

WELLBEBE - Results

Towards indicators of Well-being for Belgium

DURATION OF THE PROJECT
15/12/2006 - 31/07/2011

BUDGET
721.668 €

KEYWORDS

Sustainable well-being, indicators, capabilities-functionings, spheres of existence, focus groups, Q-methodology

CONTEXT

It is widely acknowledged that, if the production and consumption patterns of affluent societies have brought about an unprecedented level of material welfare, their requirements in terms of environmental resources and functions are such that they could not be extended to the whole earth population or to the future generations. On the other hand, the comparison between indicators of economic performance (GDP/capita) and other more specialized indicators of wellbeing such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, the Fordham Institute index of social health and many others – whatever their shortcomings – shows that, almost since the years 1973, more economic growth has ceased to be synonymous of more wellbeing for all. As long as GDP's growth correlated almost perfectly with improvement in wellbeing, there was no call for other measures of the effectiveness of our production and consumption patterns in bringing about wellbeing and happiness. Today, the historical marriage of relatively generic economic growth, a certain respect of global environmental limits and achievements in generating some improved societal wellbeing is broken. So, the definition of alternative wellbeing indicators becomes indispensable. It follows that the demand for indicators of wellbeing is emerging strongly, both at the international and national level. In the international and European policy context, the discussion of alternative indicators has been particularly revived in 2009. Most noted by international and national media, and thus policy makers, has been the presentation and publication of the 'Stiglitz-report' in September 2009. The report on the "Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress" was elaborated in 18 months by a commission chaired by J. Stiglitz, A. Sen and J-P. Fitoussi (www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr) and commissioned by the French presidential authorities. It has to be considered as a milestone in bringing to the mainstream – with the help of the credibility of the commission's members – the long-lasting critical voices and messages on current indicators of wellbeing

The Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission contended itself to stay within a mostly disciplinary economic reading and interpretation. Parallel initiatives emerged which more profoundly ask for a redeployment of our measures of wellbeing and welfare. Most notably, a second French initiative, the FAIR-network (Forum pour d'Autres Indicateurs de Richesses) helped to raise its members' voices in French media on shortcomings linked to the procedural setting and the content of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission. It used the political momentum to ask for more innovative approaches to the measurement of progress (notably on the process to select indicators, or components of indicators). September 2009 saw also the presentation of the European Commission's policy paper on "GDP and beyond: measuring progress in a changing world" (www.beyond-gdp.eu) which developed the European roadmap to the renewal of our measurements of wellbeing. In October 2009, the OECD's "3rd Worldforum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy" held in Busan (Korea) raised identical messages as the Stiglitz-report for the ears of a large audience of international, transnational and national authorities (www.oecdworldforum2009.org). Simultaneously, but more locally, in Belgium, the Federal Planning Bureau's Task force Sustainable Development (www.plan.be) published in September 2009 its Federal Report on Sustainable Development entirely dedicated to the construction of an indicator framework and set, pursuing their objective to complement the mono-sided perspective on (sustainable) development provided by GDP. Finally, at regional level, the Walloon Institute for statistics, evaluation and future studies (IWEPS-statistiques.wallonie.be) organized a discussion seminar in December 2009 dedicated to the Stiglitz report, on top of which a Belgian antenna network of FAIR was initiated (Réseau FAIR Wallonie-Bruxelles). Since then, it has started an important program of defining and measuring wellbeing at the local level in a fully participatory way, with the methodological assistance of the Council of Europe.



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OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

The Wellbebe project aims at contributing to this common scientific and civic endeavor of building indicators of wellbeing in order to complement (or substitute to) GDP in assessing social progress and human development.

As the title of the project makes clear, the requirement is to be both theoretically sound and democratically legitimate. By “theoretically sound” it is meant that wellbeing indicators should be justified on basis of rational theories of wellbeing and taking stock of the bulk of empirical scientific knowledge available. However, when dealing with normative concepts, we cannot be satisfied with scientific validity only. It is important to resist the “technocratic” temptation of proposing indicators of people’s wellbeing only based on abstract theories of justice, wellbeing, health or economic development. A minimal requirement is at least to ask a sample of the population how they think about wellbeing and what language they use when talking about it. However, “democratic legitimacy” requires much more empowering and participative mechanisms than mere focus group or opinion polls. Ideally, indicators of wellbeing should come out of a co-construction process making use of deep deliberative mechanisms such as citizen’s juries. Practically, these concerns have dictated the organization of the research around the following working packages:

- Exploring, assessing and synthesizing (through a workable framework) the main scientific discourses on wellbeing ;
- Exploring people’s way of talking of wellbeing in general (through focus groups and Q-methodology),
- Analyzing how people assess their own wellbeing (through surveys on capabilities, functionings and valuations),
- Experimenting with participative processes of co-construction of indicators of wellbeing;
- Ending with a decent, workable proposal of scoreboard and index and recommendations for structuring the process of building and interpreting wellbeing index.

