

# How People Think About Fairness and Why It Matters for Equitable Budgets

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# 1. BACKGROUND

Ideas about justice, fairness, altruism, and redistribution are at the core of the work we do around government budgets at the International Budget Partnership. Along with other global and national civil society organizations, we believe that tax and expenditure policies should allow everyone, and not just the rich, the opportunity to lead a dignified life. Yet the progressive policies necessary to yield such an outcome are perpetually contested and achieving them depends on significant support from the public. It is a foundational assumption of this paper that *building support among a broader public for progressive policies is one among several important facilitating conditions for reform.*

Support for redistributive policies is partly kindled by self-interest – e.g., we might expect that it will come from those below the median in income (or wealth) who will benefit the most – but, in most cases, self-interest is not enough to motivate widespread support for redistribution. This is because either (1) the intended beneficiaries do not constitute a majority of the population, (2) despite constituting a majority, the beneficiaries do not support these policies for other reasons, or (3) even when the beneficiaries are a majority, the alliances needed to introduce and maintain these policies require support from smaller groups who have disproportionate power and influence over the political system and will not directly benefit from them.

Thus, creating a *moral case* for fair budget policies – one that can galvanize a broad coalition – is integral to achieving progress. Generating broad support for a particular conception of *fairness* is a vital tool in the fight for more equitable policies. We know that perceptions of fairness differ, though, and we know relatively little about how people think about fairness or why they hold these beliefs. Therefore, particularly in countries where we are investing heavily in supporting efforts to make policies *fairer*, we need to learn more about the structure of people’s beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

I start from an assumption that the current state of deep polarization around budget policies is not inevitable and that it may be possible to change at least some people’s views. To that end, I explore what we know (and do not know) about views on fairness and how people’s views might change under different conditions. In order to root ideas about progressive change in our knowledge of human nature, I draw on literature from moral psychology and review empirical work on notions of fairness. Human nature is not immutable, but it is also not infinitely malleable. Understanding it better, in combination with deep knowledge of the context in the countries where we work, can help us to frame our arguments most effectively.

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<sup>1</sup> This is consistent with IBP’s emphasis on “ideas and discourse” within its most intensive country program, SPARK. See the sixth strategic component: <https://www.internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/spark-strategy-concept-note-draft-ibp-2017.pdf>

Overall, the message is quite simple: **we need to collect more data on attitudes about fairness and redistribution in the countries where we work, and to test ideas about how those attitudes can shift over time, or as a result of framing and persuasion.** This paper attempts to take us up to the point of our current ignorance and to provide some structure for thinking about how to alleviate it.

## 2. MORAL PSYCHOLOGY BASICS

Moral psychology is the study of how people think about morality. This includes, but is not limited to, how people think about fairness. In other words, moral psychology is an empirical field that asks about the nature of people's beliefs, as opposed to the study of ethics, which is a normative field that asks, "what should I do?"

Moral psychology is of interest here because it can help us to understand how people think about fairness broadly, and in the context of their other views about what is morally right or good. It also helps us to understand why they might have these beliefs which can give us a richer perspective on how beliefs might motivate action.

**An example:** let us suppose that we are advocating in favor of a tax reform that will benefit the poor, and we think people should support this reform because it will make the tax system "fairer". We have some data that suggests that many people do not support this reform, including people who will benefit financially from it. There are various ways to approach this problem. We might consider that people do not understand the reform, and that is why they do not support it. Or we might argue that people suffer from "false consciousness" (they do not understand their true interests), or that they "get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations" and lose sight of their interests.<sup>2</sup>

A moral psychologist would likely ask a somewhat different set of questions. What is fair according to most people, and why do people hold to their beliefs about fairness? Are there different ways of thinking about fairness that conflict, and how do people resolve those tensions in their own minds? If a policy reform is conceived of in moral terms, the psychologist might note, it may trigger other moral considerations beyond fairness. What are these and how do people weigh them alongside "fairness?" One thing that is worth noting about all of these questions is that they assume that people have meaningful structures for making moral assessments that are not a reflection of

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<sup>2</sup> The words are those of former President Barack Obama when he was running for the presidency in 2008. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/21/obama-dusts-off-his-cling-to-guns-or-religion-idea-for-donald-trump/?utm\\_term=.97233821ace4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/21/obama-dusts-off-his-cling-to-guns-or-religion-idea-for-donald-trump/?utm_term=.97233821ace4)

mere ignorance. This does not mean that they are necessarily “rational.” But, it also means that they are not entirely whimsical.

