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# The ISSP 2019 Social Inequality Module: Country-Comparative Individual-Level Data on Public Beliefs about Inequality and Socioeconomic Conditions Over Three Decades

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## ABSTRACT

Coinciding with a trend of rising economic divides within many countries, scholarly interest in the subject of inequality has grown significantly in the twenty first century. Since its creation in 1987, the Social Inequality module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) has evolved into an exceptionally comprehensive country-comparative individual-level database on public beliefs about inequality and socioeconomic conditions. The module stands out among international surveys due to its extensive thematic depth and breadth, along with the long timespan it covers. This provides unique opportunities for charting and monitoring longitudinal trends in social inequality, as well as for conducting comparative analyses aimed at advancing theories that incorporate the national context as an integral part of the explanatory framework. This article describes the content, coverage, and history of the fifth wave of the Social Inequality module (2019). This survey wave was conducted in 34 countries and combines previously fielded topics with new ones that speak to current debates in different areas of inequality research. The fifth wave introduces new questions focusing on anger and unfairness, reducing inequality by market actors, government inefficacy, lived experience of inequality, economic insecurity and deprivation, and social trust.

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International Social Survey Programme; ISSP; inequality; beliefs; attitudes; socioeconomic conditions

## Introduction

Coinciding with a trend of rising economic divides within many countries (OECD 2015; UN 2020), scholarly interest in the subject of inequality has grown significantly in the twenty first century. The Social Inequality module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) stands out as an exceptionally comprehensive country-comparative individual-level survey on public beliefs about inequality and socioeconomic conditions and how these are changing over time (Smith 2022; OECD 2021). The aim of this article is to provide a brief overview of the fifth wave of the module, fielded in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

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Following World War II, Western countries experienced a sustained period of unprecedented economic growth in tandem with substantial reductions of economic inequalities between major societal groups. Many have referred to this period as the Golden Age of the Welfare State (Esping-Andersen 1996; Nullmeier and Kaufmann 2021), where Western societies “had come closer than ever before to a state which could be described as prosperity for all” (Pfaller, Gough, and Therborn 1991:1). The criteria used for these assertions included full employment, real income growth for most wage earners, and institutional arrangements securing socially acceptable standards of living also for citizens that, for one reason or another, are unable to participate in the labor force (Korpi 2002; Glyn 2006).

Partly due to the oil and energy crises of the 1970s, economic growth among Western countries slowed down significantly, while the trend toward less economic inequality came to a halt in the mid-1980s (Morgan and Neef 2020; OECD 2015). In this historical context, issues related to the distribution of resources in different types of societies around the world gained prominence on the political and academic agenda (Atkinson 1997; Kanbur and Lustig 1999). At the time, country-comparative research on this subject was largely restricted to studies of macro-economic indicators of wage distributions, labor costs, unemployment, and public policies, *et cetera*. There had nonetheless emerged a growing interest, especially in the field of sociology, on perceptions of distributive fairness and stratification beliefs, but empirical evidence in this regard was mainly confined to national or sub-national studies, typically from the United States or Great Britain (Rainwater 1974; Robinson and Bell 1978; Hochschild 1981; Kluegel and Smith 1981; Gallie 1984; Shepelak and Alwin 1986).

Around this time, in the mid-1980s, two of the founding member countries of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), namely Australia (represented by Jonathan Kelley) and Austria (represented by Max Haller), suggested independently of each other that the ISSP should design a cross-national survey on social and economic inequalities from a citizens’ perspective. A *first* rationale for this appeal was that the testing of many theoretical hypotheses in the burgeoning international field of inequality research required individual-level data. A *second* motivation was that citizens’ perceptions and beliefs about inequality could have an important bearing on social cohesion and political mobilization: if actual inequalities increase in a society but most people are unaware of it, social and political implications may be negligible. If, on the other hand, increased inequalities are acknowledged by the public, the social and political consequences can potentially be momentous. This path of research would therefore be a vital complement to research founded on “hard” economic indicators.<sup>2</sup>