As for the participative aspects, four different methods have been put to work: focus groups, Q-methodology, ‘classical’ surveying with econometric analysis (OLS and ordered logit) and citizens’ panel.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

Even if, so far, wellbeing has mainly be looked at through the lenses of (welfare) economics, other scientific disciplines such as psychology, medicine, sociology, and anthropology have much to contribute to a comprehensive and reliable theory of human wellbeing. A deeper and more effective interdisciplinarity should govern the process of setting robust scientific foundations for wellbeing indicators. True and effective interdisciplinarity needs a common framework in order to structure the findings and statements from the different disciplines into a coherent causal pattern. The two most plausible candidates for providing such a framework are the “capability-functioning” approach pioneered by A. Sen and M. Nussbaum on one hand, and the less recent “Need-satisfier” approach, on the other hand. The two approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. Both suffer (or do they?) from the same indeterminateness concerning the items to include in a list of functionings or needs to take into account in building operational indicators.

The capability-functioning approach is more unified and more subtle than the need-satisfier one but is mainly known by economists and philosophers close to economics. It is probably more difficult to use in participatory settings, but we were able to use it in a focus group setting. The needs-satisfiers approach is not unified (there are many different interpretations of it) and less sophisticated than the capability-functioning one but is more widespread in the different disciplines concerned with human wellbeing and easier to use with citizens in participatory settings.

The need-satisfier approach is also more directly sensitive to inescapable elements of the human condition such as infancy, illness, and aging because it acknowledges from start the fact that man is also, sometimes, a purely “needy” creature. The capability-functioning approach has proven to provide a rich and productive model for analyzing the subtleties of wellbeing. It has been summarized in the WellBeBe project with the “Wellbeing Triangle” figure which has driven the survey on wellbeing led in Flanders. On the other hand, the needs-satisfiers framework as conceptualized by Max-Neef has proven to facilitate the co-construction of indicators by scholars and a sample of citizens.

The main conclusions of the surveys on valuation and satisfaction with capabilities and functionings are that it is meaningful to measure functionings and capabilities and to use capabilities as an alternative indicator for wellbeing (alternative, actually, to satisfaction with life). We compared subjective wellbeing measurement with capabilities measurement using data (gathered in 2009) that are representative for the Flemish population. We find that both concepts have some drivers in common (health, wealth, realizations and scope to develop). But, also we find many influencing factors with a diverging effect. For the sample of students, we discovered that there are some interesting differences between the explanation of life satisfaction and the explanation of the functioning levels that create that satisfaction. The tentative overall conclusion is that capabilities do not directly provide life satisfaction, but only indirectly when being realized (achieved) as real functionings. In summary, these results imply that the choice of the ‘outcome variable’ and so the structure of the empirical model, in the context of a multi-dimensional wellbeing measurement, are important for the identification (and the importance) of ‘drivers’ of wellbeing.

The main conclusions of the participatory exercise of co-construction are that citizens are indeed ready and even willing to collaborate in building and discussing indicators of wellbeing. However, one must be ready to invest much time in the process, more than what we were capable to do. The needs-satisfiers framework and, in particular, Max-Neef’s list of nine fundamental needs (to which a tenth, fairness or social justice; should be added) proved to really help people disclose their beliefs, values and questioning and engage in productive deliberation. We discovered that adopting a needs-satisfiers perspective leads to distinguish two different kinds of indicators: indicators of the importance of a need (or of its problematic nature) and indicators of its level of satisfaction. In assessing the evolution of wellbeing, both types should be used.



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Moreover, because when working with whole classes of satisfiers or with what Max-Neef calls synergetic satisfiers, such as work and employment, the family and friendships networks, the living environment, etc., it proves useful to distinguish clearly from the outset between satisfaction IN the satisfier domain from satisfaction THROUGH the domain. For instance, satisfying one's need of identity through one's job is different from satisfying the same need IN the workplace. The same holds for protection, understanding, etc. It appeared also that when ranking needs by importance for wellbeing, it is actually not so much importance as such that is ranked than their problematic character in the current context.

CONTRIBUTION TO A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY

So far, wellbeing and prosperity have been defined and pursued as if there were no limit to the resources we could extract from nature nor to the capacity of the environment to absorb the waste and pollutions generated by this hitherto unended quest for more material growth and wealth. Sustainable development asks for letting the people who still need economic growth to continue (or start, for some) developing their economies and for inducing those rich enough to stop benefiting of economic growth to define and foster a new kind of prosperity, a prosperity without growth (Jackson 2010) or at least with "better" growth. This makes necessary and urgent to re-think wellbeing, notably by de-linking it as far as possible from production and consumption growth. In some way, sustainable development can be defined as a process of maximizing the productivity in generating wellbeing of every ton of material and energy extracted by men, or, put the other way around, in minimizing the input in environmental resources of every unit of human wellbeing. This asks for fair and accurate measures both of environmental pressure and of human wellbeing. The Wellbebe project aims at contributing to the latter and, by so doing to the sustainable development program. Furthermore, it is heavily involved in the ongoing process of re-conceptualizing sustainable development in terms of wellbeing, capabilities, needs and life chances (Rauschmayer, Omann and Frühmann 2010).

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