

---

## Science Fiction

by

Dan Ben-David

---

What can one do when a well-known organization, one that supports many of the same issues as I, systematically cuts corners over the years as a means of promoting its objectives? When the actual facts are deemed insufficient and the organization decides to present only a partial picture of reality – one that is based on data chosen with tweezers – then there arises a danger that the public may lose faith in the entire social agenda being pursued.

Paul Krugman once wrote about interested parties who pour “a steady stream of money into think tanks that create a sort of parallel intellectual universe, a world of ‘scholars’ whose careers are based on toeing an ideological line, rather than on doing research that stands up to scrutiny by their peers ... There are several reasons why fake research is so effective. One is that nonscientists sometimes find it hard to tell the difference between research and advocacy – if it’s got numbers and charts in it, doesn’t that make it science?”

“Even when reporters do know the difference, the conventions of he-said-she-said journalism get in the way of conveying that knowledge to readers. I once joked that if President Bush said that the Earth was flat, the headlines of news articles would read, ‘Opinions Differ on Shape of the Earth.’”

The Adva Center just published its annual report on Israeli society. Underneath the headline “Growth is not good for everyone” appears a graph showing how incomes in three different income deciles have behaved over the past decade and a half. While incomes in the top decile rose steadily, incomes in the two other reported deciles – the second and sixth deciles – appear to be treading water since 1990. The explanation accompanying the graph focuses only on the steep increase in the incomes of the wealthy. The combination of misleading headline, graph and incomplete explanation yield a seemingly self-evident picture of what transpired in the lower income deciles.

On a separate page is a table that the press likes to report. It shows the decline in the share of total income by each of the eight lower deciles. The only income shares exhibiting an increase between 1990 and 2006 were those of the top two deciles. It is no coincidence that the merging of this table together with headlines of the type quoted above can lead the reader to conclude that “Growth in Israel is only for the wealthy” as stated in the title of a Ynet article including the table that was published on the heels of last year’s report.

However, the truth does not exactly match the impression that many receive from the Adva report. Had they simply shown the incomes of each decile in 1990 alongside the incomes in 2006, like in the accompanying table, then it would have been possible to clearly see the income increases in every single decile. But then, it would not have been possible to infer that growth was bad for society’s poor – which is the mistaken perception that they were trying to convey.

### Gross monthly household incomes

(in 2006 prices)

Decile	1990	2006	change
top	27,034	40,904	51%
9	17,660	23,804	35%
8	14,130	18,291	29%
7	11,906	14,922	25%
6	10,151	12,394	22%
5	8,658	10,317	19%
4	7,354	8,518	16%
3	6,084	6,837	12%
2	4,899	5,324	9%
bottom	3,037	3,383	11%

source: Dan Ben-David, Tel-Aviv University  
Data from the CBS and Adva Center

The real problem is not a widespread decline in the living standards of the poor but rather the steadily increasing inequality. This is a serious phenomenon that has been developing for three straight decades. It entrenches Israel ever deeper into the unflattering club of countries characterized by the greatest income inequality in the West.

As a result of public policies influenced considerably by narrow-minded, personal and sectoral interests, one part of the country is leaving behind a growing remainder. The abysmal education that Israel supplies and the inadequate infrastructures that it provides deprive an ever increasing segment of its population the primary tools needed for surviving – not to mention prospering – in a competitive economy and modern society.

This is the latent danger underlying misleading reports and statements, even if original personal intentions might have been good. The public could eventually conclude that everything it hears is no more than science fiction, a conclusion that may lead it to disengage from rather than to deal with the root causes of the problems – and we will continue progressing toward the social explosion that inevitably awaits.