News Item, 03/01/2011, Gütersloh: Study Shows Germany Lags in Social Justice

Updated index identifies poverty prevention and educational access as problem areas

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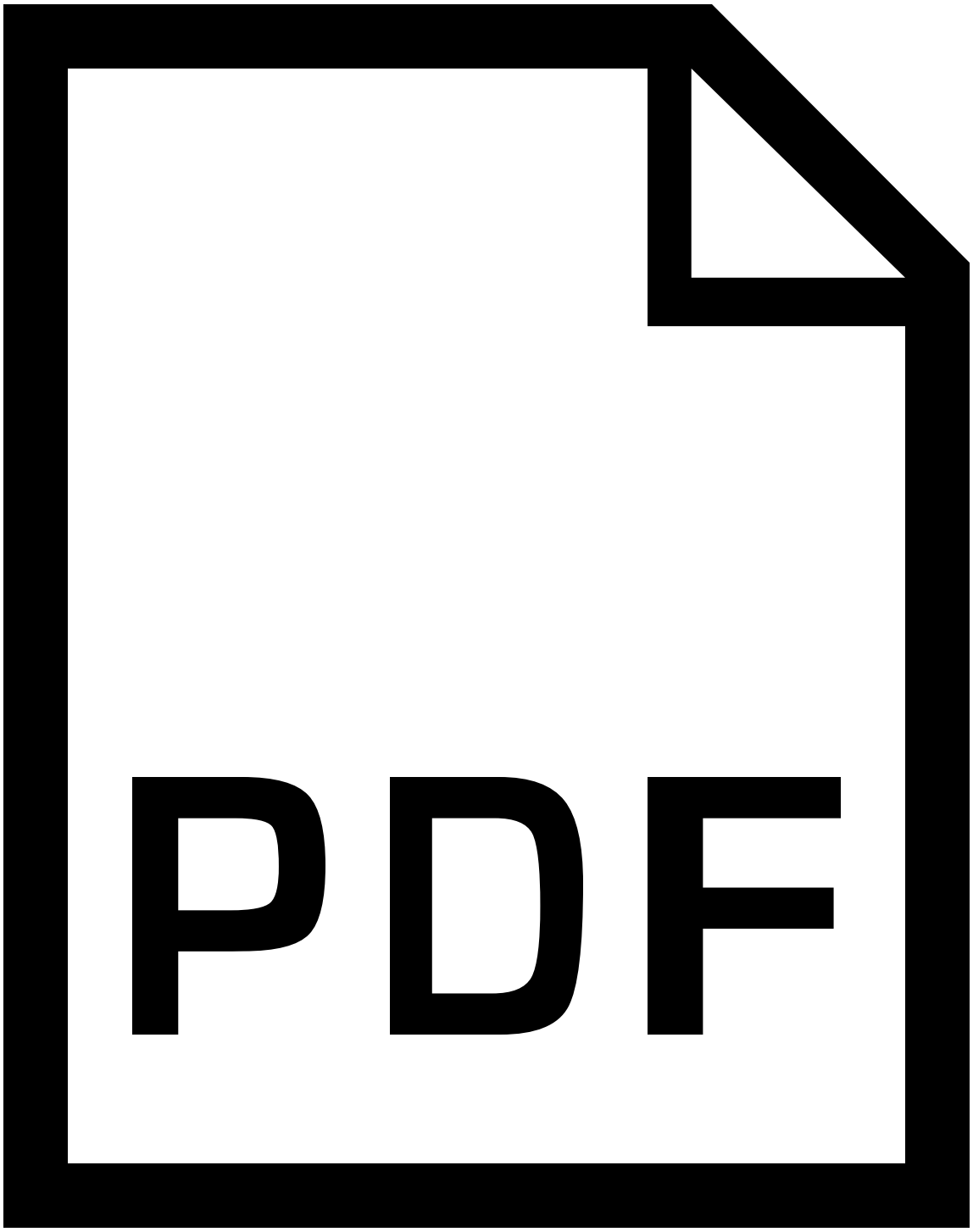

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Dr. Daniel Schraad-Tischler

Among the 31 members of the OECD, Germany ranks 15th -- only mid-field -- when it comes to the areas of poverty reduction, educational access, employment, social cohesion, social equality and intergenerational justice. Those are the findings of a recent study carried out by the Bertelsmann Stiftung. According to the study, the countries that lead in these areas include the northern European nations of Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland, with Turkey taking last place.

According to the findings, Germany's areas of particular weakness are poverty prevention, education and employment. "For the country's social market economy to be truly forward looking, it cannot be acceptable that one child in nine grows up poor, that educational opportunity is highly dependent on social background and that, comparatively speaking, many people have been excluded from the job market for a long time," said Dr. Gunter Thielen, chairman and CEO of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, at the study's presentation. "This international comparison clearly shows that social justice and economic performance need not be at odds, something the northern European countries demonstrate in particular."

