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Comparing redistributive efficiency of tax-benefit systems in Europe

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Comparing redistributive efficiency of tax-benefit systems in Europe*

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Abstract

In empirical analysis, the Kakwani index is the most frequently used indicator for comparing progressivity across countries and over time. The Kakwani is often assumed to measure to what extent a policy design is targeted to the poor. It has, however, a major drawback: it is not defined for net tax incidence—that is, the whole system of taxes and benefits. Moreover, it is defined over different intervals for different pre-tax income distributions and different average tax rates. This paper proposes an extension to Kakwani index based on the concept of relative redistributive efficiency that is not affected by these drawbacks. The Redistributive Efficiency index was compared to the Kakwani index for taxes/benefits in EU countries by using Euromod baselines. In addition, the Redistributive Efficiency index was computed on the whole tax-benefit system; that is, taxes and benefits were evaluated together. Only Ireland and the UK combine high levels of redistributive efficiency with a relevant amount of tax revenues and social expenditures. They obviously obtain very high redistribution, above 15 points. Most of the countries considered show an intermediate level of redistribution (between 7 and 12 points), but with a different mix. A group of Central and Northern European countries plus Slovenia and Hungary combine medium levels of redistributive efficiency and medium size, while some Southern European countries (Spain and Portugal) and new members compensate a rather low amount of transfer and taxes with quite high levels of efficiency. The remaining new member states and Southern EU countries show a very low level of redistribution, below 7 points. Interestingly, they vary in the level of tax burden and of resources devoted to benefits but all of them show a poor Redistributive Efficiency. This suggests that low Redistributive Efficiency plays a key role in explaining why certain countries perform a limited amount of redistribution.

JEL: C00, D31, H20, I38

Keywords: Income Redistribution; Progressivity, Microsimulation; EUROMOD

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Introduction and main conclusions

Did the new policy adopted by the government disproportionately harm the poor? Could the alternative reform recently proposed reduce the loss for low income families? Such questions are inevitable in times of widening market inequality, shrinking welfare expenditures and policies of budget consolidation. Reducing resources for welfare also reduces the equalizing impact of fiscal policies, but two reforms with the same impact on the public budget may have a very different effect on income distribution. Whether and to what degree public resources are used efficiently in reducing inequality has become a commonplace subject of political debate in the last decades and it has been a central point of academic researches on inequality for a much longer time.

Academic researchers have dealt with this issue in order to answer a variety of research questions. A number of studies have investigated whether certain types of welfare regimes are more selective than others (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996). In doing that, researchers have mainly used a qualitative description of tax-benefit systems, for example the extent to which means testing has been used. Other authors focused on whether tax-benefit systems providing more resources to those at the bottom of the income distribution (instead of spreading them more evenly among the general population) are likely to have a higher equalizing impact (Korpi and Palme, 1998; Nelson, 2004; Marx et al., 2013). The measure they used to quantify how much a benefit is targeted to the poor was the concentration index of the benefit in question. A huge number of studies have analysed the role of progressivity of policy instruments in reducing income inequality. In this case it is not possible to give a complete report of the instruments used because of the very large number of papers written on the subject, but certainly the indices most commonly used to measure progressivity are the Kakwani (1976, 1977) and the Suits (1977).

The object of all these studies has not been just to examine the redistributive effectiveness of policies, but also the role played specifically by policy design—how efficiently do redistributive policies reduce income inequality? Though the idea of redistributive efficiency has been frequently hinted at, no researchers have explicitly referred to such a concept, as far as I know. Indeed, the role of policy design in redistribution has been examined with a number of different tools, none of which is suitable to quantify redistributive efficiency. Extensive recourse to means testing is not the only way to design a highly redistributive benefit. Transfers can also be focused on the poor by using an appropriate targeting system. On the other hand a means testing system with very high income thresholds might be almost completely ineffective in excluding the rich from state transfers.

The reason why a qualitative description of how common means testing is in a benefit system is not a good enough measure of redistributive efficiency is rather intuitive, but the reason that statistical quantitative methods (such as concentration index and progressivity indices) are also not suitable is more complex to explain. The concentration index reaches the maximum value if the tax is entirely paid by the richest individual; conversely, it reaches its minimum if the whole amount of benefits is given to the poorest one. In fact, if total tax amount is sufficiently small, making the richest individual pay the entire burden will result in the most equalizing impact on income distribution. As the average tax rate increases, however, concentrating the tax on just one individual will not lead to the maximum equalizing impact; on the contrary, it could even worsen income distribution by reducing the post-tax income of the richest person below the income of the second richest person, as the tax becomes greater than the income gap between them. As the tax rate increases still further, the net income of the richest person will fall below the third richest one, and so on. To avoid richer taxpayers moving down in income ranking (re-ranking) as an effect

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1The term “redistributive efficiency” actually, has already been used by D. Coady and E. Skoufias (2004), but with a different meaning. They studied the impact of targeting benefits on the poor.
of tax burden, real taxes are designed with effective marginal rates lower than 100%. Because of the upper limit of marginal tax rates, increasingly high tax revenue can be obtained only by sharing tax burden among an increasingly large number of taxpayers, making people less and less rich pay taxes\textsuperscript{2}. In conclusion, an important consequence of assuming marginal rates lower than 100% is that in reality the upper (maximum) limit of the concentration index of a tax decreases as tax revenue increases. It may happen that even the most redistributive very high tax could have a smaller concentration index than a not very redistributive little tax. Therefore, comparison of such indices is a redistributive efficiency evaluation if only same-size taxes are involved. Similar conclusions can be reached for the concentration index applied to benefits. Even if we were dealing with taxes and benefits of the same size there would be an additional major problem with the concentration index. It is not defined for net tax, wherein a whole tax-benefit system is considered. This was not an important issue in the past, when microdata on taxes were scant and data on benefits virtually non-existent. But it is a relevant limitation now, when large sets of microdata on household incomes, benefits and taxes are available; nowadays redistributive analyses on whole tax-benefit systems have become relatively common\textsuperscript{3}

