *structure* of social needs between countries on the basis of an Individual Differences Scaling (INDSCAL) model, which is an extension of Multidimensional Scaling (MDS). It also investigates the consistency between the citizen’s evaluation of necessities in different groups of countries and in the whole EU-27 population against the *social consensus* hypothesis (Mack and Lansley, 1985). The result of our analysis shows a high level of congruence between the national patterns of social needs as well as a large consistency in the identification of socially defined necessities throughout the EU. A key consequence of this is that deprivation can be measured on the basis of a same validated set of items across all 27 Member States.

Key words: cluster analysis, consensus survey, deprivation, European Union, individual differences scaling (INDSCAL), multidimensional scaling (MDS), necessities of life, poverty, standard of living, well-being

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² Corresponding author: alessio.fusco@ceps.lu. Address: CEPS/INSTEAD – 44, rue Emile Mark - L-4620 Differdange – G-D of Luxembourg.

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