

Viktória Szirmai (ed): From spatial inequalities to social well-being. Kodolányi János University of Applied Sciences, Székesfehérvár, 2015. 187 p.

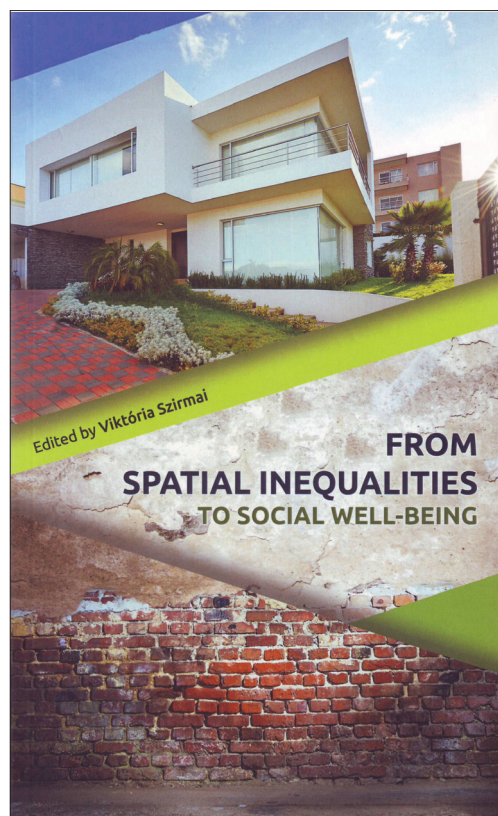
At the beginning of 2015 a substantial volume was published in Hungarian language edited by the prominent Hungarian sociologist Viktória SZIRMAI which contained studies on spatial inequalities and social well-being in the Hungarian context. Actually, the English version of the volume entitled “From spatial inequalities to social well-being” summarises the main results of the most exciting studies. Eight papers selected for the English version are obviously not enough to walk around the whole subject in detail, but more than enough to outline the main context of contemporary spatial inequalities and well-being in Hungary and to provide a careful analysis of the country-specific situation. In my review I try to summarise the main findings of the book in order to provide additional information to the public and researchers interested in the topic.

In her short introduction entitled „The history of researching social well-being in Hungary” Viktória SZIRMAI outlines the main concept of the volume. She

emphasises that the core concept of the book (i.e. ‘social well-being’) builds on the theoretical construct of A. Joseph STIGLITZ, Nobel Prize-winner American economist. The well-known Stiglitz Report published in 2009 stated that the GDP is an inappropriate index to measure social progress, thus, new indicators and analytical tools are needed for describing and modelling of social processes. Instead of one-dimensional indicators on production and economy so typical for the 1970s and 1980s the emphasis should be placed on the sophisticated measurement of social well-being. Viktória SZIRMAI draws the readers’ attention to the fact that the Stiglitz model unfortunately does not take into account the spatial aspects, namely national and regional characteristics. This is actually the main aim of the volume, to shed light on regional variations of social well-being of those living in metropolitan and rural areas through empirical surveys. The main question of the comprehensive research was how well-being is determined by spatial location and social structural positions of the population?

The initial statement of the study „Social well-being issues in Europe: The possibility of starting to establish a more competitive Europe” refers to the fact that European economy has lost its competitive advantages against other world regions since the 1980s, which resulted a gradual downsizing and reducing of welfare measures within national economic policies. Due to the withdrawing welfare systems in the last couple of decades rising urban poverty and intensifying migration processes could be detected throughout the EU member states. Next to impacts of globalisation processes the transformation of the welfare systems and administrative structures can also be mentioned, which induced polarisation processes in the regional structures: new spatial dependencies and disparities have emerged in Western Europe. Due to the emerging socio-economic differentiation spatial differences became more pronounced. The study comes to the conclusion that in the last two decades efforts in Europe to solve (or at least to soften) socio-economic and environmental problems have failed, and the civil sector could not show resounding success in this field either. That is the reason why the author assumes that the Stiglitz model could bring a new approach and more likely could lead to success in improving European competitiveness.

The chapter on „International study of public policies on well-being” provides an overview on the emergence and development of European welfare policies and examines how the question of well-being appears in significant international documents. Considering the achievements and failures of mod-



ernisation in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and based on the results of the UN-Habitat Sustainable Cities Programme the paper points out that social transformation of the CEE countries is actually completed, the standard of living has improved considerably but very unevenly, and significant concentrations of unemployment has emerged. According to the authors, large cities and metropolitan regions prevail in the settlement development contrary to small towns and rural regions, and regional development has become uneven. With regard to demographic trends low birth rates and aging are the prime challenges to be solved in the CEE countries. The economy is characterised by a lack of co-operation, the social housing sector is weak due to the privatisation and a dramatic rise of housing and living costs could be observed in these countries. Thus, the European Union's urban development policy could not convey the urban development patterns and models everywhere in Europe. Actually, the new model for social well-being policy should be based on the characteristics of the local society and they should be conveyed clearly, the needs and satisfaction of local residents must be taken into account, and well-being for urban residents should appear as a priority issue in these policies. The study comes to the conclusion that European urban policies provide a mix of legislative and business models, and although elements of well-being issues appear often, well-being seems not to be the main objective of these policies.