The Kakwani index has been used even more than the concentration index. The Kakwani measures progressivity as departure from proportionality. It is defined as the difference between the concentration index of the tax and the Gini index of income before tax; it shares with the concentration index both the mentioned problems: the upper limit changes with the tax size and it is not defined for net fiscal incidence. In this paper an intuitive extension to Kakwani index (and to the Reynold-Smolensky) based on the concept of relative redistributive efficiency is proposed. The simple starting point is the scaling of Reynold-Smolensky index (and Kakwani index) according to the tax size; so that the resulting Redistributive efficiency index proposed here, has fixed limits regardless of the tax size, from 0 (minimum efficiency) to 1 (maximum efficiency). Furthermore it is decomposable into efficiency of single policy instruments and it allows decomposing redistributive impact into two components: redistributive efficiency and a component that depends only on market income distribution and policy instrument size.

The paper is organized as follows: Part 1 will describe the limits of the Kakwani index and will introduce the concept of maximum redistribution. Part 2 will describe the new index of redistributive efficiency. Part 3 will present the index applied to compare redistributive efficiency in EU countries. Some previous findings on tax benefit systems based on the Kakwani and concentration index will be re-examined to find out if they still hold with the redistributive efficiency index.

Our results do not show any correlation between average tax rate and redistributive efficiency. This suggests that previous findings of a negative relationship between the average rate and the Kakwani (Verbist and Figari 2014) relied on the dependence of the Kakwani’s upper limit on tax size.

I found that both the Kakwani and the redistributive efficiency index of benefits are positively related to redistributive impact.

The redistributive efficiency index has been computed for the whole tax benefit systems (considering taxes and benefits together) for 27 EU countries. Three groups have been identified. A first group of countries has a significant amount of resources devoted to redistribution and high redistributive efficiency; as expected, these countries show a high level of redistribution. In the middle, there are several countries with a moderate level of redistribution; some of them show rather high redistributive efficiency, others a moderate degree of efficiency. Finally, there is a group of countries with a low level of redistribution. Some of these countries employ a significant amount of resources for welfare, while others devote much less to

\textsuperscript{2} On the very same intuition is based the discussion on Kakwani maximum value carried out by Pellegrino et al. (2017).

\textsuperscript{3} In fact there are too many researches to give an exhaustive list. It worth mentioning, among others: Immervoll et al. (2006), OECD (2008), OECD (2011), Immervoll, H. and L. Richardson (2011), Avram at al. (2014).
welfare, but all of them show a very low value of redistributive efficiency. Indeed, the lower tail of the redistributive efficiency distribution is entirely made up of these underperforming countries. This suggests that low redistributive efficiency plays a key role in explaining why certain countries perform a very limited amount of redistribution.

1. Background

Progressivity of net fiscal incidence

For the sake of simplicity, in the following, only one global measure of redistribution (proposed by Reynold and Smolensky in 1977) and the Kakwani progressivity index will be discussed, but most of the conclusions apply also to other ATR progressivity indices (Pfaehler, 1987), such as the Suits (1977).

The Reynold-Smolensky index ($\text{I}^\text{RS}$) is the most commonly used index of redistribution. A description of progressivity indices is beyond the scope of this paper, where only a few essential concepts will be mentioned. A general description of different sorts of indices and an exhaustive analysis of progression indicators within Lorenz’s dominance framework is provided by Lambert (2001) and by Seidl et al. (2013).

The Reynold-Smolensky index ($\text{I}^\text{RS}$) measures redistribution as the difference between the Gini index of income before tax ($G_{Y+T}$) and the Concentration index of disposable income ($C_Y$), ordered by income before tax.

\[
1.1. \text{I}^\text{RS}_T = G_{Y+T} - C_Y
\]

\[
\text{I}^\text{RS}_T \leq G_{Y+T}
\]

In sections 1 and 2 I assume absence of re-ranking, that is, the ordering of persons according to income before and after tax is the same. In this case the concentration ($C_Y$) and the Gini index of income after tax coincide.

Reynolds-Smolensky for total tax is decomposable into single components:

\[
1.1a. \text{I}^\text{RS}_T = \sum (1-t_i) \frac{I^\text{RS}_i}{(1-t)}
\]

Where $t_i$ is the average tax rate of the single tax "i" and $t = \sum t_i$.

Kakwani (1976, 1977) showed that $I^\text{RS}_T$ can be decomposed into other two components:

\[
1.2. I^\text{RS}_T = \frac{t}{(1-t)} * (C_T - G_{Y+T})
\]

Where $C_T$ is the coefficient of concentration of tax (ordered by income before tax) and $t$ is average tax rate\(^4\).

I refer to the first component ($\frac{t}{(1-t)}$) as “rate effect” and to the second one as “progressivity as departure from proportionality” or Kakwani index ($I^\text{K}_T$)\(^5\):

\(^4\) Average tax rate is defined as total tax revenue divided by total taxable income.
1.3. \( I_T^K = (C_T - G_{Y+T}) \)

The Kakwani index \( (I_T^K) \) provides a measures of *progressivity as departure from proportionality*. It compares the tax under examination with a yield equivalent fictional tax scheme whose equalizing impact is known in advance. Specifically, the reference hypothetical tax scheme is a proportional tax whose redistributive impact is always zero. The concentration index of a proportional tax has exactly the same value of the concentration index of the tax base; therefore, \( I_T^K \) may be interpreted as the distance of distributive effect of a tax (\( T \)) from the (non) distributive impact of a proportional tax of the same size (of any size, actually). The concept of departure from proportionality is discussed in depth in Lambert (2011, pp. 199-204).

