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Equivalence of living conditions

URN: 0156-55997774

This is a translation of the following entry:

Rosenfeld, Martin T. W. (2018): Gleichwertigkeit der Lebensverhältnisse.
In: ARL – Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung (Hrsg.):
Handwörterbuch der Stadt- und Raumentwicklung. Hannover, 837-849.

The original version can be accessed here:
urn:nbn:de:0156-5599777

Typesetting and layout: ProLinguo GmbH
Translation and proofreading: ProLinguo GmbH

Recommended citation:
Rosenfeld, Martin T. W. (2018): Equivalence of living conditions.
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0156-55997774.

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Equivalence of living conditions

Contents

'Equivalence of living conditions' aims to improve the social and economic situation in disadvantaged regions until a minimum level is reached. In determining the level and the required government measures, potential negative effects and social changes, such as demographic change, must be considered.

1 General explanation and discussion of the term

The term 'equivalence of living conditions' (ELC) refers to the goal of configuring the living conditions in all regions (▷ *Region*) of a large spatial unit through government measures so that the living conditions attained in every region tend to be viewed by the local population as equivalent to those in the other regions. The goal of ELC is based on the expectation that a corresponding equivalence (and therefore a convergence between the regions) is not brought about automatically, but that, without political intervention, the spatial disparities (▷ *Disparities, spatial*) will be reinforced over time and the living conditions of a few regions will remain increasingly behind those of the better developed regions (tendency towards divergence). Accordingly, the goal of ELC can be specified as an endeavour to use government measures to improve the living conditions in regions that have lagged significantly behind other regions and are referred to below as disadvantaged regions, until a politically determined level is attained (that satisfies the demand for equivalence).

Appropriate measures to bring about ELC can be subsumed under the umbrella term *interregional equalisation policy* (cf. Rosenfeld/Alecke/Franz et al. 2007) and entail a transfer of resources from the better developed regions to the disadvantaged regions, however that transfer may be designed. As a result, the effects of dispossession can be expected for the better developed regions that can have negative effects on the overall area in question. The principle of ELC is the special variant of the general goal of interregional redistribution favouring disadvantaged regions that is typical in Germany and currently (2014) accepted by broad parts of the public and policymakers. In Germany, the objective of equivalence is mainly important for ▷ *Spatial planning (Raumordnung)*, regional policy (▷ *Regional economic policy*), the regulation of financial resources distributed to the territorial authorities (▷ *Fiscal equalisation at the level of local authorities*; ▷ *Fiscal equalisation between the states*), and for social policies (social security system). The goal of ELC can also refer to the relationship between city districts or boroughs within larger municipalities or cities (cf. Völkel 2002), although this aspect is mostly omitted from the discussion of ELC. Independently of interregional redistribution measures, there are also discussions in various political areas about approaches to spatially unified rules or an interregional alignment of regulations; wage policy is but one example.

A radical alternative strategy to interregional redistribution is known as the 'passive regeneration' of disadvantaged regions. According to this strategy, there would be no transfer of resources to disadvantaged regions, and migration would be tolerated or positively sanctioned (cf. Dietrichs 1983).

2 Historical development and current significance

Assistance benefitting disadvantaged regions has been discussed in Germany since at least the end of the First World War. These discussions were prompted by the increasing migration of the workforce from agriculture and the growing agglomeration of jobs in the industrial and service sector in the strongly expanding urban regions (▷ *Urban region*) that started in the second half of the 19th century (cf. Kaelble/Hohls 1989: 295 et seq.). The unfavourable consequences of the changed eastern German borders after the war (cf. Roidl 1994: 15 et seq.) also played a role. Beginning in the mid-1920s, policies pursued the objective of supporting the agrarian eastern provinces, in what was known as *Osthilfe* (Eastern Aid) (cf. Roidl 1994). For the spatial planning policies of the Third Reich, the guiding principle of just compensation through equal living conditions (which tends to be similar to the objective of ELC) was critical, according to which metropolitan areas were deconcentrated and rural regions were to be strengthened (cf. Wiechmann 2014: 8). After the Second World War, funds for improving the regional economic structure in disadvantaged regions were deployed starting in 1951 (cf. Reissert 1975: 32). Since 1949, a process of fiscal equalisation between the states has been undertaken that aims to redistribute financial resources to the benefit of financially weak federal states (Article 106(4) of the Basic Law *(Grundgesetz, GG)* as notified on 23 May 1949). Although the wording 'standardisation of living conditions' had already appeared in the Basic Law of 1949 (Article 72(2) of the Basic Law as notified on 23 May 1949), the goal of ELC was not initially much of a theme in political discussions (Hübler/Scharmer/Weichtmann et al. 1980: 9). This changed in the 1960s. Due to the accelerated rural exodus and a simultaneous trend towards ▷ *Suburbanisation*, policymakers increasingly focused on measures for interregional redistribution. The goal of ELC played an essential role, not least in the great financial reform of 1969/70 (cf. Reichel 2009: 38 et seq.). Due to the structural upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s, however, the political weight of ELC weakened (cf. Reichel 2009: 69 et seq.).

