

What is Social Engineering?

Social engineering is a discipline in social science that refers to efforts to influence particular attitudes and social behaviors on a large scale. These efforts may be carried out by governments, media, or private groups in order to produce desired characteristics in a target population.

Social engineering can also be understood philosophically or deterministically, as a phenomenon where the intentions and goals of the architects of a new social construct are realized.

In Simple Terms:

Social engineering means the use of centralized planning to manage social change and regulate the future development and behavior of a society.

It **triggers planned social change and social development** — the idea that governments can shape and manage key features of society in much the same way as the economy is managed, assuming that adequate information on spontaneous trends is available through social indicators and trend reports.

Karl Popper on Social Engineering

In his classic political science book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Volume I: *The Spell of Plato* (1945), **Karl Popper** examined the application of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society.

He made a crucial distinction between two forms of social engineering:

- **Democratic or "piecemeal" social engineering**
- **Utopian social engineering**

Popper wrote:

"The piecemeal engineer will, accordingly, adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good."

According to Popper, the difference between **piecemeal social engineering** and **utopian social engineering** is:

- A **reasonable method** of improving the lot of mankind versus
- A method which, if really tried, may **easily lead to an intolerable increase in human suffering**.

Piecemeal engineering is:

- A method that can be applied **at any moment**
- Historically the **only method that has been truly successful**

Whereas utopian engineering is:

- A method that often leads to **postponed action**

- A path that may resort to **violence instead of reason**
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Social Engineering in Practice

Social engineering involves **planned social change and social development**. It represents the idea that governments can shape and manage key societal features, much like economic policies, assuming access to data via social indicators and trend reports.

For example:

The extent of **women's employment** is clearly determined in part by **government policy** to either promote or impede women's paid work.

Social engineering occurs in **two forms**:

1. **Large-scale social engineering**
2. **Small-scale social engineering**

The **debate between these two approaches** raises fundamental ethical questions in the **ethics of science and technology**:

- To what extent is it possible and legitimate for scientific expertise to serve as the basis for social policy and action?
- Can humans use science to rationally design and successfully implement an enduring society?

Different concepts of **scientific knowledge** and **technological action** offer different answers to these questions and variously support large-scale versus small-scale engineering efforts.