In the past 20 years, poverty in Germany as measured by relative income levels has increased. A particularly disturbing trend is the increase in the number of children living in poverty. Currently, one child in nine grows up in poverty. That means that the conditions necessary for ensuring social equality are often precluded from the start, since people living in poverty frequently have only limited opportunities for social participation and for living a self-determined life. In contrast, only 2.7 percent of children live in poverty in Denmark, which, along with Sweden and Norway, has the lowest poverty levels among the OECD nations. Even Hungary (8th place) and the Czech Republic (13th) outperform Germany (14th).

Despite Germany's school students having improved their standings in the international PISA rankings, the country's educational system still has a number of shortcomings in terms of ensuring social justice. Ranking 22nd, Germany is one of the lower mid-range countries. Whether children do well in school is still very dependent on their socioeconomic background, and the probability that socially disadvantaged youngsters will be able to participate in society and reap its benefits is lower than in many other OECD nations. Finally, the study's authors believe the country could invest much more in early childhood education, one of the factors critical for ensuring equal opportunity.

Despite the country's considerable dependence on exports, the global economic crisis has had a markedly lower impact on Germany's labor market than it has in other countries. Yet from the perspective of social equality and justice, there is a definite downside: A number of groups -- the long-term unemployed and less skilled workers, for example -- still have considerable difficulty finding jobs. In terms of preventing long-term unemployment, Germany is even in next-to-last place when ranked against its fellow OECD members.

Shortcomings also exist in the areas of social cohesion and social equality. In the last 20 years income disparity in Germany has increased faster than in almost any other OECD country, a polarization that is troublesome in terms of social cohesion. Moreover, while Germany has high legal standards designed to promote equality and prevent discrimination, many people do experience discrimination, especially because of age, gender or disability. In addition, the country only receives average marks when it comes to integrating immigrants, with many people perceiving immigration more as a threat than an opportunity.

On the other hand, the principle of intergenerational justice has been applied to a relatively high degree. The introduction of a constitutional limit on public debt has been a positive development, and the country has taken considerable steps in the areas of environmental protection and resource conservation. These findings, however, should not mask the fact that further environmental measures are needed, particularly in the area of climate protection and the promotion of renewable energies. Finally, public spending could be increased on research and development, since that is what largely determines a country's ability to innovate and, as a result, the level of prosperity it enjoys.