A *third* main motive was the analytical value of a cross-country approach to the study of various aspects of inequality. In short, the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals are largely a product of national institutions and other contextual factors that may forge economic interests as well as social norms and identities among the public (Rothstein 1998; Campbell 2012). While some beliefs may be shared by an overwhelming majority, others may be contested where rival groups have very different attitudes. However, public opinion is more than a passive voice that is determined by structural circumstances; it is also a force that can bring on societal change (Inglehart 1990; Manza and Brooks 2012; Wlezien and Soroka 2012). This latter insight is integral and forms one

**Table 1.** ISSP Social Inequality modules and number of participating countries.

Wave	I	II	III	IV	V
Year	1987	1992	1999	2009	2019
Number of countries	11	18	31	41	34 <sup>3</sup>

**Table 2.** ISSP Social Inequality module time series and number of countries.

Time period	SI modules	Years covered	(n) countries
1987-2019	I, II, III, IV, V	32	7
1992-2019	II, III, IV, V	27	15
1999-2019	III, IV, V	20	21
2009-2019	IV, V	10	30

of the basic rationales for analyzing public attitudes and experiences, as it is a potential force for change or preservation of current societal conditions and inequalities.

The first wave of the Social Inequality module in 1987 included nine countries that were all part of the West, but with different political histories and traditions as well as institutional systems (Australia, Austria, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Switzerland, USA, and West Germany). In addition, the participation of two countries behind the Iron Curtain, Poland and Hungary, made it possible to examine the extent to which the Cold War – that had framed the geopolitical landscape back then for about forty years – had impacted peoples' conditions and attitudes.

Over time, the module has gradually expanded its global reach. This has opened several windows of opportunity for a broad variety of geographical comparisons. Countries from all continents are presently members of the ISSP, though certain significant coverage gaps admittedly remain, most notably is the lack of participating countries from Africa and the Middle East. As shown in [Table 1](#), the number of countries that fielded the module increased progressively until 2009 (wave IV) but fell slightly in 2019. This partly reflects the practical difficulties of fielding the survey during the Covid-19 pandemic in some countries. A total of 49 countries have fielded the module at some point ([Appendix A](#) lists all countries that have fielded the module, by wave). As shown in [Table 2](#), seven countries that participated in 1987 fielded all four subsequent waves and thus have comparative data spanning over three decades. Developments over the decade between 2009 and 2019 can be analyzed for 30 countries.

### Topics in the ISSP 2019 social inequality module

In accordance with ISSP working principles, once country members have approved the overarching theme of investigation for a specific year (e.g. Social Inequality), the ISSP general assembly then democratically elects a small number of countries to drive the conceptualization of the module – the drafting group. In the case of the 2019 Social Inequality module, the countries in the drafting group were: South Africa (convenor), France, Great Britain, Philippines, Sweden, and Venezuela.<sup>4</sup>

Each ISSP module contains 60 survey items tailored to investigate the specific theme. In addition, each module includes a standard set of socio-demographic variables, of which many are of immediate relevance for inequality research, including information on occupation, income, education, as well as household and partner characteristics, *et cetera*. In

**Table 3.** Included topics in the ISSP 2019 Social Inequality module.

Replicated topics	New topics
Getting ahead in society	Reducing inequality by market actors
Occupational earnings	Government inefficacy
Concerns about inequality	Lived experience of inequality
Social policy and redistribution	Economic insecurity and deprivation
Taxation	Social trust
Market inequality in social services	
Global inequality	
Social conflict	
Subjective social class, status, and mobility	
Pay criteria	
Types of society	
Occupational social mobility	

designing the 2019 module, the drafting group's general rationale was to retain most of the existing customized items, while also introducing a few new topics that tie in with new directions and debates in inequality research where *national context* is an integral part of the explanatory framework.<sup>5</sup> Table 3 lists the individual topics that are replicated from previous waves (left column) alongside new topics introduced in the 2019 module (right column).

### **Replicated topics**

Tables 4–6 list the individual items per topic. Question numbers refer to the 2019 Social Inequality source questionnaire (ISSP 2018), and variable names refer to the 2019 Social Inequality integrated data file (ZA7600 version 3.0.0) (ISSP 2022). The tables also show the total number of items per topic and the fielding history of each individual item.

