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## OVERVIEW OF WELLBEING AND POLICY

### Evidence for action

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It was exactly one decade after the world celebrated its first International Day of Happiness (United Nations, n.d.) that we decided to embark on writing this book. The United Nations' proclamation on a day for happiness followed its 2011 General Assembly resolution that economic growth should bring happiness and elevated levels of wellbeing (United Nations, 2011).

In the years that followed, the world witnessed a surge of interest in wellbeing in both policy and research. A World Alliance for Wellbeing Economies (WEALL) was founded in 2018 as a ten-year project intended to connect new economic thinkers, activists, and practitioners and to accelerate a transition into a Wellbeing Economy. That same year, the OECD's 6th World Forum paved the way for enhanced cooperation on the measurement of wellbeing among its members (Stiglitz et al., 2018). A year later, the Council of the European Union (EU) asserted that people's wellbeing is a principal aim of the Union, and put forward an agenda for a wellbeing economy, which included reprioritizing investment to account for both wellbeing and growth (Council of the EU, 2019). In 2021, 149 countries agreed on the Geneva Charter for Wellbeing, which set a vision of wellbeing societies, whose indicators of success would guide priorities for public spending (WHO, 2021).

Meanwhile, a growing number of advisory councils, institutes, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations took up the agenda, advocating and championing wellbeing, offering training, providing guidelines for policy-makers, hosting webinars, fora, and summits. At the national level too, several countries around the world established wellbeing measurement frameworks – several predating the UN resolution, some of which are reviewed in this book. Recognizing that it is in governments' best interest to put wellbeing at the heart of policy-making (Frijters et al., 2020), an increasing number of countries recalibrated the goal of policy towards achieving collective wellbeing (Frijters & Krekel, 2021).

In parallel, academic research on wellbeing veritably exploded, with contributions from authors from all over the world and multiple disciplines. This work has yielded wide strides in measuring and understanding wellbeing though many open questions remain (Helliwell et al., 2023). One question that has been hotly debated is the definition of wellbeing (Diener, 2009). Though the literature presents many different takes on what wellbeing is, a good working definition that has withstood the test of time is Ryan and Deci's (2001) *functioning well and feeling good*. This notion of doing well and feeling good is linked to the way wellbeing is now widely measured, namely a combination of objective measures of the multidimensional conditions needed to flourish (measured through a range of indicators) and of the subjective measures of how people evaluate their own lives and their feelings as they go about them (commonly measured by subjective reports in surveys). At the time of writing, a global wellbeing index was yet to be established (UNECE, 2023), although the OECD's Better Life Index (BLI) combining both objective and subjective wellbeing measures served as one of the more diffused indexes in the world.

As part of these efforts, approaches to assessing wellbeing subjectively have flourished. Since Richard Easterlin's pioneering efforts in 1974 (Easterlin, 1974), this second so-called subjective wellbeing (SWB) approach *holds growing sway around the world* (Barrington-Leigh, 2022). Despite the challenges, including the difficulty of cross-country comparisons (Morris, 2012), the science has evolved considerably, with multiple scales used to measure both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing (e.g. Adler & Seligman, 2016).

Concurrent with the increased interest in SWB, and the possibility of measuring it, there has been a swell in research on what predicts SWB. The literature is extensive, multidisciplinary, and in some cases still inconclusive about the relationship between SWB and the many factors that affect it. In a Trojan effort to keep track of this literature, a world database of happiness literature consisting of almost 17,000 publications has been compiled by the Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization led by Ruut Veenhoven. The literature has emphasized key determinants of SWB including individual-level factors such as employment, health, and social connectedness, as well as more structural ones such as those relating to environmental quality and governance (Layard & De Neve, 2023). The work has highlighted differences in the relative importance of these and other determinants for how people evaluate their lives compared to how they experience them (Dolan et al., 2017). These measures have also been used to investigate psychological phenomena that feed into wellbeing such as adaptation and person–environment fit (Clark et al., 2008; Gander et al., 2020). Other research using SWB measures has investigated how determinants vary in importance across the wellbeing distribution and separately across cultures (Binder & Coad, 2011; Diener et al., 2003). Finally, works which evaluate the impact of life events and policy interventions on wellbeing outcomes have also emerged (Kohler & Mencarini, 2016; d'Addio et al., 2014). This body of work represents a flourishing science of happiness which has garnered the attention of researchers and policy professionals worldwide.