Returning to our tax reform example, we might ask whether people share the same view of fairness. For many people, fairness is about treating people equally. For others, it is mainly about eliminating cheating and ensuring people get what they deserve based on their efforts. Perhaps for many of us, both these ideas matter. The question is whether a certain reform seems to do more of one than the other or seems to strike the right balance between these different ideas about fairness, and between fairness and other moral values. This requires us to understand more about the structure of people’s moral beliefs.

Enter moral psychology...

**Our moral intuitions are the result of evolutionary processes:** The dominant paradigm in contemporary moral psychology is evolutionary. At the risk of oversimplifying a rich literature, this paradigm suggests that our moral machinery evolved the way it did because this helped us to cooperate in different ways, and that turned out to be adaptive. Thus, our ancestors, who were better cooperators, thrived, and we are their descendants.<sup>3</sup>

This school of thought understands morality as something that is inbuilt (innate), but that is not fully developed at birth. In this way, it mirrors the way that human reproductive organs have evolved: to wit, we are born with the DNA and some of the physical machinery, but this machinery is not fully active or developed until we hit puberty.<sup>4</sup>

**We all have some intrinsic notions of fairness, but those notions are culturally adapted.**<sup>5</sup> While we all have certain moral “tastes”, in the words of Jonathan Haidt (and before him, David Hume), we must learn how to apply

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<sup>3</sup> There is an expansive literature here, which emerged from E.O. Wilson’s work, through Peter Singer to a more recent set of moral psychologists conducting experimental work, such as Jonathan Haidt, Paul Bloom and Joshua Greene. Much of this work also builds on work with primates by Boehm, de Waals, et al. See E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: the new synthesis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: ethics, evolution and moral progress* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981); Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tale,” *Psychological Review*, 108 (4) 2001; Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: the origins of good and evil* (New York: Crown, 2013); Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: emotion, reason and the gap between us and them* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013); Christopher Boehm, “Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy,” *Current Anthropology*, 34 (3) 1993; Frans de Waal, et al, *Primates and Philosophers: how morality evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Most recently see Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, *Just Babies*. See also Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’s Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: GP Putnam, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

these: we are not born knowing everything about what is morally good. So, while we may all be born with the capacity to have some version of moral “disgust,” we are not all disgusted by the same things.

For example, most people around the world have a strong, intuitive sense of disgust when thinking about incest.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, notions of “ritual pollution” that are prevalent in India (where some people believe that toilets in the home are “dirty” relative to open defecation) are linked to a sense of disgust that is not widely shared in other parts of the world.<sup>7</sup>

According to Haidt’s moral foundations theory, we all possess moral “modules” that trigger moral assessments in six domains. These domains are listed below:

- Care/Harm
- Liberty/Oppression
- Fairness/Cheating
- Loyalty/Betrayal
- Authority/Subversion
- Sanctity/Degradation

The best way to understand these six pairs are as categories that trigger moral evaluations of right and wrong. That is, if we see someone harming another person, we will immediately ask whether someone is acting in a morally wrong fashion. If we see someone betray a friend, or desecrate a holy place, we will similarly feel that something morally wrong has been done. While each of us has the ability to form moral beliefs in each of these domains, the way we do so and the weight we give each module is the result of cultural and social forces. This is not to trivialize the way each module is interpreted; in fact, the relative weight we give to them is, according to Haidt, part of what defines our political orientation. For example, in the United States, he argues, liberals put more weight on the first three moral foundations, while conservatives tend to put equal weight on all six.

An important point from this work is that in making moral assessments, people are unlikely to consider only one moral imperative: beliefs and course of actions may trigger multiple moral values that must be reconciled. Further, and related to what we mean by fairness: in Haidt’s original formulation, fairness was about treating people equally but also about proportionality in what people receive. These two ideas can themselves be at odds, and Haidt later separated them. He subsequently argued that equality is really an idea associated with opposition to

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Haidt uses an incest scenario to demonstrate the nature of our “social intuitions” about morality (Haidt, “The Emotional Dog”).

<sup>7</sup> Diane Coffey, *et al.*, “Understanding Open Defecation in Rural India,” *Economic & Political Weekly*, LII (1), 2017.

oppression and harming others (that is, egalitarianism is not a foundation on its own but a reflection of these other foundations). While people sometimes refer to these behaviors in terms of the word “fairness,” they mean to say (for example) that oppressing others is unfair. The moral foundation of fairness, by contrast, is primarily about proportionality and punishing cheaters or free riders. This is a crucial insight, because it explains how two people who disagree about progressive tax reform can both appeal to “fairness” as a moral value (as discussed in the example above).