### **Getting ahead in society**

Starting with themes listed in Table 4, the first topic concerns beliefs about (in)equality of opportunity in society. Research on these items is contributing to critical debates in social science concerning the viability of meritocracy and/or equality of opportunity (McCall 2013; Mijs 2021). With the exception of the third wave of surveying in 1999, all but one of the items in this battery have been consistently asked in each wave since 1987, thus constituting a long time series.<sup>6</sup> Multiple latent dimensions in responses are distinguishable, including beliefs about the relative importance of socioeconomic background (Q1a-b), individual merit (Q1c-d), corruption and cronyism (Q1e-g), as well as ascribed social characteristics (Q1h-j) in “getting ahead”.

### **Occupational earnings**

This is one the most used batteries in the module, and studies using it have informed theoretical work on the legitimacy of earnings (Kelley and Evans 1993; Osberg and Smeeding 2006; Castillo 2012). The drafting group felt that it was important to keep this battery intact and proposed to measure perceived (Q2) and preferred (Q3) occupational earnings using the same five occupations as used in ISSP 2009, namely: (a) a doctor in general practice; (b) a chairman of a large corporation; (c) a shop assistant; (d) an unskilled worker in a factory; and (e) a cabinet minister in the national government. In the existing literature, various indexes of perceived and preferred earnings inequality are usually constructed,

**Table 4.** Items on replicated topics.

Question	Variable	Social inequality topic	Module history
<b>Getting ahead in society (10 items)</b>			
Q1a	v1	How important is coming from a wealthy family?	87-92-99-09-19
Q1b	v2	How important is having well-educated parents?	87-92-09-19
Q1c	v3	How important is having a good education yourself?	87-92-09-19
Q1d	v4	How important is hard work?	87-92-09-19
Q1e	v5	How important is knowing the right people?	87-92-99-09-19
Q1f	v6	How important is having political connections?	87-92-09-19
Q1g	v7	How important is giving bribes?	09-19
Q1h	v8	How important is a person's race?	87-92-09-19
Q1i	v9	How important is a person's religion?	87-92-09-19
Q1j	v10	How important is being born a man or a woman?	87-92-09-19
<b>Occupational earnings (10 items)</b>			
Q2a	v11	About how much do you think a doctor in general practice earns?	87-92-99-09-19
Q2b	v12	How much do you think a chairman of a large national corporation earns?	87-92-99-09-19
Q2c	v13	How much do you think a shop assistant earns?	92-99-09-19
Q2d	v14	How much do you think an unskilled worker in a factory earns?	87-92-99-09-19
Q2e	v15	How much do you think a cabinet minister in the < national > government earns?	87-92-99-09-19
Q3a	v16	About how much do you think a doctor in general practice should earn?	87-92-99-09-19
Q3b	v17	How much do you think a chairman of a large national company should earn?	87-92-99-09-19
Q3c	v18	How much do you think a shop assistant should earn?	92-99-09-19
Q3d	v19	How much do you think an unskilled worker in a factory should earn?	87-92-99-09-19
Q3e	v20	How much do you think a cabinet minister in the < national > government should earn?	87-92-99-09-19

often by calculating the difference between the three high-paying occupations (a, b, e) and the two low-paying occupations (c, d) (for examples, see references above).

### **Concerns about inequality**

Turning to [Table 5](#), question 4a asks respondents the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement “Differences in income in <country> are too large”. This is one of the most extensively used module items, and has been included in all rounds of fielding to date. A contemporary development in the multidisciplinary literature on public concerns and beliefs about inequality is to place more explicit focus on the importance of distributive fairness judgements, emphasizing how many people prefer “fair” distributions of income and wealth over “equal” distributions of resources (Zmerli and Castillo 2015; Starmans, Sheskin, and Bloom 2017). Inequalities that are perceived as unfair may also trigger negative emotional reactions, such as envy, anxiety, or anger, with potential implications for political preferences and behaviors (McClendon 2018; Marx 2020; Hansen 2023). To further strengthen this topic, an item on each of these two sub-themes was added to the module.