The advances made in defining, measuring, and forecasting wellbeing paved the way for efforts in the design of policy and interventions. Clearly, gearing policy for wellbeing requires a concerted effort (Durand & Exton, 2019), including strategy crafting, assessing impacts, reprioritising investment, and addressing inequalities (Council of the EU, 2021). It involves all the cycles of policy-making from agenda-setting to policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Exton & Shinwell, 2018). These steps need continuous feedback loops with interconnections between the different steps of policy creation (WEALL, 2021).

It is against this backdrop that the new frontier in wellbeing research emerges: the need to assess the impact of policy interventions – to gather evidence of what works. This has been far less prominent in the literature to date, mainly due to the recency of the initiatives themselves. It is also not straightforward to attribute shifts in wellbeing to specific policies (Wallace & Schmuecker, 2012). Thus, while there is a rich literature that identifies a link between say, environmental quality and wellbeing, there are far fewer examples that document the causal impact of actual environmental interventions on wellbeing. Studies which assess the impact of wellbeing interventions are rare, scattered across disciplines, employing different metrics, methods, and terminologies. Wellbeing policy, more generally, is documented in different languages, and in grey literature.

Indeed, the current book is supported by a whole ecosystem of others which have emerged over the past decade. For instance, in 2014, Allin and Hand (2014) issued the *Wellbeing of Nations: Meaning, Motive and Measurement*, which focused on the measurement of national wellbeing around the world. In 2016, the *Oxford Handbook of Well-Being and Public Policy* (Adler & Fleurbaey, 2016) went beyond definitions and measurement, to include methodologies for evaluating policy and assessing societal conditions, exploring some of the major challenges involved. In 2018, the *Routledge Handbook of Well-Being* (Galvin, 2018) adopted a multidisciplinary approach to understanding human experiences and endeavours for wellbeing. The *2021 Handbook for Wellbeing Policymaking* (Frijters & Krekel, 2021) examined how wellbeing fits into the political economy, suggesting technical standards for cost-effectiveness analysis based on wellbeing. Meanwhile, the *Wellbeing Economy Alliance Case Studies* (WEAll, n.d.) started to document a growing compendium of case studies online.

Our book looks to build on these important texts by offering an easy-to-consume, evidence-based synthesis of the key findings from the literature and efforts in the field. Our focus was to be neither the conceptual nor theoretical definition of wellbeing, neither its measurement nor the estimation of models to forecast it. Rather we wished to provide an accessible survey of studies and interventions to elicit the lessons learned and, most importantly, actionable points. We wanted to offer the reader a resource to understand what has worked across different policy domains to create an impact on wellbeing, in a cross-disciplinary manner, that also serves to highlight where the evidence has failed to catch up with the rhetoric of

wellbeing. It is with this in mind that we ensured that chapters underwent a double-blind peer review.

The book is structured in three main parts. The first part (comprising Chapters 2 to 9) focuses on individual factors that affect wellbeing including demographic, socio-economic, and psychological characteristics. The second part (Chapters 10 to 17) includes social and environmental factors that depend on circumstances that cannot be easily influenced by an individual and which, in many cases, are given by the location where an individual currently lives. In both parts, a distinction is made between correlational, causal, or qualitative evidence as well as documented impacts across demographic groups. The third part (Chapters 18 to 26) focuses on country experiences. Here authors review country-specific wellbeing history, performance, and work, providing key takeaways for others looking to embark on similar initiatives. Because of this comprehensive coverage, chapter contributors were urged to keep their chapters concise, with a focus on transferable findings.

The effects of income, work, and health (Chapters 2–4 in this volume) have been extensively discussed in the literature and arguably occupy a pole position in many policy-makers' agendas. Laura Kurdna discusses the complexity of the relationship between *income* and wellbeing. She notes that higher income does not always lead to higher life satisfaction due to diminishing marginal returns, adaptation, and social comparisons but carefully implemented income interventions can improve wellbeing. Alexandra Kirienko, Kate Laffan, and Laura M. Giurge argue that wellbeing at *work* relates directly to organizational outcomes like performance and retention, as these are influenced by how employees evaluate their work and how they feel doing it. They highlight the predominance of organization-level interventions and identify the focus areas for promoting employee wellbeing. Hans Czap and Marie Briguglio argue that while improvements in *health* often lead to better SWB, policy-makers should take into account the costs and benefits of health interventions, both the direct and indirect effects of health on wellbeing and the potential of bidirectional effect.

