

# The Spirit Level

## Text analysis and discussion on equitable distribution

### Overview

Participants explore the extent to which quality of life can be increased by means of equitable distribution of income and wealth rather than economic growth. After considering their own position on the issue, the participants read an interview with Richard Wilkinson, co-author of the study “The Spirit Level”, who maintains that more equal societies suffer from fewer social and health-related problems. They then collect and discuss arguments for and against greater income equality.

	8-16
	60-90 minutes
	Masking tape, 2 sheets of A4 paper, tables, moderation cards, markers, pinboard/whiteboard Downloadable materials (< <a href="http://www.endlich-wachstum.de">www.endlich-wachstum.de</a> >): Interview

### Instructions

#### Background

A common argument in favour of economic growth is the promotion of social equality by means of poverty reduction, according to the principle: “If the cake grows, everyone gets a bigger slice.” However, numerous studies (e.g. the German Government’s 2012 Report on Poverty and Wealth) show that social inequality has risen steadily in Germany since the 1990s in spite of – or perhaps because of – constant economic growth.

Meanwhile, the study “The Spirit Level” by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett shows that a society’s well-being is closely linked to equality. According to the study, in order for quality of life to increase, the issue of distribution is more important than economic growth. Instead of making the cake bigger, it should simply be cut up differently. This is a major political challenge, and at the same time a central component of a post-growth society in which the aim is to provide a good life for all.

#### Preparation

Sufficient copies of the text (Materials: Interview) are prepared. For the survey of the participants’ own views, one sheet of A4 paper is labelled “I completely agree” and the other “I completely disagree”. A long line of masking tape is stuck to the floor to act as a scale. The two sheets of paper are placed at each end. For the small group activity, tables are set up some distance from each other (1 for every 4 or 5 participants), and moderation cards and markers are placed on them. A pinboard or magnetic board with magnets is set up.

#### Execution

- The facilitator introduces the topic. The participants are asked to position themselves along the scale in relation to the following statements:
  - > If we distribute the wealth in a country more equitably, we no longer need economic growth.
  - > Inequality is necessary as an incentive for performance: it motivates people to strive for more and promotes innovation in a country.
  - > All work that is important to society should be well rewarded, regardless of whether it is carried out by kindergarten teachers, nurses, financial advisors or lawyers.
  - > A more equal distribution of income and wealth is politically impossible to implement.
  - > I wish for more social justice.

The statements are read out individually, and after each one the participants reposition themselves along the scale. Once they have chosen their positions, around 3 people from different points along the scale are briefly interviewed and asked to explain their position.

2. The participants are then given the interview with Richard Wilkinson (Materials: Interview) to read. The most important statements are jointly summarised in plenary, and any comprehension questions are answered.
3. The participants are then asked to position themselves on the scale once again in relation to the following statement: I consider a more equal distribution of income and wealth to be desirable. The participants are divided into small groups of 4 or 5 people who have chosen similar positions on the scale. The various groups are now instructed to formulate arguments supporting their position. Working separately, each group collects arguments and writes them on moderation cards (one argument per card). They have around 20 minutes for this task.
4. The groups then present their arguments. Any arguments already mentioned by previous groups are not repeated; only new arguments are read out. The moderation cards on which the arguments are written are placed on the pinboard/magnetic board, grouped according to whether they are for or against the statement.
5. The arguments are now evaluated. Each participant is asked to mark the 4 arguments which they found most convincing with a dot.
5. The arguments with the most dots are discussed in plenary. The key question guiding the discussion can be: is greater equality important for a good life for all? For larger groups, it can be helpful to have a ball which participants must hold in order to speak.

## Evaluation

The discussion is evaluated together with the participants.

- > How did you feel during the discussion?
- > Did you find it easy to argue in favour of your position?
- > Is a consensus or compromise between the two positions possible?
- > What do you think might be an actual solution to increase quality of life for all?

### Variations

As a complement or alternative to this activity, the participants can independently research income differences within Germany (or another country, as appropriate), e.g. between professions with the highest and lowest yearly income, between men and women, between whites and people of colour/people with a migrant background, or changes over recent decades. The participants can create presentations to display the figures.

### Suggestions for follow-up

The issue of distribution of work is closely connected to that of income equality. Methods such as “How do we want to work?” (chapter 3) or “The 20-hour week” (chapter 5, both currently only available in German - see [www.endlich-wachstum.de](http://www.endlich-wachstum.de)) are suitable follow-up activities.