Finally, the literature suggests that what we understand as morality is a complex mix of emotion and moral reasoning. Some scholars believe that we are mainly emotional creatures and that moral reasoning is largely a rationalization of our emotions.<sup>8</sup> Others believe that while emotion plays a key role in how we experience morality, we are also capable of sophisticated moral reasoning that goes beyond rationalization.<sup>9</sup> The latter school, in particular, believes that we can and must use our reason to guide us out of the morass created by our emotions. This is difficult, but not impossible. A hybrid position sees emotion as foundational for reasoning and suggests that both reason without emotion, and emotion without reason, lead to poor decisions.<sup>10</sup> We reflect on this matter further below.

### 3. PROBING HUMAN NATURE: Altruism and Rationality

This evolutionary approach privileges some basic ideas about human nature. For our purposes, the most important of these are *parochial altruism*, *reciprocal altruism* and what I will call *bounded rationality*, although this term is not necessarily used heavily in the moral psychology literature.

Parochial altruism – tribal: The evolutionary evidence suggests that we are self-interested, but that we exhibit parochial altruism. As the title of Joshua Greene’s important 2013 book puts it, parochial altruism is basically “tribal.”<sup>11</sup> We are all born skeptical of the “other,” whoever that other may be. We are thus prone to prejudice and tribal chauvinism. But, we are also altruistic toward members of our own group. Historically, as these patterns were evolving, such in-groups were quite small, and likely to be closely related to us genetically. Our altruism was

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. and Haidt, “The Emotional Dog”

<sup>9</sup> Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, Bloom, *Just Babies*; Green, *Moral Tribes*.

<sup>10</sup> Damasio, *Descartes’s Error*.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes*.

thus toward a rather small group. But this expanded over time, and today our tribal instincts can attach to different types of groups of different sizes and with dubious or no genetic links.<sup>12</sup>

Reciprocal altruism – generous to those who treat us well: Although much of our altruism is still parochial, directed toward those we know and can see, a significant share also takes the form of “reciprocal altruism,” meaning that we are altruistic toward those who treat us well. Reciprocal altruism is subject to modification based on the behavior of others.<sup>13</sup> This might be one reason why our altruism is attenuated when we are considering our behavior toward unknown parties: unless we are trusting and risk-loving, we are likely to have doubts about whether a stranger will reciprocate altruism that we may show toward them.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, strangers with whom we can have no direct relationship, such as people living in another country, cannot exhibit reciprocal altruism, meaning that any altruism we exhibit toward such people must be based neither on parochialism nor reciprocal behavior, but on sheer selfless generosity. However, there is not much evidence that sheer, selfless generosity has an evolutionary basis or is rooted in human nature. It seems to require something beyond moral intuition.

Bounded rationality is the notion that our rational core is circumscribed by a set of cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, which allow us to make decisions rapidly without employing comprehensive rationality.<sup>15</sup> The degree of circumscription is debated, but there is a consensus that we would not survive for long in the world if we did not rely heavily on heuristics. This idea of a “dual process” brain that relies on heuristics for much of our day-to-day life, and on more sophisticated reasoning for special types of problems, was perhaps most cogently outlined by Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking Fast and Slow*, which is based on decades of behavioral research.<sup>16</sup> Thinking fast, or using heuristics, corresponds to a kind of intuition that is so fast that we are not cognizant of it, similar to the parts of the brain that regulate, say, breathing or hunger. This logic supports the theory of “implicit bias,” the idea that even if we are rationally disposed to treat people equally, we may still harbor racist or tribal instincts that can surface when we are making snap judgements.<sup>17</sup> Thus the idea of parochial altruism and bounded rationality can be seen to be complementary.

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<sup>12</sup> There is some interesting new global survey data on altruism that finds considerable cross-country variation in levels of non-parochial altruism. See Falk, et al, “Global Evidence on Economic Preferences,” NBER, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, “Reciprocity, Self-Interest, and the Welfare State,” *Nordic Journal of Political Economy* 26, 2000. The authors, writing on the welfare state, speak of “strong reciprocity” as “a propensity to cooperate and share with those similarly disposed and a willingness to punish” those who violate these norms. This notion of conditional reciprocity is well aligned with my discussion here.

<sup>14</sup> The evidence that our altruism is attenuated for unknown parties is strong. See Green, *Moral Tribes*, for attitudes toward determined and undetermined parties, and attitudes toward near and far victims.

