



Tackling Inequality, Restoring the Common Good



Workshop 18-20 May 2021 | Tackling inequality is a central challenge of our time. Society is in an inequality crisis where the extent of the wealth gap is undermining social bonds, and generating other crises in economics, politics and peace.

“While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. The powerful feed upon the powerless. Masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape... Finance, special interests and economic interests are trumping the common good so their own plans will not be affected Inequality is the root of social evil.” (Pope Francis)

We are also at a time of opportunity, where a powerful vision for a good society has been set out by the Pope in *Laudato Si'* that has inspired people beyond the Church; where grassroots civil society organizations are working to build answers from below and strengthen their collective voice; and where a number of people in academia are setting out ways to build societies and economies that work for all.

It is now recognized worldwide that inequality is a *problem*. Taking the discussion a step further, our conference is about how it needs to be *tackled*.

The conference will seek to explore how to advance four shifts to tackle inequality: the values shift to restore dignity and solidarity, the policy shift to address inequality's multi-dimensionality, the power shift to restore real democracy and accountability, and the intellectual shift to reconnect economics with the lived experience of communities.

The values shift needed to tackle inequality: The values of dignity and of solidarity have been squeezed by two dogmas of injustice still prevalent in our culture. The first dogma is that society as a whole would benefit if every individual acted for his/her own personal interest. The other dogma is that elitism has to be encouraged since the welfare of the majority increases all the more if the abilities of the few are promoted, and so resources, incentives, opportunities should be reserved to the most gifted, since a “rising tide will lift all the boats”. Pope Francis has shown the falsity of the “trickle down effect”. (Evangelii Gaudium).

The policy shift needed to tackle inequality: All governments have pledged in the UN Sustainable Development Goals to reduce inequality but, in the vast majority of countries, the current policy mix is failing to reverse inequality's continuing rise. We will look at experiences of how inequality has been reduced in particular times and places and how these lessons can be applied in other contexts. Only through a broad and bold combination of policies addressing the range of intersecting inequalities (A. Sen, 1992), through processes of redistribution and recognition, can inclusive economies and societies be fostered.

The power shift needed to tackle inequality: The hyper-concentration of wealth and power are reinforcing each other, a link that is jeopardizing democracy today. Tackling inequality requires a rebalancing of power, so that

ordinary people have greater influence. This will require a process of people organising to build their collective voice.

The intellectual shift needed to tackle inequality: Academic economic, political and social inquiry, which of course has a necessary technical and specialist element in pursuing this topic, are often disconnected from the lives of ordinary people and from the common good. As Saint Romero noted, “there are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.” The new agenda for tackling inequality will need to be collaborative with grassroots civil society and focused on working for the common good.

The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and the University of Notre Dame are convening this symposium to bring together the interconnected spaces of church, civil society, and academia we will enrich the impact of all three sectors in confronting the challenge of inequality. There is a particularly important contribution for Catholic thinking to make in addressing inequality, in helping to reconnect economics to its moral foundations, and to working for the good society: it is a transformational approach to a challenge that requires a transformation. The symposium will help to further develop understandings of how to apply the enduring calls to the common good, human dignity, and the preferential option for the poor, to the current social reality of extreme economic inequality; and help to bring these discussion to enrich a much broader conversation involving policy experts, civil organizations, and other key actors.

The inequality crisis is, at root, one of values and relationships – how we re-envision and build society. Working together with grassroots organisations, analysts and policy experts can help in understanding the new social reality, and in developing an agenda that answers the questions it brings up, including on the complementary roles the state, the market, and intermediary institutions can play in addressing it. Our goal is to initiate a constructive, practical and non-ideological discussion about how to rebalance the relations between these sectors in the interest of justice and equity.

Beyond the symposium: taking forward the agenda

The impact of this collaboration will go well beyond that of the symposium itself. Following on from the symposium, for an initial 2 years, the University of Notre Dame, guided by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, will coordinate further streams of work to elaborate and apply the principles set out at the symposium, to foster action. This will connect the disciplines of ethics, economics, law and public policy, amongst others. It will illustrate in practical detail how the shifts set out by the symposium might be fostered in specific areas, and help groups explore how they can contribute to their fulfilment. As part of this effort, it will connect academia with grassroots civil society organizations and International Institutions in joint work to tackle inequality. The ideas emerging from the work will be shared with a broad audience by making use of videos, interviews, news articles, blogs, and social media, as well as by developing tools that can be used in university classrooms, company boardrooms, and offices of governments and NGOs.

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