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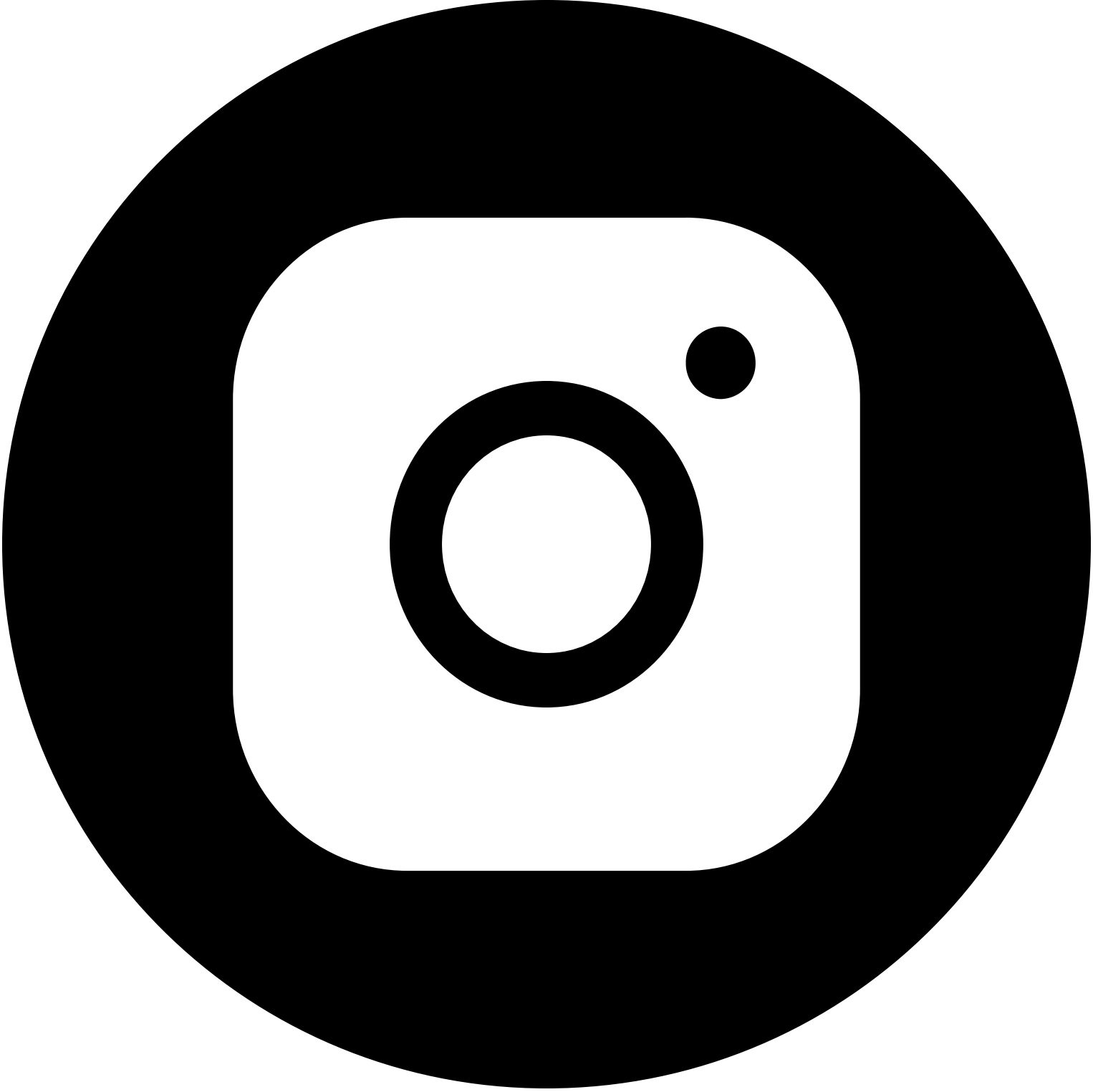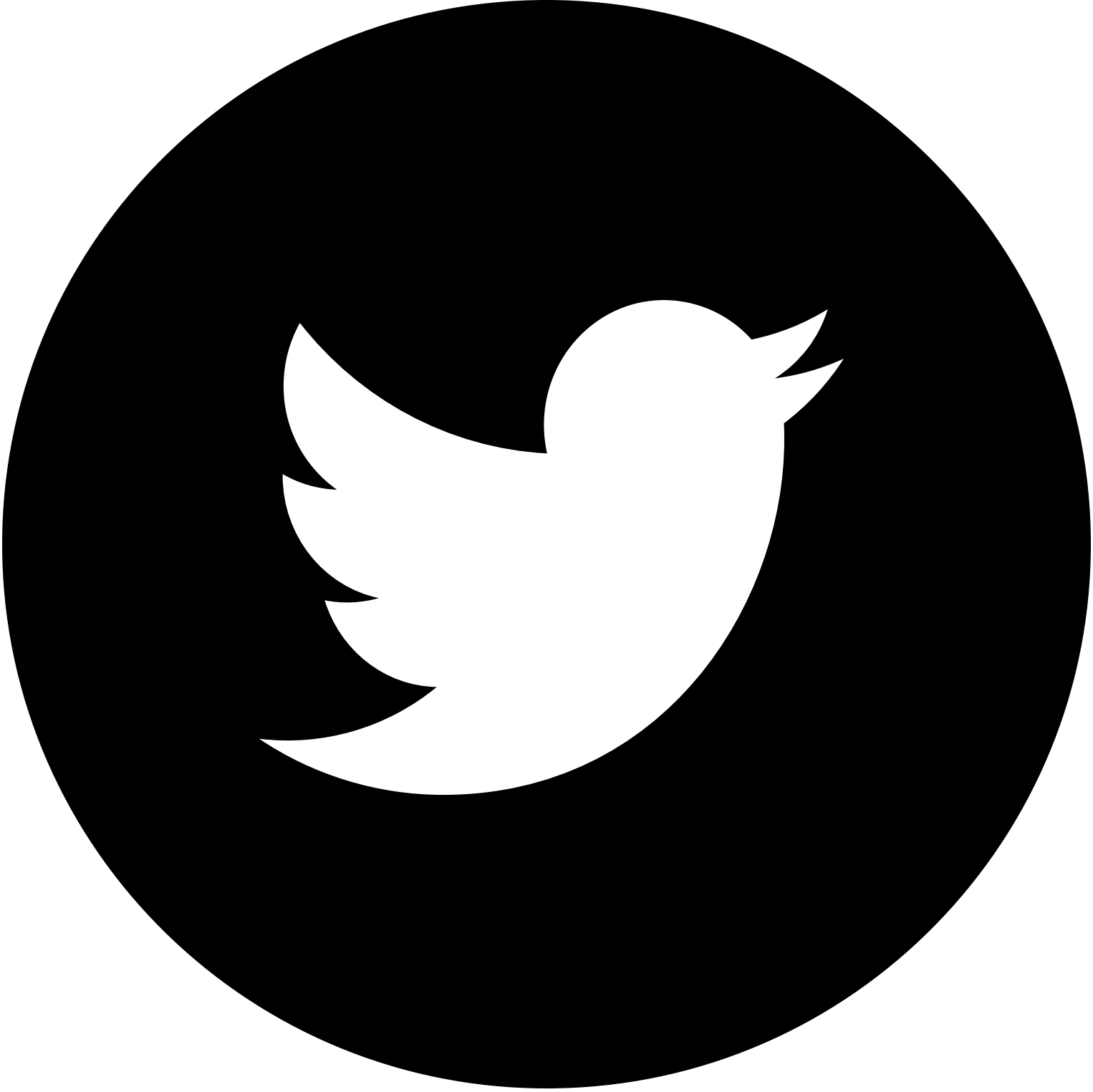
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