### **Social policy and redistribution**

Attitudes toward government policies aimed at addressing inequality is of central theoretical relevance. The number of items on this topic is relatively limited in the module, in part because this topic is more substantively covered by the ISSP's Role of Government module. Question 4b is one of the most widely used items in the entire catalogue of ISSP modules (Smith 2022). It is a generally framed statement on

**Table 5.** Items on replicated topics (continued).

Question	Variable	Social inequality topic	Module history
		<b>Concerns about inequality (3 items)</b>	
Q4a	v21	Differences in income in <Rs country > are too large.	87-92-99-09-19
Q10	v32	Do you feel angry about differences in wealth between the rich and the poor?	19
Q16	v50	How fair or unfair do you think the income distribution is in [COUNTRY]?	19
		<b>Social policy and redistribution (2 items)</b>	
Q4b	v22	It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.	87-92-99-09-19
Q4c	v23	The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	87-09-19
		<b>Taxation (2 items)</b>	
Q8a	v28	Do you think people with high incomes should pay a larger share of their income in taxes?	87-92-99-09-19
Q8b	v29	Generally, how would you describe taxes in [COUNTRY] today for those with high incomes?	87-92-09-19
		<b>Market distribution of social services (2 items)</b>	
Q9a	v30	Is it just or unjust – right or wrong – that people with higher incomes can buy better health care than people with lower incomes?	99-09-19
Q9b	v31	Is it just or unjust – right or wrong – that people with higher incomes can buy better education for their children than people with lower incomes?	99-09-19
		<b>Global inequality (3 items)</b>	
Q11a	v33	Present economic differences between rich and poor countries are too large.	99-19
Q11b	v34	People in wealthy countries should make an additional tax contribution to help people in poor countries.	99-19
Q11c	v35	People from poor countries should be allowed to work in wealthy countries.	19
		<b>Social conflict (5 items)</b>	
Q12a	v36	Conflicts in [COUNTRY]: Between poor people and rich people?	87-92-99-09-19
Q12b	v37	Between the working class and the middle class?	87-92-99-09-19
Q12c	v38	Between management and workers?	87-92-99-09-19
Q12d	v39	Between young people and older people?	87-92-99-19
Q12e	v40	Between people born in [COUNTRY] and people from other countries who have come to live in [COUNTRY]?	19

government responsibility for reducing differences in income between those with high and low incomes and is used in a vast interdisciplinary literature to measure preferences for government redistribution (Alesina and Giuliano 2011; Roberts 2014; Steele and Breznau 2019). The module also includes an item (Q4c) on unemployment compensation that speaks to the social insurance function of the welfare state. Responses to these two items are moderately (positively) correlated, and for analytical purposes it may be useful to combine them into a more comprehensive measure of attitudes toward government responsibility for constricting economic inequality/insecurity.

### **Taxation**

The general tax level and the degree of tax progressivity are both central policy tools for regulating inequality (Joumard, Pisu, and Bloch 2013). In recent decades, the economic gains of those at the top of the income distribution curve have outpaced economic improvements for the broader layers of the population within many countries. As a response, scholars have called out for increasing tax progressivity and taxes on higher

incomes (Scheve and Stasavage 2016; Saez and Zucman 2019; Piketty 2020). In the SI module, this topical issue is covered with two attitudinal items asking about the principle of progressive taxation (Q8a) and the level of taxes on high incomes (Q8b). An empirical application including the above tax items is available in Edlund (1999).

### ***Market distribution of social services***

Most attitudinal questions in the module concern the level of inequality between those with high and low incomes. This topic offers a complementary perspective by asking to what extent it is fair or unfair that those with higher incomes can buy better health care and/or education for their children. Prior studies, using a moral economy perspective, indicate that these attitudes vary substantively across countries in tandem with between-country variation in actual policy (Svallfors 2006; Lindh 2015). The 2019 wave of data enables the possibility of comparing developments longitudinally over a twenty-year period that has been characterized by strengthened marketization in many countries.

### ***Global inequality***

The 1999 module (wave III) introduced items related to global (in)equality, but these were subsequently dropped in 2009 (wave IV). Due to growing interest in global (in)equality and its relevance for national communities (Milanovic 2016), this topic was reinstated in this fifth wave of the module. Since comparability over time is a main priority, two items that were implemented in 1999 were brought back into the survey. The first item (Q11a) asks about concerns about inequalities *between* rich and poor countries in a way that has similarities with the aforementioned question on concerns about inequality *within* countries (Q4a). The second item (Q11b) is an attempt to tap into international policies for reducing global inequality, in the form of a tax contribution from wealthy countries to poor countries. To tie in with related subjects of economic globalization and global movements of people, a new third item (Q11c) was also developed relating to labor migration from poor to wealthy countries.