The political relevance of ELC initially received a fresh impetus with German reunification. When it became evident around the turn of the millennium that the gap between east and west Germany could not be successfully closed over the short term, this ignited a critical discussion about the future of the objective of equivalence. This also occurred against the background of increasing international competition between locations, the need to consolidate the public budget, the planned expiry of the special subsidy for the east German regions, and the demographic change with its foreseeable consequences, especially a further thinning out of the population in many disadvantaged regions (▷ *Demographic change*). The negative effects of interregional redistribution were more strongly emphasised while the guiding principle of competitive federalism (▷ *Federalism*) and the subsidising of urban and metropolitan regions (▷ *Metropolitan regions*) became more important. This led to (among other things) the opinion that the goal of ELC had to be reinterpreted (cf. e.g. Blotevogel/Aring/Bräuer et al. 2006). Renewed discussions on the future relevance of ELC have begun after the Conference of Ministers for Spatial Planning *(Ministerkonferenz für Raumordnung, MKRO)* presented a draft of new 'Guiding principles and action strategies for spatial development' in 2013, in which ELC is expressed in the guiding principle of 'safeguarding the provision of public services' (▷ *Guiding principles for spatial development*; *MKRO* 2013); at almost the same time, a study by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development *(Berlin-Instituts für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung, BI)* and the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) – while referring to the developmental trends already mentioned – promoted 'eliminating' the goal of ELC and establishing plans for 'closing individual villages' (Kuhn/Klingholz 2013: 70 et seq.).

The principle of ELC is also significant under constitutional law for the relation between the Federal Government and the states and the delineation of their responsibilities. According to the current version of Article 72(2) of the Basic Law, the Federation can claim 'the right to legislate […] if and to the extent that the establishment of equivalent living conditions throughout the federal territory […] renders federal regulation necessary in the national interest.' With this regulation (or its predecessor, which has similar content as described above), intervention by the Federal Government in the autonomy of the states and local authorities (and therefore a general tendency towards centralisation) could always be justified (cf. e.g. Reichel 2009: 17). With the new version of the Basic Law in 1994, the original phrase ‘standardised living conditions’ in Article 72 was replaced by ‘equivalent living conditions’ to limit the Federal Government’s options to intervene (cf. Reichel 2009: 119).

3 Justifications for interregional redistribution

All approaches to justifying assistance for disadvantaged regions (of which Figure 1 gives an overview) are based on value judgments, since welfare deficits based on spatial disparities are partially quantifiable if need be. Therefore, it must always be asked to what extent more or less interregional redistribution subsidises the common good (▷ *Common good*) or the particular interests of individual regions or professions, such as agriculture (cf. Hübler/Scharmer/Weichtmann et al. 1980: 136), or strives to expand individual skills, versus advancing individual stakeholders.

Figure 1: Arguments in favour of interregional redistribution

<table>
<tr><th colspan="8">Interregional redistribution is justified with arguments from three areas:</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Social policies</th><th colspan="4">Economy</th><th colspan="2">Politics</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">The general goal of individual distributive justice entails guaranteeing ...</td><td rowspan="2">Exceeding the optimum agglomerations in prospering regions</td><td rowspan="2">Emigration from disadvantaged regions devalues the existing infrastructure</td><td rowspan="2">Transaction costs prevent migration of capital</td><td rowspan="2">Positive external effects of public services in disadvantaged regions</td><td rowspan="2">Strengthening cohesion between the regions (territorial cohesion)</td><td rowspan="2">Securing the outer borders of the state territory</td></tr>
<tr><td>adequate access to essential public services regardless of one’s place of residence</td><td>the possibility of finding an easily accessible job opportunity regardless of one’s place of residence</td></tr>
</table>

Source: The author

3.1 Sociopolitical aspects

From a sociopolitical viewpoint, the goal of interregional redistribution must be understood as a spatial dimension of individual distributive justice, from which interpersonal redistribution is derived with the help of fees and social transfers benefitting socially weaker persons. The high societal value of interpersonal redistribution in Germany is expressed in the constitution’s postulate of a ‘social state’ (Article 20(1) of the Basic Law). If – as in Germany – the regulation of social transfers is largely delegated to the central state and no serious regional differentiation of the transfer occurs, measures for interpersonal redistribution also have spatial effects in the sense of a transfer of resources benefitting disadvantaged regions with weak economic structures and a high number of recipients of such transfers.

