

## **When measuring wellbeing there is a need for one single number**

While I agree with many of the comments made about the multi-dimensional nature of human wellbeing and the desirability of reflecting cultural differences and different degrees of life satisfaction etc. , there is also the clear need for a single number that can compete with GDP as a desirable outcome measure.

There are myriads of studies trying to explain the determinants of GDP growth in the form of economic growth regressions or different production functions and much of this analysis is only done and possible because there is a single number whose change over time is being explained.

I think most of us agree that GDP/person is not the right indicator for measuring human wellbeing and much has been written about it in terms of “Mismeasuring our lives”. But why is it then still used all around? Even in demography the concept of Demographic Dividend tries to address the determinants of GDP growth (including some of my own recent contributions) rather than replacing it with a more appropriate indicator of human wellbeing. The simple reason for this seems to be that there is not yet a widely available alternative indicator of wellbeing in the form of a single number.

This is where YoGL tries to come in. It attempts to come up with a single indicator that can also be the dependent variable in complex models and more adequately and comprehensively captures human wellbeing than GDP/person.

This indicator should also be designed in such a way that it can be forecast into the future and can be seen as the outcome variable of various kinds of models in sustainability science. It should also be fit for serving as a criterion variable in optimization models: which combination of determinants results in the highest level of human wellbeing? This is often done in the case of models based on GDP/person and should also be possible for the new wellbeing indicator.

## **And there is a need to explicitly include the length of life**

If the goal is to optimize the chosen indicator of human wellbeing, then the average of this indicator can often be increased by eliminating the weaker, poorer, less healthy or less happy members of the population. GDP/person increases if poor people are eliminated. Average health increases, if the unhealthy are eliminated, and so on. While such elimination by neglect (resulting in earlier death) or even active killing is usually not considered because it is not consistent with human rights, in any optimization model such elimination needs to be explicitly ruled out. Otherwise, it can turn out to be the optimal solution. This can best be done when explicitly including the length of life in the outcome indicator.

This suggests an indicator that is built on human life expectancy which can either be total life expectancy or some qualified life expectancy, such as healthy life expectancy. They can measure different aspects of length of life considered relevant for overall quality of life. These can be:

Total Life expectancy: Only measures the average length of life based on period mortality rates

Healthy Life Expectancy or Health Expectancy: Measures expected years of life in good health or free of disabilities (there are different ways of empirically capturing this).

Years of Good Life (YoGL): Builds on the logic of healthy life expectancy but in addition only counts years as good in which people are out of absolute poverty and above a certain minimum level of subjective life satisfaction. – This attempts to be reflecting state of the art thinking in wellbeing analysis and still not give up the aspiration of producing just one number.

If enough people agree that YoGL is a better measure of human wellbeing than GDP/person and all the necessary data become available, nothing should stop YoGL from replacing GDP/person in many types of analyses and models dealing with human wellbeing, particularly in the context of sustainable development.

I would very much like to hear and discuss counter arguments to these two propositions.

Best

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