The reason for the appeal of decomposition 1.2 is easy to explain. Tax systems typically differ in *design* and in *size*; the decomposition is thought to allow one to distinguish the impact due to each of the components: the rate effect depends on total revenue (the size), while in empirical analysis the Kakwani index is often used to measure the effect of *tax design*, independently from amounts involved.

Kakwani (1977) also showed that \( I_T^K \) can be decomposed into single tax components \( (I_T^{K_i}) \):

1.4. \( I_T^K = \Sigma t_i/t^*I_T^{K_i} \)

Where \( \frac{t_i}{t^*} \) is the share of the single tax \( T_i \) on total tax revenue.

Redistributive impact of benefits is measured in a similar way, but benefits, unlike taxes, are equalizing if they are disproportionally in favour of the poor. Technically, benefits have an equalizing impact if they are *regressive*. That is benefits are equalizing if they have a *negative* Kakwani index. Apart from the sign, redistribution and progressivity of tax and benefits are measured in a similar way. Specifically, the Reynolds-Smolensky index may also be decomposed into *rate effect* and *progressivity as departure from proportionality* for benefits:

1.2.b) \( I_B^{RS} = (G_{Y-B} - C_Y) = \frac{-b}{(1+b)}*(C_B-G_{Y-B}) = \frac{-b}{(1+b)}*I_B^K \)

Where \( b \) is the ratio of benefits on income, \( C_B \) is the coefficient of concentration of benefits (ordered by incomes before benefits \( G_{Y-B} \), \( I_B^{RS} \) is the redistributive impact of benefits (Reynolds-Smolensky index) and \( I_B^K \) the Kakwani of benefits.

The matter is more troublesome if one puts together taxes and benefits and tries to evaluate progressivity of the whole tax-benefit system. Following Lambert (2001, ch. 11) I define net taxes \( (T_N) \) as the difference between the taxes paid and the benefits received by each individual \( k \):

1.5. \( T_N = T_k - B_k \)

Then *redistributive* impact of net tax is defined as:

1.6. \( I_N^{RS} = G_{Y+T-B} - G_Y = \frac{(1-g)I_B^{RS} + (1+b)I_B^{RS}}{(1-t+b)} \)

\(^5\) Pfähler(1987) shows that a similar decomposition applies also to every other scale invariant redistribution index, which satisfy Pigou-Dalton principle of transfers, such as Suits index.
The Kakwani index, instead, is not defined because it is not possible to compute the concentration index of \( T_N \). \( T_{Nb} \) assumes a negative value if the benefits received exceed the taxes paid by the individual \( k \). For this reason, the concentration curve (and therefore concentration index) of \( T_N \) is not “well behaved”: it may assume values bigger than 1 and lower than 0 (Lambert, 2001, p 276). Even neglecting this issue, it is possible to show that the Kakwani index does not work in the case of net tax. A progressivity index for net tax can be constructed, by using (1.4.), as the weighted sum of \( I_{N}^{K} \) and \( I_{R}^{S} \):

\[
1.7. I_{N}^{K} = \frac{tI_{N}^{K} - bI_{N}^{B}}{t - b}
\]

The obvious problem here is that \( I_{N}^{K} \to \infty \) as \( b \) approaches \( t \) (Lambert, 2001; Kiefer, 1984). The conclusion is that the Kakwani index does not enable one to evaluate progressivity when taxes and benefits are both taken in account simultaneously. This is a severe weakness since progressivity of pure transfers, of negative income taxes and of complete tax-benefit systems cannot be assessed by using Kakwani index.

The Maximum Redistribution and the effective Kakwani upper limit.

A well-known inconvenient feature of the Kakwani is that upper and lower limits are not fixed, but depend on pre-tax income distribution. The Kakwani index ranges from \( -(1+G_{x+}) \), corresponding to maximum regressivity, to \( (1 - G_{x+}) \), maximum progressivity.

A closer look highlights that the question is even more complex. An easy way to provide a glimpse of the issue is to show that equation 1.2 does not hold for the whole Kakwani’s (theoretical) range. Substituting the theoretical maximum Kakwani in 1.2 we obtain:

\[
I_{P}^{RS} = \frac{t}{(1-t)} (1 - G_{Y+T})
\]

If \( t > G_{Y+T} \) then \( I_{P}^{RS} > G_{Y+T} \), this violates the condition (1.1) \( I_{P}^{RS} \leq G_{Y+T} \) and implies \( C_r < 0 \); in other words, the concentration curve of incomes after tax lies above the line of perfect distribution. The violation of this condition implies that individuals are ranked differently according to pre tax and disposable income. The richest persons according to income before tax become the poorest after tax; this is called re-ranking. This extreme example makes clear that in real tax-benefit systems there must be some condition that avoids re-ranking and in doing that affects the actual limit of Kakwani. This condition is that effective marginal rates must be lower than 100%. Indeed, It is possible to show that, for any given average tax rate, there is a single tax design that ensures the maximum redistribution. Therefore, with that tax design we have the maximum values of the Reynolds-Smolensky index; any tax design that results in a higher Kakwani index implies some re-ranking and a lower Reynolds-Smolensky.

For a given average tax rate \( t \) and for a given distribution of income before tax, the maximum redistribution is provided by a flat rate tax \( (T_{br}) \) with personal allowance \( (A) \) and a nominal tax rate equal to 100% (Fig. 1a)

---

\(^6\) A similar problem arises with Suits index (Lambert 2001). Unlike for the Kakwani, for Suits index ad hoc solutions for this problem were propose by Kienzle E.C. (1981, 1982) and Bridges B. (1984)
1.8a \( T_{MRk} = (Y_k - A) \) if \( Y_k \geq A \); \( T_{MRk} = 0 \) otherwise.