Social transfers can ensure private households a minimum income. On the other hand, an adequate supply of publicly provided goods to the residents of a disadvantaged region – insofar as the intraregional tax revenue is insufficient on account of the structural weakness – can be ensured only with the help of a transfer of resources to the respective competent regional or ▷ *Territorial authority* (federal state, district, local authority). Insofar as a region's structural weakness is accompanied by a low population density, the problem of the sustainability of public infrastructure arises in addition to a lack of financial resources (cf. e.g. Dehne/Borchard/Grabski-Kieron et al. 2008: 3). If a public facility is underutilised because there is only a limited number of users, resources are wasted. Then it must be asked to what extent such inefficiencies must be accepted and such facilities subsidised to ensure an adequate supply for residents of the region. This sustainability problem is also a concern for private providers of important household-related services. Those providers will settle only in regions that can guarantee the minimum demand needed to ensure profitability. The support of appropriate services can be derived from the motive of distributive justice.

The goal of distributive justice can be interpreted to include an assurance that the residents of a disadvantaged region have the opportunity to earn income near their place of residence (cf. Blotevogel/Aring/Bräuer et al. 2006: 5). This can be used to justify measures to subsidise enterprises. Another justification for this comes from the general principle of taking preventive rather than reactive measures for reducing social need.

3.2 Economic motives

Measures for interregional redistribution can be justified economically by the suspicion of an allocative market failure, although this cannot be fully proven empirically. The divergence between prospering and disadvantaged regions can be accompanied by an economically unfavourable spatial distribution of production factors. For the most part, the drawbacks associated with agglomerations (e.g. environmental damage) are externalised in metropolitan areas by private households and companies and therefore do not put a brake on the concentration process (cf. Vanhove/Klaassen 1987: 23 et seq.). The agglomeration process can generate additional costs through the devaluation of the available infrastructure in disadvantaged regions as well as the need to build up ▷ *Infrastructure* in the metropolitan areas (cf. e.g. Thoss 1981: 69). Transaction costs can hinder the migration of capital goods from well developed regions into disadvantaged ones, where the factor of work is not optimally used (cf. e.g. Vanhove/Klaassen 1987: 19 et seq.). A further economic justification for interregional redistribution is based on the potential external effects that goods, which are publicly provided on a decentralised level (e.g. by primary education), can have on national economic performance (cf. Zimmermann 1987: 55).

3.3 Political aspects

Interregional redistribution can ultimately be legitimised by the strengthening of the cohesion between the regions within an overall area and by preventing other costs from arising , such as in relation to the political radicalisation of the population of individual subareas or even territorial separation (cf. Vanhove/Klaassen 1987: 31 et seq.). The significance of this motive is expressed on the EU level with the guiding principle of ▷ *Territorial cohesion*. This can also be connected with the securing of the outer borders of a country.

4 Costs of interregional redistribution

The criticism of the implementation of ELC is primarily based on economic disadvantages that could be connected with the interregional redistribution and are summarily represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Arguments against interregional redistribution

The disadvantages of interregional redistribution are mainly justified with economic arguments:			
Loss of growth in the donor regions	**Negative incentives for beneficiary regions**	**Choice of suboptimal locations**	**Sunk costs in disadvantaged regions**
Interregional redistribution prevents optimal use of agglomeration advantages in prospering regions and reduces the commitment of political stakeholders there	Interregional redistribution reduces the commitment of political stakeholders in disadvantaged regions	Location selection primarily due to subsidies, dissociated from regional structures, leads to macroeconomic disadvantages	Subsidised infrastructure is devalued if migration out of the region cannot be stopped

Source: The author

4.1 Loss of growth in the donor regions

The negative effects of interregional redistribution can be manifested in disadvantages for the economic development of the donor regions whose resources are taken away, as well as the overall area. This is based on (among other things) the expectation that deploying resources in metropolitan areas (▷ Agglomeration, agglomeration area) because there are agglomeration advantages in those areas brings higher returns than in disadvantaged regions. In principle, it is also plausible to assume that political stakeholders in prospering regions will restrict their commitment to economic development if large parts of the additional regional tax income from companies established in those regions are used for transfer payments in favour of disadvantaged regions. However, empirical studies rather indicate that the negative effects of interregional equalisation policies are fairly moderate (cf. e.g. Baretti/Fenge/Huber et al. 2000; Eckey/Kosfeld 2005; Alecke/Untiedt 2007).

