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Policy Brief

What is Well-Being?

What seems a simple question is in fact difficult to answer, at least in a simple manner. Well-being is a term that is used in many different ways. Common use suggests that when people speak of their well-being, they are referring to their general health and quality of life. This is distinct from a person's standard of living, which is generally determined by material wealth. A review of well-being definitions includes the following:

- Well-being is “what is ultimately good for a person” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), and as “good or satisfactory condition of existence; a state characterized by health, happiness and prosperity; welfare” (*Dictionary.com*)
- But it is not just a state; it is also a “directed journey on the road to better emotional and physical health.” (*The Road to Well-Being*)
- Some go even further and highlight that there is a distinction between objective and subjective understandings of well-being; subjective well-being can be referred to as “happiness”; and that “well-being is always in progress and not a place to reach and hold for good.” (*Institute of Subjective Well-Being*)
- *Human Resources and Skills Development Canada* (HRSDC) implicitly defines well-being as made up of ten areas or domains: learning, work, housing, family life, social participation, leisure, health, security, environment and financial security
- Others simply define well-being via its measurement and subsequent presentation of data on various well-being indicators. Examples include the *Canadian Index of Well-Being* and *Wellbeing Toronto*.

These definitions highlight the fact that well-being is “best understood as a multifaceted phenomenon”¹ that can be both objectively defined (i.e. through a listing of multiple domains, usually created by “experts”) and subjectively defined (i.e. individually and

personally, as a current state of happiness). The French *Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, headed by Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, identified eight key dimensions of well-being:

- Material living standards (income, consumption and wealth);
- Health;
- Education;
- Personal activities including work;
- Political voice and governance;
- Social connections and relationships;
- Environment (present and future conditions); and
- Insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature

However, defining well-being as a list of domains or through indicators or a well-being “index” is insufficient in helping us understand what well-being actually means. Before proceeding to create and adopt comprehensive measures of well-being, a “multi-level” definition of well-being, from norms, values and concepts to measures, should be created and agreed upon.

There is very little of this kind of work in the literature on well-being. An example comes from a group of Canadian researchers who created a conceptual framework for well-being nearly twenty years ago.² They defined well-being as “the pursuit and fulfillment of personal aspirations and the development and exercise of human capabilities, within a context of mutual recognition, equality and interdependence.”

The authors elaborated on the definition of well-being through a discussion of three essentially normative “elements”:

- self-determination;
- mutual recognition and interdependence; and
- equality of outcome

Three “contributors” round out the framework:

- security (physical, emotional, material);
- citizenship (as rights and responsibilities); and
- democratization (participation)

The authors also make clear that well-being is an ideal state that is a vision “of where we want to go and what we want to achieve.” They argue that while the conceptual framework represents a synthesis and reflection of “commonly held Canadian values”, it is not a definitive statement of what well-being is and how it could be achieved. Rather it is a point of departure for discussion that needs testing through practice. The point is

nicely summarized by the statement, “it is only through an ongoing process of communication, learning and action that well-being could hope to be achieved.”

This is a fundamental challenge to achieving well-being for individuals, families, communities and countries. It would seem that creating and maintaining appropriate, accessible and legitimate spaces for dialogue and action on well-being needs to be addressed by all sectors of society, and in particular, by governments.

Interested in learning more? Stay tuned, Policy Horizons Canada will publish short papers on what might drive well-being in Canada over the next 10 to 15 years, based on interdepartmental and expert consultations.

¹ M.J.C. Forgeard *et al.* 2011. “Doing the Right Thing: Measuring Wellbeing for Public Policy”. *International Journal of Wellbeing*. 1(1): 79-106.

² M. Rioux and D.I. Hay (eds.). 1993. *Well-Being: A Conceptual Framework*. Vancouver: Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia. *See also*, Roeher Institute. 1993. *Social Well-Being: A Paradigm for Reform*. Toronto: Roeher Institute.