

Universal Economic Principles?

Do there exist any “universal” economic categorizations, concepts, institutions, behavioral assumptions, and/or rights which have at least some relevance for every economy, regardless of time, place, or organization? Which candidates from the following list would you accept, modify, or delete? Are there any currently omitted considerations that you think should be added? Why?

CATEGORIZATIONS:

1. The categorization of economic activity as consisting of interactions among consumers, producers, financial intermediaries (e.g., banks), and a governing body;
2. The categorization of aggregative economic activity in terms of income, private consumption, private investment, and government expenditures;
3. The categorization of stocks of productive inputs in terms of: (i) renewable and non-renewable natural resources; (ii) human capital; and (iii) physical capital.
4. The categorization of market organization in terms of monopoly/monopsony, oligopoly, monopolistic competition, and perfect competition;
5. The categorization of economic costs in terms of internal costs, external costs (externalities), opportunity costs, and social costs (e.g., as measured by consumer and producer surplus);
6. The categorization of decreasing, constant, and increasing returns to scale (level of production);
7. The categorization of decreasing, constant, and increasing returns to scope (breadth of production across product lines);
8. The categorization of economic behavior in terms of risk aversion, risk neutrality, and risk seeking;
9. The categorization of goods along a spectrum ranging from pure public goods to pure private goods.

CONCEPTS AND CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS:

1. The concept of a market (demand and supply);
2. The concept of market clearing (demand = supply);
3. The concept of specialization (division) of labor;
4. The concept of comparative advantage;
5. The concepts of risk pooling, risk spreading, and hedging;
6. The concept of technological feasibility;
7. The concept of productive efficiency (non-wastage of physical resources);
8. The concept of Pareto efficiency (non-wastage of “utils”);
9. The concept of a utilitarian social welfare function (social welfare a positively responsive measure of the individual utilities of the agents in an economy, and only of these utilities);
10. Value in use (utility) versus value in exchange (market price);
11. Positive versus normative economic analysis;
12. Efficiency versus equity.

INSTITUTIONS:

1. The institution of a legal system (rule of law);
2. The institution of a private system of markets for goods, services, and financial and physical assets;
3. The institution of a price system with its dual role as (i) a rationing device; and (ii) a source of information permitting the decentralized coordination of economic activity;
4. The institution of insurance (risk pooling);
5. The institution of fiat money (currency unbacked by goods);
6. The institution of credit (borrowing and lending at interest);
7. The institution of private property;
8. The institution of a tax-transfer system;
9. The institution of labor unions;
10. The institution of futures markets (contingent and non-contingent).

BEHAVIORAL ASSUMPTIONS:

1. The hypothesis of individual self-interest (e.g., maximization of profits and utility through rent-seeking, arbitrage, etc.) as a useful description of economic agents;
2. The hypothesis of economically rational information acquisition and use as a suitable benchmark assumption for the behavior of economic agents;
3. The hypothesis that economic agents abide by the rules set forth by the legal system (agents honor contracts, do not engage in plunder, etc.).

ECONOMIC RIGHTS:

1. The right to receive an education (human capital investment) regardless of ability to pay;
2. The right to life (implying a right to have minimum subsistence needs fulfilled regardless of ability to pay);
3. The right of “equal” access to the means of production;
4. The right to receive “equal” pay for “equal” work.