

Growth and inequality in the European Union

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“Growth and Inequality: Challenges for the Economies of the European Union” was the theme of the 14th EUROFRAME Symposium on Economic Policy Issues in the European Union held on 9 June 2017 in Berlin. [EUROFRAME](#) is a network of European economic institutes that includes DIW and IFW (Germany), WIFO (Austria), ETLA (Finland), OFCE (France), ESRI (Ireland), PROMETEIA (Italy), CPB (Netherlands), CASE (Poland) and NIESR (United Kingdom). Since 2004, EUROFRAME has organized a symposium on an important subject for the European economies every year.

This year, 27 contributions from researchers, selected by a scientific committee, were presented at the symposium, most of which are available on the conference [web page](#). This text provides a summary of the studies presented and discussed at the symposium.

As DIW President Marcel Fratzcher pointed out in his opening remarks, the rise in inequality over the last 30 years has meant that inequalities that were previously subjects of study reserved for researchers in social policy have now become subjects for numerous economists. Several questions were posed: why this rise in inequality? Is the increase in inequality in each country a necessary consequence of the reduction in inequality between countries, in Europe or at the global level? What are the macroeconomic consequences of this increase? What economic policies could avoid this?

Income inequality: the facts. Mark Dabrowski (CASE, Warsaw) – “Is there a trade-off between global and national inequality?” – stresses that the growth of inequalities within each country

(especially in the United States and China) goes hand in hand with the reduction of inequalities between countries, as both are fuelled by commercial and financial globalization. However, some advanced countries have succeeded in halting the growth in internal inequalities, which shows the continuing importance of national policy.

Oliver Denk (OECD) – “Who are the Top 1 Percent Earners in Europe?” – analyses the structure of the 1% of employees earning the highest incomes in the EU countries. They represent between 9% of total payroll in the United Kingdom to 3.8% in Finland (4.7% in France). Statistically, they are older than the mass of overall employees (this is less clear in the East European countries), more masculine (this is less clear in the Nordic countries), and more highly educated. They are more numerous in finance, communication and business services.

Tim Callan, Karina Doorley and Michael Savage (ESRI Dublin), analyse the growth in income inequality in the countries most affected by the crisis (“Inequality in EU crisis countries: Identifying the impacts of automatic stabilisers and discretionary policy”). In these five countries, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus, primary income inequalities have increased due to the crisis, but thanks to automatic tax and social transfers, inequalities in disposable income have remained stable in Ireland and Portugal and (to a lesser degree) in Greece.

Carlos Vacas-Soriano and Enrique Fernández-Macías (Eurofound) – “Inequalities and employment patterns in Europe before and after the Great Recession” – show that income inequality decreased overall in the EU before 2008, as new entrants caught up with the older members. Since 2008, the Great Recession has deepened inequalities between countries and within many countries. The growth of internal inequality is due mainly to rising unemployment; it is striking traditionally egalitarian countries (Germany, Sweden,

Denmark); and it is mitigated by family solidarity and social protection, whose roles are nevertheless under question.

Modelling the growth / inequality relationship. Alberto Cardiac (University of Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan) and Francesco Saraceno (OFCE, Paris) – “Inequality and Imbalances: An open-economy agent-based model” – present a two-country model. In one, the search for external surpluses leads to pressure on wages and a depression of domestic demand, which is offset by export earnings. In the other, the growth of inequality leads to a downward trend in consumption, which is offset by the expansion of credit. The result is an endogenous debt crisis when the household debt of the second country reaches a limit value.

Alain Desdoigts (IEDES, University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne) and Fernando Jaramillo (Universidad del Rosario, Bogota) – “Learning by doing, inequality, and sustained growth: A middle-class perspective” – present a model where innovations can be applied in production only in sectors with a sufficient size, hence those that produce the goods purchased by the middle class (so neither in the luxury goods sector nor in the low-end goods sector). Growth is therefore stronger as the middle class expands. Redistribution is favourable to growth if it is made from the rich to the middle class, and unfavourable if it goes from the middle class to the poor.