<sup>15</sup> This notion, and its history, are discussed in Kurt Weyland, *Bounded Rationality and Policy Diffusion: Social Sector Reform in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011)

<sup>17</sup> <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>. Paul Bloom has also shown that tribalism is observable in babies, who have an aversion to people who look different or have different accents. Bloom, *Just Babies*.

It is important to keep in mind that people who believe in bounded rationality believe that people can be and are rational. But, they also believe that they can be irrational and that they rely on simple and often biased mental shortcuts. These are not mutually exclusive. For those who believe in bounded rationality, the important and difficult question is: under what conditions are people more likely to exercise rationality and under what conditions will they rely on heuristics or respond primarily to their emotions? I assume, like some psychologists, that we can understand these conditions and use this understanding to make progress toward greater rationality and better judgements.<sup>18</sup>

**Why do these ideas matter for our main questions of interest?** Consider parochial altruism. If we are predisposed to feel altruism toward in-groups but not out-groups, then our attitudes about fairness and redistribution may be affected by who the beneficiaries of a proposed policy are. We might be more predisposed to redistribute resources toward people “like us” than toward “others.” There is, for example, evidence that we tend to feel empathy toward in-groups and not out-groups, and that this motivates parochial altruistic behavior.<sup>19</sup>

However, it might also be possible to frame these decisions in order to shift the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups in ways that expand our altruism. Our understanding of in-groups and out-groups (beyond kin relations) is determined by culture and society, rather than a biological fact about the world. Our perceptions of these groups might be subject to change.

Similarly, if we are capable of thinking about or reacting to information in two different ways—quickly and intuitively or slowly and deliberately—we will want to consider which of these ways of thinking is most helpful for activating attitudes that favor equity and fairness toward others. The literature suggests that our intuitions may motivate altruism toward in-groups, but we need deliberative, “slow” rationality to motivate compassion for out-groups.<sup>20</sup> While the previous point suggested that we might consider ways of expanding the boundaries of in-groups, the notion of a dual-process brain suggests that we might rather need to encourage people to deliberate rationally and universally (rather than thinking in terms of in-groups/out-groups) to increase support for equity.

Moral psychology thus raises strategic issues that we should consider in thinking about how to change people’s beliefs. These concern not only whether we try to tap into intuitive or rational beliefs about in-groups and out-

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<sup>18</sup> Other analysts believe that our dominant mode of being is not rational and that most of what we describe as rational thought is simply rationalization of deeper emotional desires. See, for example, Jonathan Haidt’s work. This idea goes back to David Hume and the notion that reason is the “slave of the passions,” although there is debate about what Hume meant by this.

<sup>19</sup> Bloom, *Against Empathy*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*; Greene, *Moral Tribes*.



groups, but also about how we attempt to frame policies so that they appeal to multiple moral imperatives or allow our target audience to satisfy their desire to act in accordance with multiple moral values.

## 4. DO PEOPLE SUPPORT REDISTRIBUTION?

What do people really think about equity, fairness and public policies favoring redistribution? There is no uniform answer to this. Attitudes vary across cultures and time, but available survey results also differ depending on the instruments used to assess people's views. Although the data is limited, one important finding is that even those people who would benefit the most from greater redistribution often show only moderate support for redistributive policies. Nevertheless, some principles of equity or fairness are widely shared and can motivate more support for redistribution.

### Empirical Data on Attitudes About Fairness

There is a considerable amount of experimental evidence that suggests people have some sense of justice, but not all of this work elicits information about beliefs. For example, people may be asked to share resources in an experiment, but we may not know why they chose to do what they did. Behavioral economists have long used "dictator games" (where subjects can make a unilateral take it or leave it offer to others from a pool of resources) to argue that people are not wholly self-interested and exhibit a sense of fairness or altruism (because they tend to give others something, even though they have no self-interested reason to do so). Yet subsequent research has shown that how people behave in such games depends on the choices they are offered, suggesting that their motives may be more self-interested than initially believed. For example, when subjects are not just asked how much they would like to share but are also given the opportunity to take from others, they are less likely to share. This evidence suggests that sharing behavior may be mainly driven by social norms and framing, and not altruism per se.<sup>21</sup>

It has been shown in the US that people underestimate existing inequalities in the distribution of wealth and that their preferences are toward greater equity than what they believe to be the status quo. An interesting finding from this work is that while poorer people prefer somewhat more equity than wealthy people, the differences are rather small.<sup>22</sup> For example, people in the lower part of the income distribution believe that the wealthiest quintile in America should control about 30 percent of the wealth, while the wealthiest respondents believe that they