4.2 Negative incentives for the recipients of the transfers

Negative incentive effects can also arise in disadvantaged regions. If it is easier to raise transfers than establish companies in those regions, the political stakeholders in disadvantaged regions might tend to concentrate more strongly on maximising transfer payments and less on strategies to improve the economic structure.

4.3 Choice of suboptimal locations

When jobs are created in disadvantaged regions, overall economic disadvantages can arise if firms choose their location primarily on the grounds of subsidies (cf. e.g. Zimmermann 1987: 56). The allocation is suboptimal since the regional structures actually speak against the choice of location. It can also be assumed that companies attracted primarily by subsidies will be minimally loyal to that location.

4.4 Sunk costs

If infrastructure is built up or maintained in a disadvantaged region with the help of transfers, but migration out of the region cannot be stopped, the infrastructure there will soon no longer be used. If this is not promptly anticipated and no alternative use can be found for the infrastructure, this will lead to economic depreciations (cf. e.g. Kuhn/Klingholz 2013: 70 et seq.).

4.5 Disadvantages for the allocative functions of federalism

The horizontal redistribution of resources is to a large degree accompanied by the concentration of financial resources on superordinate government levels and intervention in decentralised decision-making processes. Consequently, this can have negative effects on civic participation and the functioning of the democratic system on the regional or local level or both. Moreover, centralisation reduces the advantages arising from competition between municipalities and regions, especially in the subsidising of innovations in public services (regarding these aspects, cf. e.g. Zimmermann 1987: 60 et seq.).

5 Putting the equivalence of living conditions into concrete terms

Regardless of the costs as outlined above, the goal of ELC is currently accepted in Germany for the most part. But there is no consensus on how far the measures to bring about equivalent living conditions should go, and which measures are the minimum that must be pursued so that the goal can be considered attained. There are also arguments over which regions should be defined as donor regions and be encumbered with the costs of redistribution, and by which criteria. This question usually comes into play in relation to fiscal equalisation between the states, whereby the donor regions are easier to identify than in other equalisation policies. Regarding the definition of the minimal level of interregional redistribution, frequent reference is made to the concept of ▷ *Provision of public services* or the *provision of basic services* (cf. e.g. *Beirat für Raumentwicklung* [Advisory Board for Spatial Development] 2011: 4). This identifies publicly provided goods with a local circle of users (e.g. water supply, wastewater disposal, schools, day care centres, fire protection) and private providers of household-related services (doctors, nursing services, retail stores, restaurants), whose availability for each private household at every location is seen as necessary. There is no unequivocal criterion for delineating these types of services. Recently, broadband internet access through a landline network has been discussed as a basic service that must be available at every location, which would incur extraordinarily high costs (cf. Wenzel 2014).

Reference points for a demarcation of the necessary range of services can be identified if one focuses on the aspect of interregional equality of opportunity (cf. Blotevogel/Aring/Bräuer et al. 2006: 8). This could be used to justify special measures for ensuring access to educational services for youth. Moreover, it can be argued that children and adolescents in particular, as well as old and disabled people, have limited mobility and can neither readily migrate nor commute long distances. This suggests that ELC policies should focus on services related especially to those groups.

Insofar as a consensus exists regarding the necessary range of services, the criteria according to which equivalence is to be established must be determined for every service: either the availability of (fairly easily quantifiable) input factors (e.g. a wastewater pipeline to a central sewage treatment plant) or with the help of output parameters (meaning the actual benefits, such as avoiding an unhealthy and environmentally harmful contamination of the ground and surface water) that can be generated with various input factors. For example, the politically desired degree of equalisation in each case can be determined for each category of service in general, in the sense of a minimum regional provision (such as a minimum number of doctors per 1,000 residents) (cf. e.g. Thoss 1981: 66).

From the viewpoint of residents of disadvantaged and sparsely populated regions, the accessibility of the services is especially important. This poses the question of the maximum reasonable distance between the residential areas and the locations of the providers (cf. e.g. Thoss 1981: 66). This question cannot be answered independently of the already mentioned problem of the sustainability of services, and of political measures to reduce transaction costs (in relation to the utilisation of those services). Such measures primarily include the construction and operation of facilities such as streets, local public transport, and telecommunication networks. For the most part, the range of services is concentrated in central places (▷ *Central place*) as defined by spatial planning to make it easier for the population outside the environs of those centres to access the services. To that end, it must be kept in mind that mobility has increased significantly in recent decades (even among the elderly) as a result of increased use of motor vehicles.