### ***Social conflict***

These questions date back to the first wave of the survey and have been widely used to study perceived class conflict (Kelley and Evans 1995; Edlund and Lindh 2015). Despite the existence of a rich theoretical tradition on the role of social conflict as a notable influence on political mobilization and outcomes in societies, efforts at capturing perceptions of such struggles still remain relatively circumscribed in cross-national surveys. The data from ISSP SI modules therefore represents a unique series that captures views on core conflicts comparatively and over time.

For the fifth wave, this topic was broadened to encompass social conflict between other social categories/groups. First, both worsening prospects of upward mobility among younger generations (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018) and insufficient social provision for older generations (Birnbaum, Ferrarini, and Nelson 2017) have in recent years been discussed as potential sources of generational conflict. To get at this, an item fielded in the first three rounds of the ISSP SI module (Q12d) was reinstated. Second,



increases in migrant populations have provoked growing concerns about xenophobia and nationalism. The scholarly interest for survey-based data on perceptions toward foreign migrants has universal appeal and is by no means a European phenomenon. Concerns over migrants and refugees among native-born citizens in host nations is common in most continents. For example, it is evident in recent research on the treatment and violence against Zimbabwean, Nigerian and other migrants in South Africa (Enigbokan, Edkins, and Ogundele 2015). Given these developments, a new item was included covering perceived conflict between people born in the country and people who have come to live there (Q12e).

### ***Subjective social class, status, and mobility***

Historically, subjective social location has been a central concept in the module (Evans and Kelley 2004). As listed in Table 6, this includes a standard question on subjective social class (Q22) that works fairly well in predicting life chances (Oesch and Vigna 2023). The module also contains a frequently used item asking respondents to place themselves on a 10-point scale/ladder ranging from the top to bottom of society (Q13a). Some recent research uses this question as a measure of 'subjective social status' (Gidron and Hall 2017; Oesch and Vigna 2022). While this variable (named TOPBOT) has been included in every round of the ISSP since 2002, the SI module is the only survey to also ask about social origin/family background in these terms (Q13b). To further strengthen the social mobility component of this subject, a new third item (Q13c) is now added that asks for prospective social location 10 years from now.

### ***Pay criteria***

These questions ask about various justice criteria and principles for determining earnings. In theory, this battery, which was slimmed down from six to four items in the fifth wave, is intended to capture three different components that may justify pay differentials: education/authority (Q14a-b), performance on the job (Q14d), and social need (Q14c) (Evans, Kelley, and Peoples 2010).

### ***Types of society***

These questions offer insight into how people envisage the composition of the socioeconomic hierarchy of their societies along with the shape and level of inequality (Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi 1992; Evans and Kelley 2017). This is probed using five different illustrative images of how the socioeconomic hierarchy of societies may hypothetically look. The five visual images range from a very unequal society with most at the bottom ('Type A'), to a relatively equal society with a large upper-middle class ('Type E'). Respondents are first asked to select the image that best describes the type of society their country is today (Q15a), followed by a choice of the image that best represents what their country ought to be like (Q15b). Among other things, these questions have been used to study public beliefs about living in a 'middle-class society' (Larsen 2016). These items have been fielded since the second wave of the module, thus now constituting a time series spanning close to three decades.

