Position Paper: The Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement and the Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing

The United Nations Network of Economic Statisticians

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1. Chapeau

1.1. It is self-evident that our policies and collective actions should aim to maximize the wellbeing of present and future generations for everyone, everywhere, while safeguarding our planet and bringing prosperity for all. In the pursuit of this maxim, the United Nations Statistical Commission has invited the 55th UN Network of Economic Statisticians to deliver an **Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement** (decision 55/108) to provide technical measurement advice to ensure opportunities can be seized.

1.2. The UN Summit of the Future, scheduled for September 2024, aims to address major policy issues to meet today's global challenges, centered around re-invigorating multilateralism, addressing global governance gaps, and re-affirming commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Charter. The Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement will support this by delivering vital statistical infrastructure in line with following tenets:

- In a world of scarce resources, we must look to re-use as much existing data as possible.
- Sufficient methods work has been undertaken to move quickly, including on the science of measuring subjective wellbeing, we do not need to re-invent the wheel.
- Users need a small, focused core dataset, with enough sophistication and focus to be analytically powerful, but not so large as to obscure policy choices.
- Countries need a permissive framework which identifies a common core set of international comparable measures but allows them to add further measures as necessary to meet local need.
- A clear conceptual framework for wellbeing is the key missing component, whereby people centered wellbeing measures and the measures of their socio-economic and environmental drivers reveal the trade-offs inherent in key policy issues facing decision-makers – such as how to manage the trade-off between producing output to improve the prosperity related measures of quality of life and the negative impact of pollution generated through that production or how to evaluate the impact of measures which improve equitable access to health security but may be perceived to reduce personal freedoms, such as recent policy responses to the pandemic.

1.3. The topic of Wellbeing measurement, or as it is often labelled, the 'Beyond GDP' agenda is a rich one with a strong history of academic and official papers, delivering multiple models, alternatives and estimates. Key papers stretch back to at least JS Mills 'Utilitarianism' but in more recent times we can pick out:

- Sir Richard Stone's 'System of National Accounts' (1968) and nascent 'System of Social and Demographic Statistics' (1974),
- 'Our Common Future'; the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission,
- The development of the Millennium Development Goals,
- The report of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission in 2009 and the development of the OECD's Better Life Framework in response to this from 2011, including a well-being dashboard which was reviewed in 2019, and in 2024 the launch of a knowledge hub for well-being metrics and policy practice.
- The UN General Assembly 2011 resolution 65/309 'Happiness: Towards a Holistic Definition of Development' encouraging member countries to measure happiness to guide public policy, and subsequent production of the World Happiness Report.
- The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015
- The development of numerous national well-being dashboards, and

- The production of the 2019 Human Development Report – which applied the three 'Beyonds' – income, average and today – to disaggregate 'Beyond GDP emphasizing the need to consider broader dimensions of inequality.

1.4. Over the past three years, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has stimulated renewed action on this topic:

- The UN published 'Our Common Agenda' in 2021, which called for renewed effort to develop complements to GDP,
- UNSD, UNCTAD and UNDP published the briefing note 'Valuing What Counts' in 2023, which proposed how to move forward a dashboard of 20 headline indicators. This proposed a policy focus on measuring progress beyond GDP, considering sustainable development's social, economic, and environmental dimensions. It also makes the case for the guiding role of the UN Statistical Commission and supporting statistical capacity building in member states to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly aiming to complement GDP with sustainable development progress measures.
- The UN Network of Economic Statisticians (UNNES) of the UN Statistical Commission undertook a sprint series on the topic of Beyond GDP in 2022 and published its 'Research Prospectus' as a background document submitted to the 54th UN Statistical Commission where continued research was commissioned.
- In 2023, the UN Network of Economic Statisticians (UNNES) undertook a second sprint series on the topic of implementing the proposals contained in the 'Research Prospectus', and published its findings as a background document to the report of the Network submitted to the 55th UN Statistical Commission where the creation of an Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement was approved to deliver a Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing.
- In September 2024, Action 53 of the Pact for the Future was agreed at the UN Summit of the Future, which committed countries to 'develop a framework on measures of progress on sustainable development to complement and go beyond gross domestic product.'

