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## Deborah Stone

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In Charles Dickens's novel about capitalism run amok, a teacher asks: "Now, this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and an't you in a thriving state?" "Girl number twenty" (the teacher doesn't dignify the pupils with names) later confides to a friend how she got it all wrong: "I said I didn't know. I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all" (*Hard Times* [1854] 1997, 64).

This literary exchange perfectly captures what is now called the human development approach to measuring social welfare and national progress. Instead of using aggregate economic indicators such as gross national product to gauge societal development, the human development approach looks at measures of individual well-being in order to gauge the distribution of "human capabilities" that enable people to choose their own life paths and live satisfying lives. The United Nations and many countries have been using this approach for almost 20 years. *The Measure of America* is the first application of the approach to the United States.

In a forward to the report, Amartya Sen, a pioneer of the approach, acknowledges what Girl number twenty says so eloquently—that there is a gulf between mainstream economics and more humane understandings of welfare that goes back as far as Aristotle. But notwithstanding the somewhat breathless claims for novelty, the human development approach in general and this report in particular evinces a wide-eyed naïveté, a sense of discovering that one knows how to speak prose. Social scientists, social critics, philosophers, and novelists have been doing this stuff for a very long time.

To apply the human development approach to the United States, the authors created a single index—the Human Development Index—from indicators that have been gathered by government agencies for decades. The Index combines one measure of health (life expectancy at birth), two measures of education (highest degree earned by people over age 25, and percentage of population between ages 3 and 24 enrolled in school), and one measure of income (median earnings of people over age 16). Two things are new. First, the report blends these five measures into a single scale, and second, it applies the

Index (and many other measures) to states, regions, and congressional districts, as well as to demographic groups, especially those defined by race, ethnicity, immigrant status, age, and gender.

For anyone who studies social policy, there are few surprises in *The Measure of America*. The basic data are issued regularly, and the comparative rankings of groups (except perhaps for congressional districts) are staples of governmental, academic, and think tank reports. Mississippi and Texas have been bringing up the rear on just about every measure of health, education, and poverty since my graduate school days in the 1970s. This report does not alter the picture. For those of us who follow U.S. social welfare in international perspective, it is not news that the United States spends more on health and education yet ranks relatively low on outcomes compared to other countries, or that we have relatively high rates of poverty and income inequality, or that we are a sorry specimen when it comes to public guarantees of health insurance, child care, and family leave.

The big disappointments are conceptual, however. First, the report does not advance our understanding of or ability to measure human capabilities. Second, it does not offer ways of thinking about *community strength* or citizens' relations with one another. And third, it is largely deaf to the ways that deliberate policies created the problems it tries to measure and explain.

Human capabilities, "what people can do and what they can become," encompass many more areas than health, education, and welfare, the three measured by the report. In a simplistic diagram (p. 15), the report ticks off culture, religion, economy, environment, community, laws and politics as other capabilities, and in a sidebar (p. 18) it adds several more: "the ability to participate in the decisions that affect one's life, to have control over one's living environment, to enjoy freedom from violence, to experience love and friendship, to have societal respect, and to relax and have fun." A really creative approach would have been to develop measures of some of these other capabilities, but the report succumbs to the reductionist tendency of measurement. The authors tip their hats to all of these other dimensions, then measure only what they can measure—indeed, only things that government has *already measured*—and then they play with the numbers, slicing and dicing the data into categories and presenting them in color charts, maps, and diagrams.

The report summarizes many nuanced and sophisticated social science findings about inequalities in health, education and income, but these rich qualitative and quantitative data are sprayed scattershot throughout the report in bits of text (for example, 10 lines on "discrimination" and nine on "residential segregation" as explanations for racial and ethnic disparities in standard of living); sidebars (for example, one noting that so-called unskilled, female-dominated service jobs might garner more money, benefits,

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*Deborah Stone is Visiting and Research Professor in the Department of Government and the Rockefeller Center at Dartmouth College.*

and respect if we recognized that they require “people skills”); and boxes with vignettes of model service programs and bad ones (such as for-profit nursing homes whose payment policies force therapists to browbeat patients into draconian rehabilitation schedules). The best cutting-edge data live in boxes with scarcely any integration into the main body of the report, much less into the Human Development Index—for example, some chilling data on who is more likely to attend schools with security guards, metal detectors, barred windows, graffiti, and trash on the floor. You guessed it—African Americans, non-native English speakers, and low-income students (p. 101).

A second disappointing aspect of the report is that it does not address social integration and community strength in any systematic way. For example, in the chapter on education, there is a wealth of information about the impact of parental and community financial resources on education, but virtually nothing about the continuing, even worsening, racial segregation of schools. Home schooling appears once—as a statistic in a sidebar on “Fast Facts about K–12 Education” (p. 103)—with no discussion of how the home-schooling movement might affect students’ capacities for cross-class and multicultural understanding, toleration, and intellectual openness. In health care, measures of individual health such as life expectancy and morbidity are old hat. The report could have pushed the envelope by measuring the communal capacity to provide health care, perhaps by counting access to comprehensive insurance or the resources devoted to home health care.

For public policy scholars, the most disappointing aspect of the report is its failure to acknowledge that many of the problems it describes are the results of deliberate policy decisions. There is scant human agency in *The Measure of America*. Want to know the “factors that fuel growth in earnings inequality?” On pages 138–40 you will find “globalization and technological change” but no mention of trade and industrial policies that exacerbate or mitigate these forces. You will find that the minimum wage “has not kept pace with inflation,” with a brief mention of Congress, but you would never know that Congress repeatedly declined to raise the minimum wage despite having full information about its declining real value. You will find as another cause of growing wage inequality a “decline in union membership,” but you will not hear about union-busting and legislative and regulatory policies that have made it harder for unions to form. And you will not find any mention of tax policy in this section on the growth in earnings inequality or anywhere else in the report. Want to know why there is a gender gap in earnings? “Research shows that women pay a penalty for leaving the marketplace to care for children” (p. 146). Hmmm. Who *imposes* that penalty, and who could do something to eliminate it? No answers here, though in another section (p. 147), we learn that most other countries provide for paid maternity

leaves and other policies that support working mothers. Want to know why homicide and suicide are the two leading causes of death among youth? “Compelling evidence” points to “the availability of guns in the home,” the report notes (p. 79), with no mention of gun ownership laws.

Ultimately, the report issues some bland calls for policy reforms, but nothing that remotely pushes beyond the vague slogans long kicking around in social policy: To improve health, “promote prevention” and “make health care affordable for all Americans.” To improve education, “modernize K–12 education” and “invest in at-risk kids.” To improve the standard of living, “strengthen and support families,” and “boost incomes and asset-building.” All good things, to be sure, but *The Measure of America* does not contribute much new ammunition for boosting the reform agenda.