**Table 6.** Items on replicated topics (continued).

Question	Variable	Social inequality topic	Module history
		<b>Subjective social class/status and mobility (4 items)</b>	
Q13a	v41	Groups tending toward top/bottom. Where would you put yourself on this scale?	87-92-99-09-19
Q13b	v42	Where did the family that you grew up in, fit in then?	09-19
Q13c	v43	Ahead 10 years from now, where do you think you will be on this scale?	19
Q22	v61	Which social class would you say you belong to?	87-92-99-09-19
		<b>Pay criteria (4 items)</b>	
Q14a	v44	Important for pay: How much responsibility goes with the job?	92-99-09-19
Q14b	v45	Important for pay: The number of years spent in education and training?	92-99-09-19
Q14c	v46	Important for pay: Whether the person has children to support?	92-99-09-19
Q14d	v47	Important for pay: How well he or she does the job?	92-99-09-19
		<b>Types of society (2 items)</b>	
Q15a	v48	Type of society: What type of society is [COUNTRY] today - which diagram comes closest?	92-99-09-19
Q15b	v49	Type of society: What do you think [COUNTRY] ought to be like - which would you prefer?	92-99-09-19
		<b>Occupational social mobility (4 items)</b>	
Q20a	v57	Father's employment relationship when R was [14-15-16] years old.	92-99-09-19
Q20b	v58	Mother's employment relationship when R was [14-15-16] years old.	09-19
Q20c	v59	When you were [14-15-16] years old, what kind of work did your father do?	87-92-99-09-19
Q20d	v60	When you were [14-15-16] years old, what kind of work did your mother do?	09-19

### **Occupational social mobility**

Social mobility and the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic (dis)advantage is a core subject in the sociological social stratification literature and beyond (Ganzeboom, Treiman, and Ultee 1991; Hout and DiPrete 2006). Since its inception, the ISSP SI module has been a forerunner in collecting primary data on occupational social mobility in multi-regional, multi-national and multi-cultural perspective (i.e., that is not restricted to a selection of Western countries in the Global North). The 2019 wave continues this proud tradition by repeating four items that ask about the employment relationship and occupation (coded into ISCO08) of the mother and father, respectively, when the respondent was 14-16 years old. For the purposes of social mobility analysis, this information can be combined with ISSP standard background variables measuring the respondent's own employment relationship and occupation. The ISSP standard background variables also includes information about the employment relationship and occupation of the respondent's partner, whenever applicable.

### **New topics**

The module includes five new topics to capture additional facets of inequality and policy dimensions that complement the replicated content. In Table 7, individual items related to each of these topics are listed.

**Table 7.** Items on new topics.

Question	Variable	Social inequality topic	Module history
		<b>Reducing inequality by market actors</b>	
Q4d	v24	It is the responsibility of private companies to reduce the differences in pay between their employees with high pay and those with low pay	19
Q5	v25	Who do you think should have the greatest responsibility for reducing differences in income between people with high incomes and people with low incomes?	19
		<b>Government inefficacy (2 items)</b>	
Q6	v26	Most politicians in [COUNTRY] do not care about reducing the differences in income between people with high incomes and people with low incomes.	19
Q7	v27	How successful do you think the government in [COUNTRY] is nowadays in reducing the differences in income between people with high incomes and people with low incomes?	19
		<b>Lived experience of inequality (2 items)</b>	
Q17a	v51	How often contact with people who are a lot poorer when you are out and about?	19
Q17b	v52	How often contact with people who are a lot richer when you are out and about?	19
		<b>Economic insecurity and deprivation (3 items)</b>	
Q18a	v53	Currently, how difficult to make ends meet from total household's income?	19
Q18b	v54	During next 12 months, how difficult to make ends meet from total household's income?	19
Q18c	v55	How often is a meal skipped because there is not enough money for food?	19
		<b>Social trust (1 item)</b>	
Q19	v56	People can be trusted or can't be too careful in dealing with people?	19

### **Reducing inequality by market actors**

The aim of this new topic is to learn more about *how* people prefer to reduce economic inequality. As a complement to questions that examine the perceived role of government, the purpose of this topic is to broaden the analytical scope by incorporating other potential role players in addressing inequality, with particular emphasis on policies and institutions that may reduce economic inequality in the labor market (Lindh and McCall 2023). First, Q4b about government-led reduction of income inequality was used as a template to construct a parallel measure (Q4d) covering attitudes toward private-led policies that reduce wage inequality among employees. This item thus complements Q4b in painting a thicker description of public support of policies to reduce economic inequality. The second new item (Q5) has a forced-choice format (drawing on McCall et al. 2017). This question is intended to capture two main dimensions. It firstly distinguishes whether respondents view the reduction of inequality as mainly an institutional (government/companies/labor unions) or individual (individuals themselves) responsibility – or alternatively whether they do not want to reduce inequality at all. Preferences for ‘individual responsibility’ or for ‘not reducing inequality at all’ are not covered explicitly anywhere else in the survey. Secondly, for the large group of people that think of inequality-reduction as mainly an institutional responsibility, this question provides more information on their preferences regarding the appropriate balance of responsibility between key institutional actors.