2. Objectives

2.1. The aim is to deliver a statistical toolkit for well-being measures that provides a clear mechanism for the common understanding of what well-being covers, and the relationship between subjective and objective measures of well-being. This toolkit will provide a clear entry route into wider statistical data, through bringing clarity to the coherency of existing frameworks and metrics, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals, whilst highlighting metrics which are of particular use in considering and understanding long-term trends and mega-trends, including:

- Climate change
- Urbanization
- Demographic aging and other transitions
- Digitalization
- Inequality

2.2. The objective is not to evaluate individual government policies, but rather to provide government and citizens with data comparable across countries to consider high level trends with long-term impacts, whether it be the positive impact well-being has on productivity growth or the relationship with mental health, and to understand the evidence on what are the key drivers of wellbeing to inform the shaping and prioritisation of government programmes.

2.3. To deliver against these aims, the UN Network of Economic Statisticians is an innovative, country-led association of national statistical institutes and other experts whose purpose is to rapidly develop and test new models on the innovative frontier of economic statistics. It is a lean group with limited standing secretariat resources. The adoption of the normal working models for such an Expert Group, with multiple task-teams or physical meetings is neither viable nor preferable. The Network's model is based around giving countries and organizations opportunities to make their voice heard through public debate and information-sharing through virtual sessions which are open to all and any Network members or invited speakers / guests. Our working model is inclusive and based on our belief that every country, large or small, and irrespective of region, has a valuable contribution to make. Our sprint series in 2022 and 2023 demonstrated the impact of these principles, but also the level of interest in this topic, with over two hundred delegates routinely attending our sessions.

2.4. The Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement has a clear set of objectives:

- To develop the Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing (FISW), meeting user needs and reflecting producer constraints.
- To ensure the FISW has a clear conceptual framework which robustly presents data in a methodological fashion such that trade-offs and the wider impacts of policy decisions become visible.
- To ensure the FISW presents a clear hierarchy and structure to aide user navigation: not all data can or will be prioritized for the headline dashboard, but the FUSW should explain how headline metrics relate to the wider statistical system.
- To provide a model headline dashboard for a 'state of the nation' perspective to inform decision-makers and the public of an international comparable state of wellbeing for their community, and the impact their community has on others, which can be flexibly extended to support local policy needs.
- To support the Friends of the Chair group on Social and Demographic Statistics with their development of a comprehensive framework for social and demographic statistics (which may develop into a Statistical System); specifically through a) providing access and insights from the economic statistics pillar, where there is overlap in the topics covered, and b) providing clarity on the demands for coherent social and demographic data, in terms of definitions and measures, from the FISW.

2.5. To do this, the Expert Group will work to:

- Understand and identify the user community and their needs, alongside insights from academia and other voices including the private sector to proactively explain how the FISW helps deliver against user need.
- Understand and take account of the needs of producers and compilers, and the constraints they face, re-using as much existing data as possible, noting the potential the Friends of the Chair group on Social and Demographic Statistics' work presents for improving data.

- Produce an output framework with a focus on communication and impact of statistics, rather than their production.
- Formalize terminology, including the definition of wellbeing, and hierarchies to support framework and definitions in collaboration with the varied expert communities who own the main statistical Standards.

3. The Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing

3.1. The Expert Group is working to draft guidance for statistical compilers in a document we call 'The Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing (FISW) which reflects the four dominant (if not wholly exclusive) ways of looking at the issue of wellbeing:

- The Brundtland Review dimensions: well-being can be considered in the **here and now**, but this might be achieved at the expense of those **elsewhere**, or in the **future.**
- 'Valuing What Counts' recognizes that in the here and now there are issues of **inclusion and inequality**, including gaps in provision, and of **sustainability and resilience**. This perspective for analyzing inequalities—beyond income, averages, and the current moment—aims to bring to light the complex and evolving nature of disparities is also reflected in UNDP's Human Development Report 2019, titled "Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: Inequalities in human development in the 21st century" and the work on National Transfer Accounts (NTA) led by DESA Population Division.
- The National Accounts and System of Environmental-Economic Accounts provide useful frameworks for considering the measurement of **flows**, of **stocks** and of the **distribution** of these between different sections of society.
- The statistical landscape reflects three pillars: **environmental**, **social and demographic,** and **economic**.

3.2. Underneath these four perspectives, there are ancillary questions related to the perspective we wish to consider this question through.

- **The absolute or relative outcomes lens** – it is well recognised that perspectives of well-being can be as dependent on relative positioning vis-à-vis a peer group as absolute measures. How and whether to reflect this is a core question for consideration
- **The people-centric or wider perspective lens** – should humanity be at the heart of a well-being measure and its definition or should it cover a wider canvas, of which humanity is an essential part, but just one part? Different societies (and groups within society) may perceive the answer to this question in markedly different ways.
- **The objective v subjective lens** – what role should subjective measures of well-being take in the measurement system vis-à-vis objective measures of economic, environmental, or social drivers of wellbeing?
- **The outcome v the drivers lens** – is what matters the outcome or the conditions which deliver these outcomes? Which provides greater policy traction? How should we strike the appropriate balance between the two?