Family and social interactions are the focus of the next two chapters. Lili Xia discusses *family* wellbeing as the essential component of individual life satisfaction as well as a key aspect of societal wellbeing. She analyses the case study of the Hong Kong Family Wellbeing Index and its application to public policy development and public service design. Stephanie Preston and Tanner Nichols focus on the phenomenon of *altruism*, noting that this has evolutionary, physiological, and psychological benefits such as genetic propagation, increased cooperation, and improved societal wellbeing. These, they argue, counterbalance the costs of giving. They proceed to call for the framing of wealth redistributive policies to address injustice and to enhance cooperation.

Age, gender, and education are covered in Chapters 7, 8, and 9, respectively. Maciej Górny and Krzysztof Hajder consider the U-shaped relationship between *age* and wellbeing and discuss the challenges associated with aging. They underscore the importance of comprehensive wellbeing policies including those

fostering social connections and financial stability. They further note the potential of positive psychology and technology interventions to enhance wellbeing as people age. Jaslin Kaur Kalsi and Astghik Mavisakalyan discuss how *gender* and gendered norms shape women's and men's wellbeing differently throughout their lives, in the context of employment, parenthood, and retirement. They make policy recommendations to address disparities and to support positive societal change. Ingebjørg Kristoffersen, Alfred Michael Dockery, and Ian W. Li underscore that *education* is positively associated with objective measures of quality of life for both individuals and society. However, the relationship between education and subjective wellbeing is complex, as influenced by changing expectations and reference points, diminishing returns, and the development of psychological resilience.

Moving to social and environmental factors, the next cluster of chapters focuses on housing, the environment, and crime (Chapters 10–12). Marie Briguglio, Dylan Cassar, and Daniel Gravino reveal a generally positive association between improved *housing* conditions and housing tenure but a negative impact on the associated financial burden. The authors underscore the context-dependent nature of interventions and suggest incorporating wellbeing assessments into future housing policies. Kate Laffan, Hans Czap, and Natalia V. Czap examine the impact of both *environmental* quality and pro-environmental behaviour on wellbeing. They suggest that interventions should focus on improving environment quality and behaviour for their own sake and because such actions will yield significant wellbeing benefits. Eva Krulichová summarizes the research on how individual experiences with *crime*, fear of crime, and country-level crime factors relate to SWB. She uses the data from the European Social Survey to demonstrate that SWB is influenced less by crime rates and strict criminal policies and more by the public's trust in the police and legal system at least within the European countries.

The effects of democracy, migration, and religion on wellbeing are the focus of Chapters 13 to 15. Alois Stutzer, Benjamin Jansen, and Tobias Schib distinguish between outcome utility derived from the results of *democratic* processes and procedural utility gained from participation in these processes. Their review of empirical studies finds democracy to be vital for wellbeing. Martijn Hendriks explores how different *migration* policies impact the happiness of migrants, host communities, and those remaining in the origin countries. He emphasizes the importance of social cohesion between immigrants and natives, suggesting that well-designed integration policies can create mutual benefits for both. Teresa García-Muñoz and Shoshana Neuman synthesize the evidence from 22 studies over the past two decades on the effect of *religious* and *spiritual* interventions on wellbeing, finding that such interventions are particularly effective in improving wellbeing among those with mental and physical health issues and have potential in patient care and workspaces with high-stress jobs. They also highlight the importance of awareness campaigns to foster tolerance in these domains.

The impact of digital technology and art, culture, and creativity is the focus of Chapters 16 and 17. Diane Pelly acknowledges the widespread concern about the harmful effects of *digital technology* but argues that these may be overstated and heavily dependent on usage patterns. She recommends focusing on positive interventions that leverage technology to enhance wellbeing, tailored to individual differences. Leonie Baldacchino reports that engagement in *art, culture*, and creativity enhances wellbeing through mechanisms such as social connection, distraction from suffering, self-expression, skill development, and states of flow, with active engagement yielding the most benefit. She proceeds to recommend interventions for engagement, particularly for marginalized groups and support for artists.