### **Government inefficacy**

Influential studies suggest that actual policymaking is disproportionately responsive to the preferences of more socioeconomically resourceful citizens (Gilens 2012; Elsässer and Schäfer 2023; Persson and Sundell 2023; but see also Elkjær and Iversen 2020).

Some segments of the population, often located toward the lower end of the socio-economic hierarchy, may thus feel excluded and frustrated with how governments are seemingly unwilling and/or ineffective in dealing with pressing insecurities and inequalities. Such sentiments may have socio-political implications, e.g., in terms of preferences for economic redistribution, populist voting, or a general withdrawal from societal participation. To provide insight into these issues, two new items (Q6 and Q7) were developed and included in the new wave of the module. These were inspired by classical items on external political efficacy, but adapted to deal explicitly with the issue of income inequality.

### ***Lived experience of inequality***

A growing interdisciplinary literature suggests that everyday lived experiences are fundamental in shaping peoples' perceptions and beliefs about inequality. Specifically, increased exposure to inequality may lead to greater awareness of and aversion to inequality (Mijs 2018; Condon and Wichowsky 2020). Therefore, two new items were included that ask respondents to report on such experiences, and which complement and contrast with other measurements of inequality present in the module. The two items (Q17a-b) focus on the frequency of contact in the respondent's daily life with people with a very different economic position to themselves (richer and poorer). These items build on the experiences of a collaborative project between the UK and South Africa on geographically related economic inequalities in South Africa (McLennan, Noble, and Wright 2016; Noble and Wright 2013).<sup>7</sup>

### ***Economic insecurity and deprivation***

The ISSP's standard background variables, such as occupation, household income and education, are extremely useful for sorting respondents into structural locations within various dimensions of socioeconomic inequality (e.g., social classes). Yet, a limitation of the module has been a shortage of items that deal explicitly with economic insecurity and deprivation. This was improved upon in the fifth wave by including three established survey questions that ask about current (q18a) and prospective (q18b) difficulties in making ends meet, as well as about having to skip meals due to lack of funds (q18c). In addition to varying across different social strata within countries, a general expectation is that the prevalence and patterns of economic insecurity and deprivation may vary between countries with different contextual characteristics.

### ***Social trust***

In recent years, empirical studies on the repercussions of income inequality for social cohesion have increased considerably. Improved data availability, as much as refined analytical tools, have contributed to the improvement of knowledge. Previous studies indicate that social trust is associated with beliefs about income inequality. For example, comparative studies from multiple continents suggest that trust is impaired in national contexts where income inequality is either perceived to be high or the result of unfair procedures (You 2012; Loveless 2013; Zmerli and Castillo 2015). In addition to being highly relevant *per se*, the inclusion of social trust (Q19) is thus also motivated in

relation to other topics dealing with various subjective and objective dimensions of inequality.

## Concluding remarks

The historical progression and expansion of the Social Inequality module from 1987 to 2019 have been impressive. In 1987, 11 countries participated, with the overwhelming majority belonging to the Western hemisphere. In 2019, the number rose to 34 participating countries, with all continents and world regions represented, though there are still notable gaps in terms of global coverage, as noted in the introduction.

Overall, however, the depth and comprehensive nature of the module as well as the spatial and geographical coverage of the ISSP data has opened up remarkable opportunities for monitoring socioeconomic change and conducting detailed and rigorous comparative analyses on social and economic inequalities from a citizen perspective. Most notably, the richness of the collected ISSP Social inequality modules – in terms of thematic depth and breadth, number of countries involved, and the long timespan covered – facilitate analytical approaches that incorporate time series and cross-national comparisons; two powerful and combinable designs for studying societal processes and development (see e.g. Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother 2016).

Progress in research on social and economic inequalities is, of course, not only based on the findings of survey research. To the contrary, recent influential works demonstrate how research based on “hard” economic data is pushing knowledge further (Salverda, Nolan, and Smeeding 2009; Piketty 2014; Atkinson 2015; Milanovic 2016). Indeed, we encourage scholars to engage in research agendas that further integrate these two traditions. The international data infrastructure for such ground-breaking analytical approaches and comparative studies has never been better.