3.3. Previous efforts to present unified wellbeing guidance have struggled with straddling these different dimensions and providing a unified approach to reviewing the question. The FISW looks to submit a pragmatic strategy to combining these axes into a digestible framework which can be primarily populated using pre-existing data.

3.4. To do this the FISW will build on existing statistical standards which are already familiar to users, the System of National Accounts (which provides economic data, alongside its related manuals and guidance), the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (which provides environmental data), and the collection of guidance around social and demographic statistics. The importance of relying on these internationally agreed frameworks comes from consistent definitions, standards, and previous user engagement to ensure these data are well-defined, internationally comparable, robustly tested, and coherent enough to permit key trade-offs to be understood.

3.5. In terms of measures, the Framework covers:

- subjective measures of well-being, including life satisfaction, feelings, and the degree to which individuals feel their lives have meaning and purpose. How this changes through time and location, in terms of social and economic life cycle could also be considered.
- objective and subjective measures of key determinants of well-being, inclusion and inequality, and sustainability and resilience, covering the widest landscape of policy priorities, including prosperity, health, education, work, housing, society, good governance, and the environment. These need to reflect multiple perspectives of these issues, drawn from social and demographic, environmental, and economic data, whilst also recognizing the need to combine flow, stock, and distributional indicators derived from domain-specific international statistical standards. The selection of domains also needs to relate to the 17 SDG goals.
- a universalist scope covering both a) the quality of life and standards of living measures and b) measures of minimum thresholds of deprivation being essential minimum conditions that need to be met for human survival, and where gaps exist between these minima and actual outcomes, such as about poverty and deprivation.
- an assessment through the three lenses “here and now’, “elsewhere” and “in the future”. These dimensions consider the immediate or present, spatial (cross-border and regional), and long-term aspects of well-being.
- an understanding of the key trade-offs between the various dimensions and lenses of the framework. For the objective measures, the key trade-offs include resource allocation between immediate vs. long-term outcomes, and cost vs. benefit. For subjective measures, it is the comparison of self-rated or perceived experience in access, quality, equity, emergency response readiness, and long-term investment in government services. Similarly, key trade-offs can be determined between the objective outcomes and subjective levels of experience of government services or certain socio-economic or environmental phenomena.
- an analytical insight into the impact of objective determinants of well-being, inclusion and inequality, and sustainability and resilience on subjective measures of well-being, such as adult life satisfaction affected by physical and mental health, employment status, education, income, education, life cycle, and family characteristics. These insights support well-being-related cost-benefit analysis for resource allocation of sectoral public programs.

3.6. The FISW will systematically draw objective and subjective data together, consolidating the different approaches taken to this question, and will look to prioritize individual metrics and time series to deliver a comprehensive perspective on wellbeing, where three pillars of material wellbeing, inclusion, and inequality, and sustainability and resilience support proposed headline measures of subjective wellbeing.

3.7. With the FISW core set of key determinants of subjective and objective well-being and key drivers of inclusion and inequality, and sustainability and resilience tailored specifically to well-being, the balance between immediate and long-term needs, and impact of location, the proposed information system differs from other indicator frameworks.

- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework of 231 unique indicators covers a broader range of global development issues and provides a generalized framework applicable across various sectors and development contexts.
- The Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) framework of 10 indicators covers the health, education, and living standards dimensions of poverty. It has a specific focus on the prevalence of poverty in the world and provides insights into the lives of poor people, their deprivations, and how intense their poverty is to inform and accelerate efforts to end poverty in all its forms.
- The Multi-dimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) provides an understanding of a developing country's structural vulnerabilities linked to its exposure to adverse external shocks and stressors and a (lack of) structural resilience to withstand the shocks and stressors in determining its requirements for concessional financing. It is based on 18 indicators for each of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of structural vulnerabilities and (lack of) structural resilience.