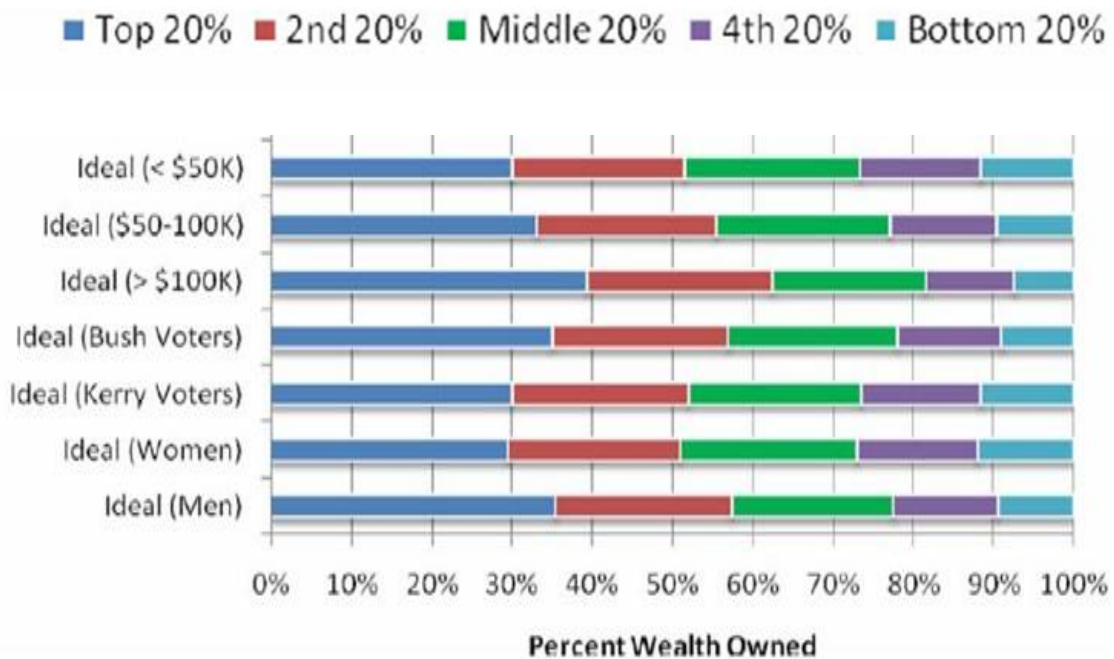
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<sup>21</sup> See John List, "On the interpretation of giving in Dictator Games," *Journal of Political Economy* 115(3), 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Norton and Ariely, "Building a Better America—One wealth quintile at a time," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6(1) 2011.

should control just under 40 percent. The difference is consistent with what one might expect, but the gap between what the relatively rich and relatively poor say is much less than the gap between what each group says and the actual distribution of wealth. The same finding applies if we look at the share that should go to the poorest quintile.

**FIGURE 1. IDEAL DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH BY QUINTILE: BY INCOME, POLITICAL LEANING & GENDER, 2011**



Source: Norton and Ariely, 2011

Hochschild (1981) reports on survey data from 1939, during the middle of the Great Depression, when respondents would have been expected to be most in favor of progressive redistribution. While low-income people were more favorable to redistribution, in most cases the majority view among low-income respondents was against more redistributive policies. For example, only 46 percent of low-income respondents thought that government redistribution should be accomplished “by heavy taxes on the rich.” This looks high compared to the 17 percent of high-income respondents favoring this approach, but still means that most low-income people did not favor aggressive taxation of the rich.<sup>23</sup>

Some recent work suggests that there may be more significant differences in the views of lower- and upper-income people on some redistributive issues than that found in earlier studies, and that these differences have an

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Hochschild, *What’s Fair? American Beliefs About Redistributive Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

impact on policy. Bartels reports on attitudes of the wealthy from a 2011 survey of “economically successful Americans” and compares these attitudes to those of the general public.<sup>24</sup> This small survey of high-income people suggests substantial differences of opinion on the role of government. For example, while 87 percent of the population felt that the federal government “should spend whatever is necessary” to ensure children have access to good public schools, only 35 percent of the wealthy shared this view. Other work by Gilens suggests that when the views of the wealthy diverge from those of the average, political elites are far more sensitive to the views of the affluent than the average.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, in Bartels’s comparison between the views of the wealthy and the general public, the same question asked by Hochschild about heavy taxes on the rich to achieve redistribution achieves a majority: 52 percent of the general public support such taxes, while only 17 percent of the wealthy do.<sup>26</sup> While this is significant, it is not as high as one might expect based on the differences in attitude about the role of the state manifested in the education question above.

