



Social Justice Ireland

The Common Good



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Understanding of the Common Good

The right of the individual to freedom and personal development is limited by the rights of other people. This observation highlights the concept of the 'common good'.

The concept originated over two thousand years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. More recently, the philosopher John Rawls defined the common good as "certain general conditions that are in an appropriate sense equally to everyone's advantage"¹

François Flahault notes "that the human state of nature is the social state, that there has never been a human being who was not embedded, as it were, in a multiplicity. This necessarily means that relational well-being is the primary form of common good. Just as air is the vital element for the survival of our bodies, coexistence is the element necessary for our existence as persons. The common good is the sum of all that which supports coexistence, and consequently the very existence of individuals."²

This understanding was also reflected at an international gathering of Catholic leaders. They saw the 'common good' as "the sum of those conditions of social life by which individuals, families and groups can achieve their own fulfilment in a relatively thorough and ready way"³

This understanding recognises the fact that the person develops their potential in the context of society where the needs and rights of all members and groups are respected.

The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions and environments on which all depend, work in a manner that benefits all people simultaneously and in solidarity.

Examples of particular common goods or parts of the common good include an accessible and affordable public health care system, an effective system of public safety and security, peace among the nations of the world, a just legal and political system, an unpolluted natural environment and a flourishing economic system.⁴

Put very succinctly, 'the common good is not about an accumulation of goods leading to a desirable state of affairs, but, rather, about creating the conditions in which the good of the individual and the collective may emerge'.⁵

Jacques Maritain argued that human beings are by nature ordained to life in society, to life in relation to other persons; that the positive realisation and fulfilment of personality is achieved

¹ Rawls, J. (1971), *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. P 246

² Flahault François, 2011, *Conceiving the social bond and the common good through a refinement of human rights*, in *Rethinking progress and ensuring a secure future for all: what we can learn from the crises*. Trends in social cohesion No 22. Council of Europe, Strasbourg. P 68

³ Vatican II Council, (1965) *Gaudium et Spes*, No 74.

⁴ Velasquez, M. et al, (1992) *The Common Good*, Issues in Ethics V5, N1

⁵ Kirwan, J. (1983) in Francis McHugh, *Catholic Social Thought: Renovating the Tradition*. P72

only through knowledge and love of other persons. Human beings need other persons and the larger society in order to thrive or even to exist at all. These needs are for material goods such as food and shelter; but they are also for higher goods such as moral and intellectual education.⁶

A similar view is expressed in a NESC study which states that “at a societal level, a belief in a ‘common good’ has been shown to contribute to the overall well-being of society. This requires a level of recognition of rights and responsibilities, empathy with others and values of citizenship”⁷

The common good raises the issue of resources. The goods of the planet are for the use of all people – not just the present generation; they are also for the use of generations still to come. The present generation must recognise it has a responsibility to ensure that it does not damage but rather enhances the goods of the planet that it hands on – be they economic, cultural, social or environmental.

The structural arrangements regarding the ownership, use, accumulation and distribution of goods are disputed areas. However it must be recognised that these arrangements have a major impact on how society is shaped and how it supports the well-being of each of its members in solidarity with others.

The concept of the ‘common good’ is a contested area. Some people fear that an emphasis on the common good will take the focus off human rights. A holistic approach sees human rights and the common good as mutually reinforcing; ‘the common good is chiefly guaranteed when personal rights and duties are maintained.’⁸

Rights are not simply claims to pursue private interests or to be left alone. Rather, they are claims to share in the common good of civil society.⁹ Rights are social, economic, political and cultural conditions that make it possible for persons to participate in the life of the community. The person grows, develops and is sustained through communal relationships.

⁶ Maritain, J. (1966), *The Person and the Common Good*, University of Notre Dame

⁷ NESC, 2009, *Well-Being Matters: A Social Report for Ireland*, Vols 1 and 2, Report No. 119, Dublin. (p32)

⁸ Pope John XXIII, (1963) *Pacem in Terris*, No. 60

⁹ Hollenbach, David, 1989, *The Common Good Revisited*, Theological Studies 50 p70



Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of individuals and groups throughout Ireland who are committed to working to build a just society where human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected.

Social Justice Ireland,
Arena House,
Arena Road,
Sandyford,
Dublin 18
Phone: 01 213 0724
Email: secretary@socialjustice.ie
Charity Number: CHY 19486
www.socialjustice.ie