3.8. The broad schematic of the Framework is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Broad Schematic for a potential model of the Framework

	Subjective measures of wellbeing	**Objective measures of key drivers of wellbeing (Beyond Income)**	**Objective and subjective measures of the degree of Inclusion and Inequality (Beyond Average)**	**Objective and subjective measures of the degree of sustainability and resilience (Beyond Today)**
The 'Here and Now' lens	• Subjective measures of individual wellbeing • Business Sentiment	Social, economic, and environmental flow measures	Social, economic and environmental flow distributional measures	Social, economic, and environmental flow measures
The 'Elsewhere' lens	Cross-border and sub-national subjective measures	Social, economic, and environmental flow cross-border and sub-national objective measures	Social, economic, and environmental cross-border and sub-national flow distributional measures	Social, economic, and environmental cross-border and sub-national flow measures
The 'In the Future' lens	Social capital stock measures	Social, economic, and environmental stock objective measures	Social, economic, and environmental stock distributional measures	Social, economic, and environmental stock distributional measures
Potential key data-frames	• *Social statistics* • *Economic statistics (SNA)*	• *Social and Demographic Statistics* • *Economic statistics (SNA)* • *Environmental statistics (SEEA)*	• *Social and Demographic Statistics* • *Economic statistics (SNA)* • *Environmental statistics (SEEA)*	• *Social and Demographic Statistics* • *Economic statistics (SNA)* • *Environmental statistics (SEEA)*

4. Presenting the use cases

Introduction

4.1. The use cases illustrate a tentative core set of indicators for specific policy domains with a brief description of the potential trade-offs offered by the dimensions and perspective lenses of the framework, and with reference to the source data and their supporting statistical manuals and classifications.

4.2. The Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Well-Being (FISW) is structured around several dimensions, each focusing on different aspects of well-being beyond traditional economic measures. It is a comprehensive framework that aims to provide a holistic view of well-being by integrating various dimensions and perspectives, ensuring inclusivity and sustainability. The schematic representation outlines the framework across four main dimensions: 1) subjective well-being, 2) objective drivers of well-being, 3) objective and subjective measures of inclusion and inequality, and 4) objective and subjective measures of sustainability and resilience. These dimensions are assessed through three lenses: 'Here and Now,' 'Elsewhere,' and 'In the Future.' The following use cases demonstrates pen-pictures in relation to a number of policy domains, framing the use cases in terms of their core indicators and their potential trade-offs.

4.3. **Subjective measures of Wellbeing**: the subjective measures provide a nuanced understanding of well-being from immediate, cross-boundary and intra-regional, and future-oriented perspectives, helping to inform policies aimed at enhancing well-being. The 'Here and Now' lens includes personal assessments of life satisfaction, happiness, and overall quality of life. Surveys and questionnaires might be used to gather data on how individuals perceive their current state of well-being. The 'Elsewhere' Lens captures the well-being perceptions of individuals about international or transnational contexts. For example, how individuals in one country perceive their well-being about neighboring countries or global standards. Also, this can highlight regional disparities and local factors affecting well-being, such as regional economic conditions, access to services, and community cohesion. The 'In the Future' Lens, reflecting social capital stock measures assesses the long-term well-being assets related to social networks, community engagement, trust in institutions, and social cohesion. Social capital is crucial for resilience and sustainability, as it influences how communities respond to future challenges and opportunities. The "in the future lens' also covers individuals' expectations and outlook on their future quality of life, including aspects such as economic security, environmental conditions, and social stability.

4.4. **Objective measures of wellbeing**; these objective measures similarly provide a concrete and quantifiable understanding of well-being from immediate, cross-boundary and regional, and future-oriented perspectives, helping to inform policies aimed at enhancing well-being. By focusing on immediate, cross border and regional, and long-term indicators, policymakers can develop targeted strategies to address current challenges and build inclusive and sustainable future for all. The 'Here and Now' Lens includes current and immediate indicators of well-being, capturing real-time data on various social aspects with the distributional and economic and environmental issues covered in the other dimensions. These social measures cover outcomes on delivery, access, and quality of social services like life expectancy and enrolment. The 'Elsewhere' Lens captures cross-boundary and regional indicators of well-being, providing insights into social outcomes in different regions and countries. It highlights regional and international social disparities affecting well-being such as in life expectancy and resource allocations. The 'In the Future' Lens focuses on long-term social indicators

of well-being, assessing the sustainability and resilience of well-being assets related to social networks, community engagement, trust in institutions, and social cohesion.