The third part of the book documents the experience of a diverse set of countries which are at different stages of a wellbeing agenda, starting with frontrunners – Bhutan and New Zealand (Chapters 18–19). Kehinde Balogun and Kariuki Weru examine Bhutan’s pioneering efforts. Here, the Gross National Happiness policy prioritizes a multidimensional assessment of wellbeing and balance between individual, society, and environmental relationships. The authors advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge and relational wellbeing concepts and highlight the importance of inner and cultural poverty alongside traditional income poverty to achieve holistic wellbeing and sustainable development. Dan Weijers provides an overview of how New Zealand became a frontrunner in integrating wellbeing into public policy with the 2011 adoption of the Living Standards Framework and the 2019 adoption of the Wellbeing Budget. He reports on the Wellbeing Data Dashboard and Cost Benefit Analysis tool while making recommendations on environmental concerns and citizens’ assemblies on wellbeing.

Chapters 20 and 21 turn to Finland and their Economy of Wellbeing policy approach and the UAE and their National Wellbeing Strategy, respectively. Riikka Pellikka and Heli Hätönen argue that while Finland ranks one of the first in many wellbeing-related indices, it faces challenges in sustaining such high levels for present and future generations. They also note the challenges in ensuring that this framework is apolitical and remains in place regardless of the composition of the government. Ahmad Samarji and Amal AlBlooshi examine the evolution of the UAE’s public policy from independent initiatives to a comprehensive UAE’s National Wellbeing Strategy 2031. They describe an evidence-based and evolving strategy that balances top-down and bottom-up approaches that can be used as a model of integrating wellbeing into public policy at the regional and global levels.

The experiences of Canada and Australia are documented in Chapters 22 and 23. Chris P. Barrington-Leigh positions Canada as an early adopter of SWB and social connection metrics. He acknowledges the challenging context of the wellbeing agenda but also emphasizes growing efforts to unify wellbeing data, share evidence and experience, and influence policy. Michelle Baddeley reports that despite its high living standards, Australia faces significant wellbeing disparities, particularly among marginalized groups such as Indigenous populations, immigrants, the disabled, and the elderly. Challenges are exacerbated by geographical

and climate-related issues, by the recent pandemic and contractionary measures to control inflation, she argues.

Chapters 24 to 26 focus on the experiences of the UK, Japan, and Malta. Joanne Smithson presents the UK's wellbeing measurement framework and the HM Treasury's guidance on integrating wellbeing into the policy evaluation process. The author synthesizes interventions proven to enhance individual and community wellbeing and discusses priority areas, including work, income, society and governance, mental health, relationships, and communities. From Japan, Toshiaki Hiromitsu, Eriko Teramura, and Ryusuke Oishi report efforts to systematically measure citizens' wellbeing since 2010. Noting that recent data revealed significant differences in citizens' wellbeing across the lifespan, the authors highlight the need for public policy to consider population heterogeneity and to focus on work style, remote work, and a four-day workweek. Finally, Marie Briguglio discusses Malta's significant economic progress and potential discrepancies between these achievements and the SWB of its citizens. She notes the challenges in the domains of work, environmental quality, child wellbeing, and government trust. She documents recent interventions in the domain of wellbeing and makes recommendations for advancing a wellbeing agenda.

Together, these 25 chapters offer evidence of the multitude of factors that impact human wellbeing and how public policy can influence these factors, as well as a diverse range of wellbeing policy experiences on a country-by-country basis. Our aspiration is that this book informs governments, political parties, academics, journalists, students, groups, or individuals working in the global quest to move towards better wellbeing for all. Mindful of the constraints of time and attention, we have prepared an appendix to this chapter that summarizes the actionable points emerging from all the chapters in the form of cheat-sheets.

When we embarked on this writing book, we agreed we would seek to achieve gender and geographical balance among the contributors. We have had the privilege of collaborating with academics and practitioners working at universities, governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations from all continents across the globe, specialized in a wide range of social sciences. We are extremely grateful to them and we hope that, in bringing them together, we have added value to their remarkable work.

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