Attitudes about specific policy questions may shift or may be affected by question wording and the political framing of those policies at a particular time. However, attitudes about fairness may be more enduring, because they operate not only at the level of specific policies or choices in dilemmas, but also at the level of shared principles. In this way, they are theoretically an important source of support for policy change.

Moral philosophers and policymakers have discussed various higher-level principles that drive people’s attitudes about fairness and equity. In previous work related to revenue sharing, we have further synthesized these into five core principles. We have also tested these principles empirically in Kenya using a national survey with a set of scenarios designed to tap into them. The five principles we discuss are: need, capacity, effort, basic minimums and fair process. We find that, on average, Kenyans support giving a greater share of available resources to people who need more, that they believe those with more capacity should receive less, that those who make more of an effort on their own behalf should receive more, and that everyone deserves some minimum share.<sup>27</sup>

These principles build on James Konow’s review of evidence on how people understand justice.<sup>28</sup> For example, from vignette surveys and laboratory experiments, Konow finds evidence that people support allocations based on

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<sup>24</sup> Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, Table 8.5.

<sup>27</sup> Jason Lakin, “[Do Kenyans Have A Shared Understanding of Fairness? Results from a National Survey](#),” International Budget Partnership, December 2016.

<sup>28</sup> See James Konow, “Which Is the Fairest One of All? A Positive Analysis of Justice Theories,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, 41(4) 2003.

people's needs and the efforts that they put into bettering themselves. Contrary to what Rawls expected, there is also evidence that people tolerate fairly high degrees of inequality as long as some basic level of needs are met.<sup>29</sup> This is closely linked to a kind of hybrid utilitarian view, in which people believe the just approach is to maximize social welfare or utility, but subject to a "floor constraint" that no one should fall below (which corresponds to the idea of "basic needs").<sup>30</sup>

Another important distinction in empirical work on fairness principles is the difference between two ideas about equality: equality of opportunity and of outcomes. Just as people are relatively unaware of the true degree of inequality in society, they are also unaware of the true degree of social mobility. Most studies suggest that social mobility—normally measured as the probability of individuals rising above the socioeconomic class of their parents—is much lower than people think.<sup>31</sup>

It may be that people are more disposed to support redistribution where they are more aware of the degree to which inequality is inherited, as opposed to merited by people's choices. While people tend to believe it is fair that some receive less if they make less effort (which is related to an ideal of equality of opportunity), when there is evidence suggesting that people's circumstances are heavily influenced by factors beyond their control rather than their own choices (for example, poverty during a recession), people tend to be more supportive of redistribution.<sup>32</sup>

**What does all of this mean?** There is widespread support at the level of principle for basic moral notions of fairness and distributing resources according to people's needs and according to the efforts and contributions they make to society. People's beliefs about redistribution are likely affected by class, gender and status, as well as the information they have and the way choices are framed, but generally support for high levels of redistribution is modest even among those most likely to benefit from it. While people may not have highly redistributive views, they do want to know that the rich are contributing their "fair share," whatever this may be.<sup>33</sup> Finally, all of this should be taken with a grain of salt, as it draws on a limited number of studies, mainly from rich countries, and

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"Konow believes the evidence supports a multi-criterion theory of justice with three principles: equity, efficiency and need. Our five principles are related to different versions of these ideas but are not exactly the same and we use different terminology than he does.

<sup>29</sup> Norman Frohlich, et al, "Choices of Principles of Distributive Justice in Experimental Groups," *American Journal of Political Science*, 31(3) 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Bowles and Gintis, "Reciprocity," refer to "basic needs generosity," which appears to be a similar idea.

<sup>31</sup> Actual economic mobility in the US is lower than in many European countries. See Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*. The idea that Americans are particularly mobile is an old one; see Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*, Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991.

<sup>32</sup> Bowles and Gintis, "Reciprocity."

<sup>33</sup> James Surowiecki, *The wisdom of crowds: why the many are smarter than the few and how collective wisdom shapes business, economies, societies, and nations* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

because attitudes may be at least partially an artifact of the tools used to elicit them, and the particular moment during which these tools are administered.

## 5. DO PEOPLE CHANGE THEIR VIEWS ON FAIRNESS AND REDISTRIBUTION?

The foregoing tells us something about what people think, but not if and why they change their views. We know relatively little about this. Because social identity conditions how people perceive and use information and because people are boundedly rational, policy preferences are often the result of partisanship and ex-post rationalization rather than interests and reason. They also reflect myopia, as voters are unable to judge the longer-term impacts of policies that affect them.<sup>34</sup> This suggests that people may not change their views easily about policy choices affecting redistribution. Nevertheless, this remains an empirical question for investigation.