4.5. **Objective measures of degree of inclusion and inequality**, and **sustainability and resilience**: these measures cover the concrete and quantifiable understanding of well-being from immediate, cross-boundary and regional, and future-oriented perspectives, helping to inform policies aimed at enhancing well-being and addressing challenges from an economic and environmental perspective. These dimensions are presented jointly because the inclusion and inequality dimension covers measures related to distributions and deprivations by socio-economic status and special population groups. By focusing on these measures, policymakers address issues related to inclusion, inequality, deprivation, sustainability, and resilience. The 'Here and Now' Lens includes current and immediate indicators of well-being, capturing real-time data on various economic and environmental aspects and their distributions and degrees of deprivation. These economic and environmental measures cover outcomes from economic and environmental-related activities measured by income, consumption, (un) employment, cost of living, environmental degradation, and exposure to air and water pollution. They also cover measures on the delivery, access, and quality of economic and environmental services like pension, social security, and environmental protection services. The 'Elsewhere' Lens captures cross-boundary and regional disparities indicators, providing insights into economic and environmental outcomes in different regions and countries. It highlights regional and international economic and environmental disparities affecting well-being such as income, environmental pollution, and resource allocations. The 'In the Future' Lens focuses on long-term economic and environmental investment, assessing the sustainability and resilience of assets related to economic infrastructure, wealth in financial and non-financial assets, intergenerational distribution of assets, emergency preparedness and capacity of government services, and workforce and climate resilience.

4.6. The trade-offs between subjective and objective measures involve balancing immediate equity in outcomes, access, and quality with the long-term investment, capacity, and adaptability of the systems. Key trade-offs can be measured through the distribution of resource allocations to ensure equitable access and quality to services across different demographic groups and regions. With a focus on sustainability and resilience, investing in long-term infrastructure, advanced technologies, and emergency preparedness may not immediately benefit all groups equally. Comparing the current expenditures for improving immediate volume, access, and quality of the service delivery or short-term economic and environmental outcomes versus long-term investment in future capacity of service delivery or economic stability and environmental resilience of outcomes helps in assessing the trade-offs. To understand the trade-offs through subjective well-being indicators, the focus is on capturing individuals' perceptions and experiences related to both immediate delivery and access to services and long-term health system resilience and emergency preparedness. Possible subjective well-being indicators that could help illuminate the trade-off between perceived balance between current needs and future system stability and resilience, such as for health systems and employment conditions. Another relates to the impact of long-term Investments on equity of the outcome, delivery, quality, and access of services.

5. Considering the selection method for the core set of indicators

5.1. In considering a tested method to select a core set of indicators, the Delphi method may be considered, being a nimble, agile, and cost-effective methodology. This method is a structured, systematic decision-making process that relies on a panel of experts (composition to be agreed) to achieve consensus on a particular subject. It is often used in decision-making and forecasting in various fields, including policy development, research, and planning. The Delphi method can be applied to select a global set of a limited set of core subjective and objective well-being indicators.

5.2. Steps in the Delphi Method include the creation of an expert panel to identify and recruit a diverse group of domain-specific experts from academics, policymakers, practitioners, and representatives from international organizations. This expert panel should agree on evaluation criteria for selecting indicators. Criteria may include relevance, alignment with global megatrends and policy priorities; comparability, ability to be measured consistently across different countries and regions; feasibility, availability of data and ease of measurement; comprehensiveness, coverage of key aspects of well-being within each policy area; actionability, and utility in informing and guiding policy decisions. The panel could be tasked with the development of an initial questionnaire based on a comprehensive review of an initial set of domain-specific indicators. This questionnaire should include potential indicators for each policy domain like health, work, income and consumption, housing, and education, and ask the experts to rate the evaluation criteria for each indicator. In the next step, the questionnaire is distributed to the expert panel.

5.3. In subsequent rounds, the export panel responses are analyzed for areas of agreement and disagreement among the experts. These results are summarized and could include statistical measures such as mean, median, and standard deviation for each indicator's ratings. A second questionnaire is prepared based on the analysis of the first round. This second questionnaire should provide feedback to the experts, highlighting the summarized results and any divergent views, and ask experts to reconsider their ratings in light of the group feedback and provide revised ratings for the purpose of seeking consensus. The second round should allow further refinement of the list of indicators based on the revised ratings based on the convergence in the experts' opinions and the identification of the most highly rated indicators. This panel consultation could be repeated if needed to achieve a higher level of consensus. Two to three rounds are typically sufficient, but more can be conducted if required. After achieving a satisfactory level of consensus, the list of core indicators can be finalized based on the highest-rated items.

5.4. This consensus list of core indicators can be further validated through additional reviews or pilot studies to ensure their applicability and relevance, and other criteria agreed upon by the expert group. The final report should be comprehensive in detailing the methodology, analysis, and final selection of indicators. This report should be shared with stakeholders with the recommendation to implement the selected indicators in the well-being assessment framework. Moreover, the report could indicate an ongoing review and adaptation process for ever-greening the assessment framework to establish a process for regular review and adaptation of the indicators to account for emerging trends and new data sources.