

Does inequality hurt economic performance?

By [Francesco Saraceno](#)

Economic theory has long neglected the effects of income distribution on the performance of the economy. Students were taught right from Introduction to Economics 101 that the subject of efficiency had to be separated from considerations of equity. The idea is that the size of the cake had to be expanded to the maximum before it is shared. It was implicit in this dichotomy that economists should address the issue of efficiency and leave the question of distribution (or redistribution) to the politicians. In this framework, the economist's role is simply to ensure that choices about the channels for redistribution through taxation and public spending do not affect growth by interfering with the incentives of economic agents. Echoes of this view can be found both in the debate about the taxation of very large incomes envisaged by the French Government as well as in authors like [Raghuram Rajan](#) who justify inequality with references to technical progress and international trade, a view refuted by [Paul Krugman](#).

Since the work of Simon Kuznets in the 1950s, some economists have of course questioned whether excessive inequality might not inhibit economic growth, in particular by blocking the accumulation of human capital. But this has long been a minority view among economists. Indeed, the dramatic increase in inequality documented among others by [Atkinson, Piketty and Saez](#) as well as by institutions such as the [OECD](#) and the [IMF](#) failed to give rise to a deep-going reflection about the relationship between inequality and economic performance.

It was the crisis that revived this concern. Growing inequality [is now suspected](#) of being a source of increasing

household debt and speculative bubbles, leading to the accumulation of internal and external imbalances that have set off the current crisis. This is the argument developed by authors like [Joseph Stiglitz](#) and [James Galbraith](#).

Today the dichotomy between efficiency and distribution is no longer tenable. Inequality is becoming an essential theme in economic analysis, for both the short and long terms. To stimulate discussion on this topic, the OFCE and the SKEMA Business School are holding a workshop on “[Inequality and Economic Performance](#)” in Paris on 16 and 17 October 2012.