One possibility is that people change their views when they are exposed to more information about actual inequalities. Some recent cross-national work suggests that people's views about redistribution correlate with their perceptions of inequality, rather than actual inequality, and that their perceptions about inequality are weakly correlated to reality (on the order of  $r=.37$ ). While this work is strictly based on correlations, it could support a theory that people would be more supportive of redistribution if they were better informed about inequality.<sup>35</sup>

Some experimental research suggests that exposure to key facts does change people's attitudes about redistribution. Bartels has shown that support for repeal of the estate tax in the United States has been high for most of the twentieth century, in spite of the fact that few people would benefit from such a repeal.<sup>36</sup> But Kuziemko, et al investigated whether or not people's attitude about the estate tax was affected by information about the number of people that the tax actually affects. They found substantial increases in support for an estate tax when this information was provided.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*; Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for realists: why elections do not produce responsive government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Gimpelson and Daniel Treisman, 'Misperceiving inequality', *Economics and Politics*, 30(1) 2018. doi: 10.1111/ecpo.12103.

<sup>36</sup> Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*.

<sup>37</sup> Kuziemko, et al, "How Elastic Are Preferences for Redistribution? Evidence from Randomized Survey Experiments," *American Economic Review*, 105 (4) 2015.

Other research finds that people’s attitudes about policies (not strictly on redistribution) tend to moderate when they realize that they do not understand them well. This is revealed to participants when they are asked to explain how these policies work and realize on their own that they do not understand them as well as they thought. This exposure of what researchers call the “illusion of explanatory depth” has been shown to cause people to move toward less extreme policy positions.<sup>38</sup>

The fact is that we do not know all that much about if and how people’s attitudes about redistributive policies change. More work needs to be done to assess whether information can change people’s attitudes, particularly when they are ill-informed about inequality or public policy. And, more systematic work is needed on the ways in which framing debates about redistribution and eliciting certain moral values can shift perceptions and support for specific policies.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

So, what are the implications of all of this for the work of global civil society organizations? The main recommendation is to think about how we can work with country-based partners and offices to learn more about how people think about fairness and redistribution. Specifically, we should:

### **Collect and analyze attitudes about fairness.**

- We lack robust data on attitudes about moral preferences, fairness and redistribution at a global level. We have some data from the United States, and some from other developed countries, and a bit from emerging economies. If we want to help shape discourse and encourage people to adopt progressive policies, we need to understand more about their current thinking by collecting more public opinion data and analyzing it. For example, recent data from the G20 found wide differences across countries in whether people think of taxes in terms of fairness or only in legal terms. In Indonesia, people tend to see taxes as both a matter of morality and of regulation, but in Russia, the vast majority of respondents see taxes only as a legal matter, with just over 10 percent (net) respondents seeing them as a matter of fairness.<sup>39</sup> [Understanding the sources of these differences and how to talk to people about fairness.](#)

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<sup>38</sup> Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion: why we never think alone* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017).

<sup>39</sup> IFAC and ACCA, “G20 public trust in tax,” 2017.

[http://www.accaglobal.com/content/dam/ACCA\\_Global/disc/news/pi-G20-public-trust-tax.pdf](http://www.accaglobal.com/content/dam/ACCA_Global/disc/news/pi-G20-public-trust-tax.pdf)

equity and public policy in different countries must be part of our agenda. In thinking about how to do this, we should connect our work to salient policy conflicts at country level.

