

## **More than the Sum of its Parts: A Call for a Paradigm Shift in the Concept and Measurement of Wellbeing**

Vanessa di Lego  
Vienna Institute of Demography

PERN Cyberseminar on The Demography of Sustainable Human Wellbeing  
14-21 March 2022

Since ancient Greece, there has been a longstanding debate about what constitutes wellbeing, and how it should be measured. While the hedonic Epicurean position was that wellbeing represents a life full of happiness, Aristotle proposed a definition of eudemonia, or of a life full of purpose, meaning, and value (Rabbås 2015). Even though human wellbeing has been more and more acknowledged as having intrinsic value, we still attempt to measure it through its outcomes and assess it through its component parts. Easterlin's paradox and the diminishing marginal utility of income taught us the importance of detaching income from wellbeing and taking on a broader view of the matter that goes beyond GDP indicators to include happiness, health, life satisfaction and the environment (Clark, 2018; Dasgupta 2001). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has listed human wellbeing and capabilities as part of the key transformative power of sustainable development (Global Sustainable Development Report 2019) and comprehensive measures of wellbeing have been proposed as more appropriate to grasp human progress (World Happiness Report 2021). More data, surveys and alternative measures have been presented and yet we still struggle to appropriately define and measure wellbeing, with ongoing debacles on whether the focus should be on objective or subjective definitions, and about whether one should adopt an individual or an aggregate perspective (Dodge et al., 2012). An unsurmountable advancement on the topic has been taken place in the last decade and comprehensive approaches that seek to consider total wellbeing in assessing human progress, like the Wellbeing-Adjusted Life-Years (or WELLBYs) are helpful as they steer away from the typical economist concept of Quality-Adjusted Life Years (QUALYs) that only counts for a patient's health-related quality of life (World Happiness Report 2021, Chapter 8). Indicators like the most recent demographic approach of years of good life (YoGL) are extremely valuable in that they directly provide numerical values of human wellbeing and focus on its constituents and change over time, which allows for comparisons across different populations (Lutz et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, the very view of wellbeing is still very contentious and fragmented across economists, sociologists, demographers and psychologists. As much as we have advanced and

put efforts in understanding and measuring wellbeing, it often seems to slip through our fingers like sand or only allow us to have a very specific vantage point. Perhaps what we still have failed to recognize is that wellbeing is more than the sum of its parts and that is why we need an urgent change in perspective. I would like to call for the need to join ongoing efforts on a more synergic approach towards wellbeing, where the very concept is both embedded in, an outcome of and a key driver for development. This demands a shift in perspective from the notion of what is a good and meaningful life and what makes societies and individuals thrive and flourish. A normative perspective to Sen's (2004b) capabilities approach through issues raised by Nussbaum (2011), like senses, imagination, thought and emotions may be a fruitful avenue, as it has been shown that these features support human association leading to compassion and resilience, which are key for development (Nussbaum 2001). This demands a deeply transdisciplinary approach on which instead of splitting it into a problem of objective *versus* subjective measures and the need to take a "view from nowhere" (Nagel, 1986) – an epistemological point of view we have inherited by our Greek philosophical upbringing – we take a stance of an "epistemic disconcertment" (Verran, 2013), and propose ways to recognize and explicitly manage the positions by different disciplines "as if people mattered" (Schumacher 2011), in order to achieve a view of wellbeing from "everywhere".

Aspects like emotions and feelings should be considered crucial for understanding wellbeing. Indeed, as the 2021 World Happiness Report surprisingly showed, even during fragile times like the COVID-19 pandemic countries like Finland were unaffected in their ranking as the happiest country in the world (World Happiness Report 2021). This is intimately connected to aspects associated to underlying feelings of mutual trust, evidencing how fundamental a role this has as a part of people's resilience and ability to cope in difficult times. Just as Desmond (2016) exhaustingly shows, at the same time that housing is deeply implicated in the creation of poverty in the case of the U.S, it is also the mistrust in institutions, the feeling of unsafety among neighbors, the fear of eviction and solitude that pave the way towards the vicious cycle of poverty, which in turn increase the likelihood of suicide, unhealthy behavior and drug abuse. Solving for material conditions may not necessarily improve people's lives if they still feel unsafe, unappreciated and unloved. The inverse is also true.

Despite having more data, we still struggle with understanding the determinants of wellbeing. Despite having more wealth, we have deeply increased income inequality and levels of unhappiness. Despite having more indicators of wellbeing, we still have not reached consensus on which are the proper guidelines to follow to create and maintain resilient societies. This requires a deeper understanding of not only the determinants and consequences of wellbeing, but the fertile soil that gives rise to its ideal conditions of growth and maintenance. A paradigm shift is needed to acknowledge that wellbeing is not only attainable after a set of material and structural

conditions have been met, but that it is in itself an integral component of development and that we need to go beyond the sum of its parts.

## References

Clark, A. E., et al. (2018). *The Origins of Happiness: The Science of Wellbeing over the Life Course*, Princeton University Press.

Dasgupta, P. (2001). *Human Well-Being and the Natural Environment*. Oxford University Press.

Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted: poverty and profit in the American city*. Crown Publishers/Random House. New York.

Dodge, R., Daly, A., Huyton, J., and Sanders, L. (2012). The challenge of defining wellbeing. *Int. J. Wellbeing*, 2(3), 11.

Helliwell, John; Layard, Richard; Sachs, Jeffrey (April 2, 2012). *World Happiness Report*. Columbia University Earth Institute.

Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*, (United Nations, New York, 2019)

Lutz, Wolfgang, Erich Striessnig, Anna Dimitrova, Simone Ghislandi, Anastasia Lijadi, Claudia Reiter, Sonja Spitzer, and Dilek Yildiz. (2021). “Years of Good Life Is a Well-Being Indicator Designed to Serve Research on Sustainability.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(12): e1907351118.

Nagel, T. (1986). *The view from nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2001). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511840715

Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Harvard University Press)

Schumacher, E. F. (2011). *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. Vintage Edition, Random House, London.

Sen, A. (2004b). “Capabilities, Lists, and Public Reason: Continuing the Conversation,” *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 3: 77-80.

Rabbås, O, Emilsson, E. K., Fosshem, H and Tuominen, M (eds.). (2015), *The Quest for the Good Life: Ancient Philosophers on Happiness*, Oxford University Press.

World Happiness Report (2021). Available on <https://worldhappiness.report/>

Verran, H. (2013). “Engagements between disparate knowledge traditions: Toward doing difference generatively and in good faith”. In Green (Eds.) *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge* (1 ed., pp. 141-162) HSRC Press.