1.8b \( Y_{MRTk} = A \) if \( Y_k \geq A \); \( Y_{MRTk} = Y_k \) otherwise.

Where \( Y_{MRT} \) is post-tax income. It may be shown that any other tax design involves a post-tax income distribution more unequal than \( Y_{MRT} \), in terms of the Gini index. I assume that the taxes being compared all have the same (total) amount, so that any after-tax income resulting from (any) tax different from \( T_{MR} \) can be reproduced starting from \( Y_{MRT} \) and carrying out transfers from one individual to another. A transfer from individual A to individual B means a higher tax paid by A and a lower tax paid by B. The impacts of all possible transfers are shown in Fig. 1. I assume \( T_X \geq 0 \), and therefore a transfer to non-taxpayers (Fig. 1b) is not allowed, because non-taxpayers would end up with a post-tax income bigger than their pre-tax one—they would receive benefits instead of paying taxes.

Fig. 1 The Most Redistributive Tax

Transfers from (pre-tax income) richer taxpayers to poorer ones (Fig. 1c) are allowed and they produce an increase of post-tax income inequality due to re-ranking, since as a result of \( T_{MR} \) all taxpayers have the same post-tax income equal to A (Fig. 1a). Only one additional type of transfers is possible: from non-taxpayers (and poor tax payers) to (richer) taxpayers (Fig. 1d); it does not necessarily involve re-ranking.
but it is a transfer from the poor to the rich. The Gini index respects the Pigou-Dalton transfer principle and therefore the latter type of transfer leads to a more unequal post-tax income distribution.

A nice feature of the Most Redistributive Tax (\(T_{MR}\)) is that it can be computed with simple microsimulation techniques and using the same microdata necessary to compute the Reynolds-Smolensky and the Kakwani: total value of tax under examination and individual value of income before tax. Then also the Reynolds-Smolensky index (\(\Pi_{MRT}^{RS}\)) and Kakwani index (\(\Pi_{MRT}^{K}\)) corresponding to maximum redistribution can be computed using the same data:

\[
1.9a. \Pi_{MRT}^{RS} = (G_{Y+T} - G_{Y+T-T_{MR}}) = \frac{t}{1-t} \cdot \Pi_{MRT}^{K}
\]

\[
1.9b. \Pi_{MRT}^{K} = (C_{TMR} - G_{Y+T})
\]

Where \(C_{TMR}\) is the concentration index of \(T_{MR}\). Note that \(T_{MR}\) is paid entirely by the richest individual only if the average tax rate is implausibly low; the value of \(C_{TMR}\) is typically lower than 1 and \(\Pi_{MRT}^{K} < (1-G_{Y+T})\).

For most of the reasonably big taxes, the Kakwani index corresponding to the maximum redistribution is lower than its theoretical maximum \((1-G_{Y+T})\). An increase of the Kakwani index beyond \(\Pi_{MRT}^{K}\) would lead to a reduction of redistribution because this is possible only in presence of marginal tax rates bigger than 100% and re-ranking.

I have shown that though the Kakwani upper limit presented in 1.3a could hold for the Kakwani index in general, if the Kakwani is applied to a tax it is necessary to either limit the effective upper bound to \(\Pi_{MRT}^{K}\) or give up to the condition of marginal tax rates not bigger that 100%. In the latter case, redistribution is not monotonically non-decreasing with the Kakwani. It goes without saying that the condition on marginal tax rates is essential for any sensible discussion on taxes and benefits and it will be maintained in the following.\(^7\)

I will proceed with the analysis of the properties of \(\Pi_{MRT}^{K}\) and \(\Pi_{MRT}^{RS}\).

Given that the only tax rate of \(T_{MR}\) is fixed at 100%, total tax amount changes only if tax allowance is modified: an increase of tax allowance reduces tax revenue and a reduction of tax allowance increases it. The impact of changes of tax allowances on progressivity as departure from proportionality and redistribution has been studied by Keen et al. (2000). They found that if the tax schedule is proportional (as in our case), an increase of allowance (namely a reduction of average tax rate) leads to an increase in the Kakwani index and a decrease in the Reynolds-Smolensky index. This provides a more rigorous proof of the dependency of Kakwani limit on average tax rate and the conclusion is that the effective upper limit of the Kakwani (\(\Pi_{MRT}^{K}\)) decreases as average tax rate (\(t\)) increases.

The reasoning applied to the Kakwani for taxes can be extended to benefits with only small adaptations. The most distributive scheme can be identified for benefits as well. For a given total amount of benefit, the maximum redistribution (\(\Pi_{MRR}^{RS}\)) is provided by a Minimum income scheme (\(B_{MR}\)) with income limit (\(B\)) and 100% withdrawal rate.

\[
B_{MR_{k}} = (B-Y_{k}) \quad \text{if} \quad Y_{k} \leq B \quad ; \quad B_{MR_{k}} = 0 \quad \text{otherwise.}
\]

\[
Y_{MRR_{k}} = B \quad \text{if} \quad Y_{k} \leq B \quad ; \quad Y_{MRR_{k}} = Y_{k} \quad \text{otherwise}
\]