**Design civic spaces where we can “expand the circle” and encourage people to develop informed preferences.**

- If the evolutionary psychology literature is correct, then people are more likely to embrace equality for in-group members than out-group members. People will be more likely to support redistributive policies if they believe that these policies are going to benefit in-group members. But the boundaries between in-group and out-group are not fixed by biology. Evidence from the lab as well as from history and political science suggest that our perceptions of who is part of our “tribe” can be expanded or contracted by political entrepreneurship and framing. We can push people out of our circles by dehumanizing them, and we can bring them in by identifying them more clearly, reclassifying them or activating different layers of our identities.<sup>40</sup>
- Thinking about how to expand the circle in ways that contribute to greater compassion and support for equitable sharing is one way of advancing our agenda. This might look quite different at the global level and at the national or subnational level. But the basic logic is the same: find ways to encourage people to recognize their common humanity and the ties that bind rather than separate them. At the same time, we should try to create spaces where people are exposed to information about current inequalities and encouraged to reassess their beliefs. The limited evidence we have suggests that exposure to information about policy may change people’s views and increase support or reduce opposition to redistributive policies. This suggests a role for public or civic education and attempts to create spaces where people are encouraged to engage in reasoned, consequential debate about policy.
- One practical way of doing this that IBP has attempted in Kenya is to use a “veil of ignorance” in facilitated regional discussions around the country. These discussions focused on discussions of fairness principles and then drew on them to motivate discussions of redistributive policies (in this case, the distribution of intergovernmental transfers). The goal of the public forums was to get citizens to focus on certain attributes of their fellow citizens (say, their level of need or effort) rather than others (say, their region or ethnicity) as they formed their opinions about resource allocation. In doing so, we observed that people were able to move, at least partially, beyond tribal (in the broad sense) allegiances.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> On dehumanization, see Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> For a synthesis of the process and what was learned from it, see: <https://www.internationalbudget.org/publications/measure-of-fairness/>

**Develop and experiment with narratives that appeal to the full set of moral foundations and strike a balance between emotion and reason.**

- Moral appeals for greater redistribution tend to focus on a particular kind of fairness, and particularly on principles of need. This appeals to many liberals, but is often less appealing to others (including the poor and middle classes) whose moral preferences emphasize not only avoiding harm or caring for those in need but also proportionality, authority, loyalty and sanctity.<sup>42</sup> In appealing to norms around justice and fairness, we should endeavor to think through the full moral implications of our policy proposals. It is of course not always possible to activate all of these moral ideas in favor of equitable policies, and some of them may even run counter to equity. But we should put some effort into addressing this through the framing of our appeals. For example, loyalty to the group need not run counter to equity (though as above, this depends in part on who is in the group and who is out). Authority may also be appealed to: when legitimate authorities, whether communal or religious or political, endorse policies in the proper way, this will lend those policies broader support.
- The broader point here is that we need to test empirically, through experimentation, how we frame our appeals most effectively in different contexts.<sup>43</sup> The right combination of arguments and evidence can activate more rational and universal concerns about equity, while other appeals may be more intuitively attractive but less effective. Of course, emotion is a strong motivational force and our communications approach will need to draw on what we know about how to arouse interest and motivate action. The exact balance between emotion and reason that yields compelling moral arguments in the field of tax, spending, distribution and redistribution is an open question. Much of what we know about morality is not specifically about the collection, distribution or use of resources.
- Nevertheless, if we want people to adopt equitable and universalistic approaches to these issues, we will need them to use their faculties of reason. Our emotions were not designed for this kind of moralizing. Indeed, they can even lead us astray. As Paul Bloom notes, emotions like empathy tend to focus us on the here and now, privilege the few over the many, and are not capable of the abstraction necessary to see what is truly the morally, correct thing to do in many situations.<sup>44</sup> Drawing on experimental work and

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<sup>42</sup> On moral foundations theory, see Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*. Lakoff also argues that conservatives and liberals conceptualize the state as a family, but two different kinds of family. Conservatives as a “strict father” led family, and liberals as a “nurturant family”.

<sup>43</sup> As above, much of what we say on this topic is implicitly or explicitly framed around what Asma calls the Western “grid of impartiality.” This notion has less appeal in many other parts of the world. An interesting question is how other cultures think about impartiality. It is possible that they reject the impartiality principle, as Asma suggests, or that they simply think that an “impartial” observer would expect people to exhibit loyalty and favoritism. See Stephen T. Asma, *Against Fairness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Bloom, *Against Empathy*.



brain imaging studies, Joshua Greene similarly argues that we need the cool deliberative utilitarian (“manual”) part of our brain to make the right decisions when considering how to treat strangers, rather than the “automatic” settings triggered by emotion and which cause us to favor our friends and those in close proximity.<sup>45</sup> While we know that we cannot reason without emotion, it seems equally clear that we cannot reason when emotion is allowed free reign.<sup>46</sup> Finding a balance seems to be crucial, and there is no substitute for experimentation.

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<sup>45</sup> Greene, *Moral Tribes*. Various experiments show that we are much more likely to say that we will take action to help victims that are in front of us than those that are far away, or even those identified by a number than those with no number (even when we know nothing about the victim in either case other than the number). It is hard to see the moral virtue of treating people that are in closer physical proximity or that have assigned numbers as more valuable than those further away or without numbers, but this is how the emotive part of our moral brains works.

<sup>46</sup> Damasio, *Descartes' Error*.