When minimum standards are being established, a differentiation can be made according to region types, meaning that (explicitly) different minimum standards could apply for different types of regions. Lower minium standards would be conceivable for regions with especially strongly pronounced economic development problems and an extremely low population density, in which the assurance of access of the residents to all public services is associated with especially high costs (cf. Kuhn/Klingholz 2013: 70). Consequently, there would still be interregional redistribution, but this poses the question of whether that redistribution would still correspond to the guiding principle of ELC due to the explicitly desired unequal treatment of regions. Strictly speaking, however, unequal treatment already exists in many areas today.

6 Political strategies and instruments for creating equivalence of living conditions

Regarding the general strategies for bringing about ELC, a differentiation can be made between a compensatory policy primarily geared towards access to goods and services and an activating policy focusing on the development of private companies.

6.1 Compensatory policy

With the help of transfers, the desired private and public services can be established in any desired location, although this might prove inefficient if the services offered are not sustainable. Accordingly, the policy must specify the cases in which appropriate subsidies are desired, or whether other options for securing supply are preferable. Such possibilities have long been discussed, and many options have been tested as part of model projects. Primarily, these entail deregulation strategies and measures to reduce transaction costs (cf. Blotevogel/Aring/Bräuer et al. 2006: 18; Dehne/Borchard/Grabski-Kieron et al. 2008: 10). Only a few examples can be given here. In some service categories, reducing state regulations can help lower transaction costs. For example, mail-order pharmacies are already permitted. Nursing staff can take over some services normally reserved for doctor's surgeries. Reducing regulations can allow the introduction of inter-year classes, through which very small schools in sparsely populated regions can be maintained (cf. Blotevogel/Aring/Bräuer et al. 2006: 18). Making municipal facilities (such as sports facilities) more multifunctional has long been recommended (cf. e.g. Burberg 1981: 95). Transaction costs can be lowered further by increasing internet use. As an alternative to subsidising local public transport services, it is possible to provide selected parts of the population in disadvantaged regions with 'mobility vouchers', enabling them to choose the means of transportation that suits them (cf. Dehne/Borchard/Grabski-Kieron et al. 2008: 19).

In many cases, supplying publicly provided goods by combining neighbouring, smaller municipalities is seen as a path to greater efficiency; consequently, this would give the local authorities in disadvantaged regions more resources for financing important services. However, studies show that forming larger municipalities does not necessarily help increase efficiency (cf. Haug 2013).

6.2 Activating policy

It is improbable that spatial disparities can be comprehensively and sustainably reduced over the medium term through an activating policy. One possible strategy might consist of concentrating activating measures (especially expanding the ▷ *Infrastructure*) in municipalities or regions which are deemed to have particularly good opportunities for beneficial development.

The potential disadvantages of using subsidies to attract companies from other locations has already been mentioned. Measures to subsidise entrepreneurship, innovation and personal responsibility in the disadvantaged regions might be more advantageous (but more likely to be effective over the long term) (Blotevogel/Aring/Bräuer et al. 2006: 14). Overall, it must be considered whether transfer payments to disadvantaged regions can be designed more robustly than before, as a 'reward' for success in the sense of improving a region's economic situation.

As part of fiscal equalisation, considerable amounts of money are transferred to disadvantaged regions (federal states, local authorities) without the recipients having any explicit incentive to better their situation. This can be brought about, for example, by introducing 'activating' transfers, which are tied to specific measures for improving the economic situation of the receiving regions. Part of the funds formerly transferred as part of fiscal equalisation could be earmarked for certain uses (cf. Blotevogel/Aring/Bräuer et al. 2006: 10 et seq.).

Finally, it must be pointed out that aligning spatially effective specialist policies with the goal of ELC, and coordinating them with each other, has long been discussed (cf. Karl 2015). One example of this is financially subsidising housing development and introducing means to curb rents in metropolitan areas which stimulate further migration into those areas.

7 Conclusions and outlook

There is still a considerable need for empirical research on the effects (both positive and negative) of the measures with which ELC should be attained. When such measures are put into concrete terms through policies, interests must be weighed between the ELC and the economic, social, and political costs associated with the strategies chosen. Continuing demographic change and the desire to consolidate the public budgets will further intensify this conflict of goals in the future. Prosperous regions increasingly need skilled workers to migrate from disadvantaged regions. However, if the population in the disadvantaged regions continues to decline, it will be ever more difficult to guarantee the standards of basic services that were previously pursued in the traditional form. Alternative methods of supplying such services and measures for deregulation have long been discussed and must only be implemented more decisively. In the future, further recommendations must be weighed, such as explicitly differentiating between the standards for basic services for various types of regions and concentrating activating policy measures on municipalities and regions with a comparably high potential for economic development.

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Last update of the references: December 2016