\(^7\) This is not to say that effective marginal rates bigger that 100% are completely unseen in real tax-benefit systems. Discontinuities and incomes subjected to more than one tax (or social contribution) occasionally do cause effective marginal rates bigger than 100%. More frequently, re-ranking is due to the treatment of non-income characteristics, such as the presence of income dependents in the family. This latter case concerns horizontal equality rather than vertical equality, and must be studied with different tools.
Where $Y_{\text{MRB}}$ is post-benefit income. A line of reasoning similar to the one applied to the most distributive tax can be used for the most redistributive benefit ($B_{\text{MR}}$). Similarly to taxes, it may be shown that for any benefit scheme involving the same amount of resources as $B_{\text{MR}}$, after-benefit income can be reproduced starting from $Y_{\text{MR}}$ and performing a pure transfer. A transfer from individual A to individual B leads to a smaller benefit to individual A and a bigger transfer to individual B. Any transfer from a non-beneficiary is not allowed because it involves negative benefits (that is they would pay taxes instead of receiving benefits). Transfers from less poor (in pre-benefit income) beneficiaries to the poorer would lead to re-ranking and to a more unequal income distribution. Transfers from poorer beneficiaries to other beneficiaries lead directly to a more unequal income distribution.

Symmetrically to taxes, the most redistributive benefit ($B_{\text{MR}}$) is less regressive than the Kakwani lower limit, that is $I_{\text{MRB}}^K > (1 + G_Y b)$. Moreover ($B_{\text{MR}}$) becomes less regressive as total benefit amount increases, the Kakwani of the most redistributive benefit ($I_{\text{MRB}}^K$) is increasing with benefit average rate ($b$). Unlike for taxes, however, there is not any previous research on a general relationship between benefit progression and income limits; for this reason a simple proof is provided in Appendix 1, where the dependence of $I_{\text{MRB}}^K$ on income limit ($B$) is discussed.

### 2. Redistributive efficiency index

The objective of this part is to develop an index of Redistributive Efficiency ($I^E$) without the flaws previously seen for the Kakwani index. The Redistributive Efficiency index is defined for net tax; it is monotonically increasing with equalizing impact of the tax, the benefit and the net tax.

The simple starting idea is based on a change of benchmark. Redistributive Efficiency ($I^E$) compares the observed redistribution to the redistribution produced by the most distributive tax (or the most distributive benefit) of the same size of the tax (benefit) under examination, rather than measuring progressivity as departure from proportionality.

While the Kakwani is the distance between concentration index of the actual tax and the concentration index of a hypothetical proportional tax, the redistributive efficiency index uses the most distributive tax as the counterfactual tax.

Progressivity as departure from proportionality does not need the actual computation of the counterfactual equally yield proportional tax (benefit), since all proportional taxes and benefits have the same Kakwani and Reynolds-Smolensky value, zero. Unlike proportional taxes and benefits, the concentration index of the most distributive tax (benefit) depends on average tax (benefit) rate; for this reason $T_{\text{MR}}$ ($B_{\text{MR}}$) must be really simulated. Once $T_{\text{MR}}$ and $B_{\text{MR}}$ are simulated, the corresponding Reynolds-Smolensky redistributive indices $I_{\text{MRT}}^{RS}$ and $I_{\text{MRB}}^{RS}$ can be computed as:

\begin{align*}
2.1.a \quad & I_{\text{MRT}}^{RS} = (G_{Y+T} - G_{Y+T-T_{\text{MR}}}) \\
2.1.b \quad & I_{\text{MRB}}^{RS} = (G_{Y-B} - G_{Y-B+B_{\text{MR}}})
\end{align*}

Then the Redistributive Efficiency index can be computed as the ratio between the actual redistribution and the maximum attainable with the same amount of resources:

\begin{align*}
2.2.a \quad & I^E_T = \frac{I^{RS}_{\text{MRT}}}{I^{RS}_{\text{MRT}}} \quad 0 \leq I^E_T \leq 1
\end{align*}
Redistributive Efficiency has a number of noticeable properties. For simplicity, in the following they will be presented for $I_{TE}^E$ only, since the generalization to $I_{EB}^E$ is straightforward.

First, an attractive feature is that $I_{TE}^E$ has fixed bounds; it ranges from 0, in case of proportionality, to 1 if redistributive impact of the tax or benefit matches the most redistributive one.

Second, Redistributive Efficiency is also equal to the ratio between the actual Kakwani and the Kakwani of the most distributive tax. Using 1.2 for substituting $I_{MRT}^{RS}$ and $I_{T}^{RS}$ in 2.2a yields:

$$2.3 \, I_{E}^{T} = \frac{I_{RS}^{T}}{I_{MRT}^{T}} = \frac{I_{RS}^{T}}{I_{MRT}^{T}}$$

Third, similarly to the decomposition into rate effect and Kakwani, this framework allows a decomposition of the Reynolds-Smolensky index into two components due respectively to the amount of resources employed and the tax design:

$$2.4 \, I_{E}^{T} = I_{E}^{T} I_{MRT}^{RS}$$

Where $I_{MRT}^{RS}$, the maximum redistribution, depends only on tax amount and pre-tax income distribution and $I_{E}^{T}$, redistributive efficiency, depends on tax design.

Finally, $I_{E}^{T}$ is decomposable into contribution of single components. Using the 1.1a decomposition for $I_{T}^{RS}$ yields:

$$2.5 \, I_{E}^{T} = \sum \frac{(1-t_i)(1-t_i)}{(1-t_i)} I_{T}^{E} \frac{I_{MRT}^{RS}}{I_{MRT}^{RS}}$$

where $I_{T}^{E}$ is the Redistributive Efficiency of tax $i$ and $I_{MRT}^{RS}$ is the Reynolds-Smolensky of the most redistributive tax with the same size of tax $i$.