Inequality, financialisation, monetary policy. The article by Dirk Bezemer and Anna Samarina (University of Groningen) – “Debt shift, financial development and income inequality in Europe” – distinguishes between two types of bank credit: credit for financial and real estate activities, and credit for non-financial enterprises and consumption. They explain the growth of inequality in the developed countries by the growing role of credit that finances finance to the detriment of credit that finances production.

The article by Mathias Klein (DIW Berlin) and Roland Winkler (TU Dortmund University) – “Austerity, inequality, and private debt overhang” – argues that restrictive fiscal policies have little impact on activity and employment when private debt is low (because there is a full Barro effect); they have a restrictive effect on activity and increase income inequality when private debt is high. Therefore, fiscal restraint should be applied only once private debt has been reduced.

Davide Furceri, Prakash Loungani and Aleksandra Zdzienicka (IMF) – “The effect of monetary policy shocks on inequality” – point out that the impact of monetary policy on income inequality is ambiguous. An expansionary policy can reduce unemployment and lower interest rates (which reduces inequality); it can also lead to inflation and raise the price of assets (which increases inequality). Empirically, it appears that a restrictive policy increases income inequality unless it is caused by higher growth.

Inequalities and social policy. Alexei Kireyev and Jingyang Chen (IMF) – “Inclusive growth framework” – advocate for growth indicators that include trends in poverty and in inequality in income and consumption.

Dorothee Ihle (University of Muenster) – “Treatment effects of Riester participation along the wealth distribution: An instrumental quantile regression analysis” – analyses the impact of Riester pension plans on the wealth of German households. They significantly increase the wealth of the participating households at the bottom of the income distribution, but these are relatively few in number, while this mainly has wealth redistribution effects for middle-class households.

Inequality, poverty and mobility. Katharina Weddige-Haaf (Utrecht University) and Clemens Kool (CPB and Utrecht University) – “The impact of fiscal policy and internal migration on regional growth and convergence in Germany” –

analyse the factors for convergence of per capita income between the old and new German Länder. Convergence has been driven by internal migration, investment subsidies and structural funds, but fiscal transfers in general have had no effect. The 2008 crisis favoured convergence by hitting the richest regions in particular.

Elizabeth Jane Casabianca and Elena Giarda (Prometeia, Bologna) – “From rags to riches, from riches to rags: Intra-generational mobility in Europe before and after the Great Recession” – analyse the mobility of individual incomes in four European countries: Spain, France, Italy and the United Kingdom. Before the crisis, this was strong in Spain and weak in Italy. It declined markedly after the crisis, particularly in Spain; it remained stable in the United Kingdom.

Luigi Campiglio (Università Cattolica del S. Cuore di Milano) – “Absolute poverty, food and housing” – analyses absolute poverty in Italy using an indicator based on food consumption. He shows that poor families bear particularly high housing costs, which cuts into their food consumption and health care spending. Poor families with children are tenants and were hit especially hard by the crisis. Social policy should offer them better protection through targeted transfers in cash or in kind (health, education).

Georgia Kaplanoglou and Vassilis T. Rapanos (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and Academy of Athens) – “Evolutions in consumption inequality and poverty in Greece: The impact of the crisis and austerity policies” – point out that the crisis and austerity policies have reduced GDP and household consumption by about 30% in Greece. This has been accompanied by an increase in inequality in consumption, which the paper documents in detail. It analyses in particular the effect of VAT hikes. Families with children were especially hard hit.

Labour market. Christian Hutter (IAB, German Federal

Employment Agency) and Enzo Weber (IAB and Universität Regensburg) – “Labour market effects of wage inequality and skill-biased technical change in Germany” – use German data to estimate a structural vector model for analysing the link between wage inequalities, employment, neutral technical progress and technical progress favouring skilled labour. The latter raises labour productivity and wages, but also wage inequalities, and it reduces employment. Wage inequalities have a negative impact on employment and overall productivity.

Eckhard Hein and Achim Truger (Berlin School of Economics and Law, Institute for International Political Economy) – “Opportunities and limits of rebalancing the Eurozone via wage policies: Theoretical considerations and empirical illustrations for the case of Germany” – analyse the impact of wage increases in Germany on the rebalancing of current account balances in Europe. They show that these play a role not only through a competitiveness effect, but also through a demand effect by modifying the wage / profit distribution and by boosting consumption. They must therefore also be supported by an increase in public spending.