The chapter on „The socio-demographic structure of the Hungarian Metropolitan Regions” deals with the socio-demographic conditions of 9 Hungarian metropolitan regions based on empirical analyses focusing on demography, migration, education and income conditions. Authors come to the conclusion that social conditions in metropolitan areas on the countryside are less favourable than in Budapest. Demographic indicators are deteriorating on the countryside, mainly due to the declining population figures and the growth of outmigration. Demographic and social differences among the major provincial cities and Budapest have clearly grown during the past decade.

In the next study „The spatial social characteristics of Hungarian metropolitan regions and the transformation of the core-periphery model” we get an insight into the transformation of the spatial structures of the investigated metropolitan regions. The chapter is based on comparative analyses of empirical research results carried out in 2005 and 2014 with the same methodology. Results of the first survey in 2005 showed that inner-city areas could be characterised by a strong socio-spatial hierarchy, and the social status of the population clearly dropped towards the periphery. Due to the outmigration of middle-class people to the suburbs inner-urban areas became strongly differentiated, whereas the social upgrading of the

periphery gained momentum. Results from 2014 survey suggest a strong regional and social polarisation. On the one hand, the spatial expansion of higher status strata could be detected, on the other hand, the level of social exclusion has clearly increased. While inside the compact cities spatial disparities somewhat decreased, the social status of neighbourhoods levelled out, at the peripheries (both inside and outside the city-limits) new better-off residential areas emerged. This could be predominantly traced back to the outmigration of higher status groups. The process is labelled by the authors as ‘suburbanisation inside the city’. Anyway, according to the empirical data the status of the city centre has nowhere diminished, and thanks to the sporadic gentrification processes the core cities will most probably maintain (or even increase) their socio-economic status.

The upcoming study „Social well-being characteristics and spatial-social determinations” examines the already well-known metropolitan regions but this time the characteristics of well-being are addressed. Authors detect the patterns of Stiglitzian dimensions (i.e. material living standards, health, education, personal activities, political voice and governance, social connections and relationships, environment, insecurity) on intra-urban and regional scale in Hungary. According to the investigations they conclude that due to the strengthening weight of the middle class, and the ongoing polarisation within the society the inner-city will most probably continue to play a leading role in the core-periphery model, however, the transition zone seems to become more mosaic-like.

The chapter entitled „Well-being deficits in disadvantaged regions” provides a comprehensive assessment of the so-called ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ well-being in four disadvantageous micro-regions. In order to explore the level of ‘objective’ well-being in the case study areas educational attainment, labour market position and financial situation of the population are compared in the first section of the study. Different characteristics of ‘subjective’ well-being are presented through the analysis of differences in term of happiness and satisfaction. All indicators for objective and subjective well-being are the weakest in peripheral marginalised communities, and differences are most pronounced in the case of objective well-being. Among determining social and economic factors for well-being deficits aging, decreasing population, stagnation of the local economy, lack of industrial activities and reduction in employment can be mentioned. Peripheralisation, economic marginalisation and negative demographic processes could not be significantly improved even by government measures.

In the final chapter of „How can we get from spatial inequalities to social well-being?” the editor of the book concludes that globalisation produces inequalities and the global economy actually works in inequalities effectively. International research on

competitiveness also testifies this experience. Over the past decades a significant deconcentration (of jobs and people) has taken place, and urban areas have been torn to developed and underdeveloped areas. In particular, social and spatial differences have become very conspicuous especially between metropolitan and rural disadvantaged micro-regions. Thus, in the coming years it would be important to reduce regional disparities and to support the development of well-being. The way out could be the assessment of the level of well-being of various social strata in urban and rural areas, and after defining well-being deficits differentiated steps should be performed in order to increase the well-being of these social strata.

We can conclude that the aesthetically pleasing, properly illustrated book gives a good insight into the social well-being issue of metropolitan and rural areas in Hungary. The merit of the book is that

the outcomes are predominantly based on empirical research and a comparative and interdisciplinary approach is applied.

The quality of the book could have been further improved with valuable photos, which could have provided a better understanding of local conditions to foreigners and readers without knowledge of local (Hungarian) circumstances. In any case, the book is a good starting point for those who deal with social differentiation of metropolitan areas in CEE and more specifically in Hungary, or want to get deeper insight into the subject of social well-being. Honourable is the work of the editor because the joint research and publishing of the book have successfully contributed to the cooperation of sociology and geography.

TAMÁS EGEDY