Redistributive Efficiency, amount of resources and net fiscal system

Progressivity as departure from proportionality is usually interpreted as a comparison between concentration indices of the actual tax/benefit and the concentration index of equal-yield proportional ones. It may look like computation of the Kakwani really involves a comparison with a counterfactual tax of the same amount as the one under examination. But all proportional taxes have the same concentration of the tax base, so that the correct definition of tax size seems not really of interest when computing the Kakwani. Instead, the concentration of the most redistributive tax depends on the size; therefore, the correct definition of the amount of resources employed is essential for the computation of the redistributive efficiency index.

Unfortunately, in real tax benefit systems the definition of the size of taxes and benefits is not always an elementary task. There are several cases in which it is not easy to decide whether some tax credits are more appropriately classified as benefits. Typical examples are tax expenditures and negative taxes. Similar doubts arise about the benefits: a withdrawal rate on a benefit works like a tax surcharge on beneficiaries’
market incomes. Indeed, Meade proposed a Citizen’s Income plus a “Withdrawal Surcharge over the lower range of [...] income” (Meade, 1995, p. 69), instead of a minimum income. Though a minimum income and a basic income plus an additional tax on lower market incomes are the same, they may look very different as far as the computation of both redistributive efficiency and progressivity are concerned. According to nominal definitions, the first is just a benefit; the second is a benefit (with more resources employed, a lower efficiency and a lower progressivity than minimum income) plus an explicitly regressive tax. According to the nominal definitions, the same redistribution will result from different size and different progressivity for the two instruments, because they are treated as different, though they are essentially the same. In fact, as long as taxes and benefits are considered separately, conclusions will inevitably be affected by a certain degree of uncertainty due to the decisions we have to make on whether a tax is actually a benefit reduction or whether a tax relief is a benefit in disguise. Only the use of the concept of net fiscal system allows resolving the ambiguity inherent in the definition of taxes and benefits. The net tax incidence is \((1.5)\) the difference between the taxes paid and the benefits received by each individual. For a person, net tax can have a positive or a negative value. A positive value (the taxes paid are bigger than the benefits received) means that she is a net payer to the government, while a negative value means that he is a net recipient. I have already shown that it is not possible to compute the concentration index of net tax; it is necessary to deal with quantities that assume either positive (taxes) or negative (benefits) values. Hence I define individual Net Tax \(T_{NK}\) and Net Benefit \(B_{NK}\) rather than individual Net fiscal system as such:

\[
\begin{align*}
2.6.a \quad T_{NK} &= T_k - B_k \quad \text{if } T_k > B_k \quad T_{NK} = 0 \quad \text{otherwise} \\
2.6.b \quad B_{NK} &= B_k - T_k \quad \text{if } T_k < B_k \quad B_{NK} = 0 \quad \text{otherwise}
\end{align*}
\]

The definition of individual net tax and benefit allows the computation of total amount of Net tax and Net benefit. Consequently, it is possible to simulate the most redistributive net fiscal system and to calculate the redistributive efficiency index of total tax-benefit system:

\[
2.7 \quad I_{R}^{\text{RS}} = \frac{I_{R}^{\text{RS}}}{I_{R}^{\text{MRN}}} \quad 0 \leq I_{R}^{\text{RS}} \leq 1
\]

Note that \(T_{NK}\) and \(B_{NK}\) are smaller than actual taxes or benefits for individuals who receive benefits and pay taxes because 2.6.a and 2.6.b imply that all benefits received by net payers are treated as tax reliefs and that all taxes payed by net receivers are treated as benefit reductions. As a consequence, if at least one individual pays taxes and receives benefits, the values of total net tax \((T_{N})\) and total net benefit \((B_{N})\) used to compute the most redistributive net tax and the most redistributive net benefit are smaller than budgetary total taxes and total benefits.
3. REDISTRIBUTIVE EFFICIENCY IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

This section is devoted to the analysis of Redistributive Efficiency and Progressivity in 27 European countries. First, \( R^{RE} \) will be computed for taxes and benefits separately, so that Redistributive Efficiency can be compared with the Kakwani index. Then the Redistributive Efficiency index will be calculated for the net fiscal systems, namely considering taxes and benefits together.

Data

The following analysis is based on data provided by the Euromod model, version G1.0+. Euromod is a tax-benefit microsimulation model for the European Union; a clear and complete description of the model can be found in Sutherland and Figari (2013). The baselines used here refer to 2012 incomes and tax-benefit systems. Euromod simulations are based on individual data derived from EU-SILC survey for most countries; for some other countries input data are from national household budget surveys or national SILC. Also, the year of data collection differs among considered countries. Input data are described in Appendix 2.

Equations and income definitions

Euromod provides household disposable income by components. Market income includes income from labour (net of employer social contributions), incomes from capital and other market incomes. Tax includes income tax, property tax and local tax; indirect taxes are not included. Euromod includes all benefits in cash (many simulated, some from input data), but not benefits in kind (such as public health services and education). Household disposable income is equal to market income minus taxes and employee social contributions plus cash benefits. The empirical analysis will be carried out on household equivalent incomes obtained using OECD modified equivalence scale\(^8\).

In the following taxes and employees social contributions will be always considered together and, for sake of simplicity, called just “taxes.” Unlike other important previous studies (OECD, 2008; OECD, 2011; Immervoll and Richardson, 2011), public old age and survivor pensions will not be included in the following analysis. This is not to say that pensions do not cause redistribution, but it is just the recognition that the analytical scheme adopted here does not allow its evaluation. Evaluating the redistributive impact of taxes and benefits involves the implicit calculation of counterfactual scenarios. What if taxes and benefits were not provided by the state? The implicit answer here is that in the absence of state intervention the provision of benefits and tax revenue would be negligible. That is a rather reasonable assumption for most benefits and taxes; economic theory suggests that benefits would be severely under-provided in a market economy and common sense suggests that very few people would pay taxes if not obliged. Indeed, even the most aggressive opponents of this type of static analysis advocate for the introduction of second order efficiency effects (such as the impact on labour supply) in the counterfactual scenario, but not for considering substitutive private provision of taxes and benefits.