Camille Logeay and Heike Joebges (HTW Berlin) – “Could a wage formula prevent excessive current account imbalances in euro area countries? A study on wage costs and profit developments in peripheral countries” – show that the rule “wages must grow in line with labour productivity and the inflation target” should have had stabilizing effects in Europe both on the competitiveness of the member countries as well as on their domestic demand. This nevertheless assumes that companies do not take advantage of this to boost their profits and that no country seeks to increase its competitiveness.

Hassan Molana (University of Dundee), Catia Montagna (University of Aberdeen) and George E. Onwordi (University of Aberdeen) – “Reforming the Liberal Welfare State: International Shocks, unemployment and household income shares” – construct a model to show that a free market

country, such as the United Kingdom, could improve the functioning of its labour market by reducing flexibility to move towards a flexi-security model: higher unemployment benefits, restrictions on redundancies, greater spending on training, and support for hiring. By boosting labour productivity, this strategy would reduce the structural unemployment rate and increase the share of profits.

Guillaume Claveres (Centre d'Economie de la Sorbonne, Paris) and Marius Clemens (DIW, Berlin) – “Unemployment Insurance Union” – propose a model for European unemployment insurance that would cover part of the expenses of unemployment benefits. This could reduce fluctuations in consumption and unemployment resulting from specific shocks. This assumes, however, that it would apply only to cyclical unemployment, which is difficult to define.

Bruno Contini (Università di Torino and Collegio Carlo Alberto), José Ignacio Garcia Perez (Universidad Pablo de Olavide), Toralf Pusch (Hans-Boeckler Stiftung, Düsseldorf) and Roberto Quaranta (Collegio Carlo Alberto) – “New approaches to the study of long-term non-employment duration via survival analysis: Italy, Germany and Spain” – analyse involuntary non-activity (people who would like to work but have given up looking for a job and lost their rights to unemployment benefits) in Germany, Italy and Spain. This is particularly important and sustainable in Spain and Italy. They caution against measures to encourage redundancies, job insecurity and incentives for undeclared work.

Taxation. Markku Lehmus, (ETLA, Helsinki) – “Distributional and employment effects of labour tax changes: Finnish evidence over the period 1996-2008” – uses a general equilibrium model with heterogeneous agents to evaluate the impact of the reduction in the taxation of employment in Finland from 1996 to 2008. He shows that this explains only a small share of the rise in employment (1.4 points out of 16%) and of the rise in income inequality.

Sarah Godar (Berlin School of Economics and Law) and Achim Truger (IMK and Berlin School of Economics and Law) – “Shifting priorities in EU tax policies: A stock-taking exercise over three decades” – analyse the evolution of taxation in the EU states: from 1980 to 2007, taxation became less progressive with lower marginal rates of income tax and corporation tax, and preferred treatment of capital income. The crisis of 2008 and the difficulties with the public finances temporarily slowed this trend; an increase in revenues was, however, often sought by raising VAT.

Alexander Krenek and Margit Schratzenstaller (WIFO) – “Sustainability-oriented future EU funding: A European net wealth tax” – argue for the introduction of a European household wealth tax, which could help finance the European budget.

The macroeconomic consequences of inequalities. Bjoern O. Meyer (University of Rome – Tor Vergata) – “Savings glut without saving: Retirement saving and the interest rate decline in the United States between 1984 and 2013” – explains 60% of the decline in the interest rate in the United States, despite the decline in the overall household saving rate, by demographic factors (the differential rise in life expectancy), the slowdown in labour productivity gains and the increase in income inequality.

Marius Clemens, Ferdinand Fichtner, Stefan Gebauer, Simon Junker and Konstantin A. Kholodilin (DIW Berlin) – “How does income inequality influence economic growth in Germany?” – present a macroeconomic model in which short-term income inequalities increase the productivity of each asset (incentive effect), but reduce overall consumption (savings effect); in the long term, they have a negative impact on the formation of the human capital of young people in the working classes. Hence an exogenous increase in income inequalities first has a negative effect on GDP (demand effect), then positive (individual incentive effect) and then again negative

in the long term (human capital effect). The effect is always negative on household consumption and positive on the external balance.