## Notes

1. In doing so, it complements previous articles in this journal that detail other ISSP survey modules, related to “citizenship” (Scholz et al. 2017), “work orientations” (Jutz et al. 2018), “role of government” (Edlund and Lindh 2019), “social networks and social resources” (Sapin et al. 2020), and “religion” (Smith and Schapiro 2021).
2. The growing interest in the subject is indicated by several other cross-national projects that were initiated, by and large at the same time-period. Apart from LIS, formerly known as the ‘Luxembourg Income Study’, which collects “hard” socio-economic data from a variety of countries, we find two cross-national projects on attitudes: ‘The Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness’ (Wright 1989), and the ‘International Social Justice Project’ (Wegener 1991).
3. At the time of completing the article, 33 countries had their data approved and included in the integrated file or separately downloadable. India has formally deposited its data with the ISSP Archive, but it has not yet been approved for release. In this article, India is included as the 34<sup>th</sup> participating country in the 2019 social inequality round.
4. The convenor of the prior module in 2009, the Netherlands, represented by Harry Ganzeboom, contributed as additional advisory member. Australia, represented by Jonathan Kelley, was the convenor for the first three waves of the SI module.
5. The ISSP working principles state that “for a module to qualify as a replication, two-thirds of the items must be taken from one or more of the previous questionnaires of that topic

module.” This implies that 45 of the 60 items fielded in previous social inequality had to be retained for the 2019 wave.

6. The only item not fielded in the first three waves – but included subsequently – relates to ‘the importance of bribes’ in getting ahead in society. In the 1999 wave, the getting ahead in society battery was reduced to a mere two items to accommodate other social inequality content.
7. The research was financed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (ES/I034889/1). Within this project, the development and national field testing of initial versions of the ISSP SI exposure to inequality items were included in the 2017 annual round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS).

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## Data availability statement

Like all ISSP data, the Social Inequality module is available as an open access resource. It can be downloaded at no cost from the ISSP Research Group (2022) *via* the following doi: 10.4232/1.14009.

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## Appendix A: List of participating countries in the social inequality module

Note: X = country included in the integrated file; x = downloadable as separate files. For more information, see <https://www.gesis.org/en/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-topic/social-inequality>

Region and Country	Wave				
	I (1987)	II (1992)	III (1999)	IV (2009)	V (2019)
<b>East Asia and Pacific</b>					
Australia	X	X	X	X	X
China				X	
Japan			X	X	X
New Zealand		X	X	X	X
Philippines		X	X	X	X
South Korea				X	
Taiwan				X	X
Thailand					X
<b>Europe and Central Asia</b>					
Austria	X	X	X	X	X
Belgium				X	
Bulgaria		X	X	X	X
Croatia				X	X
Cyprus			X		
Czech Republic		X	X	X	X
Denmark			X	X	X
Estonia					x

(continued)

Continued.

Region and Country	Wave				
	I (1987)	II (1992)	III (1999)	IV (2009)	V (2019)
Finland				X	X
France			X	X	X
Germany	X	X	X	X	X
Great Britain	X	X	X	X	X
Hungary	X	X	X	X	x
Iceland				X	X
Ireland	x		X		
Italy	X	X		X	X
Latvia			X	X	
Lithuania				X	X
Netherlands	X		X	x	
Northern Ireland			X		
Norway		X	X	X	X
Poland	X	X	X	X	
Portugal			X	X	
Russia		X	X	X	X
Slovakia		X	X	X	x
Slovenia		X	X	X	X
Spain		x	X	X	
Sweden		X	X	X	X
Switzerland	X		X	X	X
Turkey				X	
Ukraine				X	x
<b>Latin America and Caribbean</b>					
Argentina				X	
Brazil			X		
Chile			X	X	X
Suriname					X
Venezuela				X	X
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>					
Israel			X	X	X
<b>North America</b>					
Canada		X	X	x	
USA	X	X	X	X	X
<b>South Asia</b>					
India					x
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>					
South Africa				X	X

Note: For regional classification, use has been made of The World Bank's seven-category analytical grouping (<https://datatopics.worldbank.org/sdgdAtlas/archive/2017/the-world-by-region.html>).