Things are different for old-age pensions, though. There is unquestionable evidence that all societies provide for some old age provisions, through private pension schemes, savings or household arrangements,

---

\(^8\) OECD modified equivalence scale gives value 1 for the first adult in the household, 0.5 for each additional adult and 0.3 for each child. Every individual aged below 14 is considered a child.
regardless of state intervention. Public pensions are compulsory saving/insurance systems that are bound to crowd out private provisions for old age to some extent. The construction of a counterfactual with such substitutive private provisions would be necessary for a thorough evaluation of the redistributive impact of public pension schemes.

**Reranking**

For this final empirical analysis we must give up the assumption of absence of re-ranking because in real tax-benefit systems the presence of reranking is inevitable even if marginal nominal tax rates are lower than 100%. Reranking is generally due to the treatment of households different in non-income characteristics (such as the number of components or presence of dependents) or to a non-homogenous treatment of different income sources. In order to be able to take in account the presence of reranking a few changes in equations are necessary.

For taxes, Reynolds-Smolensky decomposition (equation 1.2) changes into:

\[ 3.1 \quad I_{TR}^{RS} = (G_{Y+T} - G_Y) = (G_{Y+T} - C_Y) - R_{KT} = \left( \frac{t}{(1-t)} \right) * I_{TR}^{K} - R_{KT} \]

Where \( G_Y \) and \( C_Y \) are, respectively, the Gini index and the concentration index of disposable income, \( G_{Y+T} \) is Gini index of income before taxes. The ordering variable is disposable income plus taxes. Re-ranking effect \( R_{KT} \) is the difference between Gini and concentration index of disposable income:

\[ R_{KT} = (G_Y - C_Y) \]

Similarly to equations 3.1, the Reynolds-Smolensky decomposition for benefits (equation 1.2b) changes into:

\[ 3.2 \quad I_{BR}^{RS} = (G_{Y-B} - G_Y) = (G_{Y-B} - C_Y) - R_{KB} = \left( \frac{-b}{(1+b)} \right) * I_{BR}^{K} - R_{KB} \]

Where \( G_Y \) and \( C_Y \) are, respectively, the Gini index and the concentration index of disposable income, \( G_{Y-B} \) is Gini index of disposable income net of benefits. Re-ranking effect \( R_{KB} \) is the difference between Gini and the concentration index of disposable income. Disposable income minus benefits is the ordering variable for concentration indices.

Finally, also equation 2.3 has to be changed into:

\[ 3.3 \quad I_{TE}^E = \frac{I_{TE}^{RS}}{I_{MRT}} = \frac{I_{TE}^{K}}{I_{MRT}} - \frac{R_{KT}}{I_{MRT}} \]

\[ 9 \text{ For reranking due to vertical and horizontal inequity see Lambert 2001 pg.238.} \]

\[ 10 \text{ The equivalent equation for benefits is } I_{BE}^E = \frac{I_{BE}^{RS}}{I_{MRT}} = \frac{I_{BE}^{K}}{I_{MRT}} - \frac{R_{KB}}{I_{MRT}} \]
Results

This simple empirical analysis was first carried out on taxes and then on benefits separately to highlight similarities and differences between the Redistributive Efficiency index and the Kakwani index. Finally $IT^R$ was computed for the entire tax-benefit system, that is on net fiscal systems. Fig. 2 shows the Kakwani index ($K$-left hand scale), the Redistributive efficiency index ($R-E$- left hand scale), the Reynold-Smolensky index ($R-S$ – right hand scale) and average tax rate ($t$– right hand scale) for taxes. Part a) and part b) contain the same variables, but in the first all countries are ordered by the Kakwani, while in the latter countries are ordered by Redistributive Efficiency; this will allow the robustness of previous findings on the relation between Kakwani index and average tax rate to be tested. Verbist and Figari (2014) found a negative correlation between progressivity as departure from proportionality and the level of tax burden. They conclude that tax rate and progressivity are “rather substitutes than complements” and that it “confirms the different policy options adopted by governments across Europe even when the policy aim in terms of redistribution is the same.”

Both part a) and b) show that $IT^K$ and $IT^R$ differ significantly. As expected, the discrepancies between the two indices appear to be clearly explained by average tax rate level. Fig. 2a confirms the negative correlation between the Kakwani index and tax level. Yet, the correlation disappears if Redistributive Efficiency is used instead of Progressivity as Departure from Proportionality (Fig. 2b). This contradictory evidence leaves room for further investigations on the role played by the reduction of the upper limit of the Kakwani as the average tax rate increases. Previous results seem to depend on the technical dependence of effective Kakwani upper limit on tax size, rather than alternative policy strategies adopted by European governments with similar attitude toward redistribution.

Fig. 2: Taxes and social contribution

Fig. 3 shows the Kakwani index ($K$), the Redistributive Efficiency index ($R-E$) and the Reynolds-Smolesnsky ($R-S$) index for benefits. Part a) and part b) contain the same variables, but countries are ordered differently: in part a) countries are ordered by decreasing Kakwani index and in part b) they are ordered according to Redistributive Efficiency index. In case of benefits I will analyse the issue on whether countries with transfers more targeted to the poor do distribute more than other countries.
The debate was opened by Korpi and Palme (1998), who found that “The more we target benefits at the poor and the more concerned we are with creating equality via equal public transfers to all, the less likely we are to reduce poverty and inequality”. They call their findings the “paradox of redistribution”.

Fig. 3: Benefits

a-Ordered by kawani index  

b- Ordered by Redistributive Efficiency index

Korpi and Palme’s (1998) conclusions were largely based on the positive relation between the concentration index of benefits and redistribution\(^\text{11}\) found in the countries they considered, although their discussion about differences among welfare systems was far more articulated. Their findings imply that welfare models more targeted on the poor are able to devote a much lower amount of resources to social expenditure. It has to be noted that a negative relation between the concentration index of the benefits and the amount of resources in not sufficient, per se, to cause the fall of redistribution as the concentration of benefits increases.

In Fig. 3 the Kakwani is presented with the sign changed, in order to make clearer the two pictures. The Redistribution index (Reynolds-Smolensky) seems to decrease as the Kakwani index decreases (fig.3a). This confirms more recent results obtained by Marx et al. (2013), who found that the redistributive paradox does not hold any more. The positive correlation between targeting transfers to the poor and redistribution is even more apparent (Fig. 3b) if we use the Redistributive Efficiency index as the measure of the targeting.

Looking at the Kakwani of taxes and benefits does not provide any hints on progressivity of the whole net fiscal system. We have already seen how taking into account the overlapping of taxes and benefits over the same individuals is important for a correct evaluation of the impact of the whole tax-benefit system. Even neglecting this issue, the comparison of Fig. 2 to Fig. 3 highlights that countries with very progressive taxes (such as Portugal and Ireland) often do not have very regressive benefits; therefore, it is impossible to guess how much the whole tax-benefit system is targeted to the poor. The Redistributive Efficiency index is the only tool that enables to such an evaluation.

Fig.4 shows the Redistributive Efficiency (right hand scale), the Reynolds-Smolensky (left hand scale) and the Maximum Redistribution (\(I_{MR}^{RS}\) - left hand scale) indices for net fiscal system. Countries are ordered by Reynolds-Smolensky.

---

\(^{11}\) If benefits are mainly targeted to the poor, the concentration index is negative and its value increases (decrease in absolute value) as the share of benefits received by the poor decreases. Concentration index is positive if a disproportionate share of benefits is given to the rich. Korpi and Palme (1998) measure redistribution as the percentage change of gini index of income caused by benefits.
A clear pattern of redistribution and Redistributive Efficiency emerges from the picture. The two Anglo-Saxon countries (UK and Ireland) present a very high level of redistribution and redistributive efficiency. Then, there is a large group with average levels of redistribution; the Reynolds-Smolenyk index lies between 12.5 and 7 points for as many as 15 countries. Some of these countries obtain their redistributive impact with higher Redistributive Efficiency and others with higher Maximum Redistribution, without a clear pattern. Finally there are ten countries with very low levels of redistribution, below 7 points. Interestingly, all of them show a poor Redistributive Efficiency (except Slovakia) while the Maximum Redistribution varies significantly; a few of them, notably Italy and Poland, have a maximum redistribution index even bigger than some countries belonging to the average redistribution group. As it emerges, low Redistributive Efficiency plays an important role in explaining the poor redistributive impact of the underperforming tax-benefit systems.
References


Appendix 1

B1 and B2 are two minimum income schemes:
\[ B1(x) = b1 - x \text{ if } x \leq b1; \ 0 \text{ otherwise} \]
\[ B2(x) = b2 - x \text{ if } x \leq b2; \ 0 \text{ otherwise} \]

Where \( x \) is income before benefits.
If \( b1 < b2 \), B1(x) involves a smaller amount of resources than B2(x).

To be equalizing, benefits have to be regressive. A sufficient condition for B1(x) to be more regressive than B2(x) is that Lorenz curve of B1 (\( L_{B1}(x) \)) dominates Lorenz curve of B2 (\( L_{B2}(x) \)).

This condition is not strictly true because \( L_{B1}(x) = L_{B2}(x) = 1 \) if \( x > b2 \).

The condition can be restated so that B1(x) is more regressive than B2(x) if Lorenz dominance holds when \( x \) is smaller than \( b2 \).

**A.1** B1(x) is more regressive than B2(x) if:
\[
L_{B1}(x) > L_{B2}(x) \quad \text{if } x < b2 \\
L_{B1}(x) = L_{B2}(x) = 1 \quad \text{Otherwise}
\]

Condition \( L_{B1}(x) > L_{B2}(x) \) is clearly true if \( b1 \leq x \leq b2 \), since \( 1 = L_{B1}(x) > L_{B2}(x) < 1 \).

Hence it remains to prove that:

**A.2** \( L_{B1}(x) > L_{B2}(x) \) if \( x < b1 \).

Condition A.2 is similar to the “qualified Lorenz dominance” used by Keen et al. 2000.
I show that this is true for any value of income smaller than \( b1 \).
Consider any distribution \( X = (x1, x2) \) where: \( x1 < x2 < b1 \):

\[ B1(x1) = b1 - x1 \]
\[ B2(x1) = b2 - x1 \]

\[ L_{B1}(x1) = \frac{b1 - x1}{(b1 - x1) + (b1 - x2)} \]
\[ L_{B2}(x1) = \frac{b2 - x1}{(b2 - x1) + (b2 - x2)} \]

Then condition **A.2** implies:
\[ \frac{b1 - x1}{(b1 - x1) + (b1 - x2)} > \frac{b2 - x1}{(b2 - x1) + (b2 - x2)} \Rightarrow 0 > (b1 - b2)(x2 - x1). \Leftrightarrow b1 < b2 \]

Hence B1(x) is more regressive of B2(x) if \( b1 < b2 \), that is if total expenditure for B1 is lower than total expenditure for B2.
## Appendix 2

### Euromod database

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Source: EUROMOD data documentation.