

Foreword

Understanding and improving well-being requires a sound evidence base that can inform policy-makers and citizens alike where, when, and for whom life is getting better. These Guidelines have been produced under the OECD's Better Life Initiative – a pioneering project launched in 2011, which aims to measure society's progress across eleven domains of well-being, ranging from income, jobs, health, skills and housing, through to civic engagement and the environment. Subjective well-being – i.e. how people think about and experience their lives – is an important component of this overall framework. To be most useful to governments and other decision-makers, however, subjective well-being data need to be collected with large and representative samples and in a consistent way across different population groups and over time.

These Guidelines mark an important turning point in our knowledge of how subjective well-being can, and should, be measured. Not long ago, the received wisdom was that “we don't know enough” about subjective well-being to build it into measures of societal progress. However, as the evidence documented in these Guidelines shows, we in fact know a lot – perhaps more than we realised until we gathered all the relevant material for this report – and in particular that measures of subjective well-being are capable of capturing valid and meaningful information.

However, like all self-reported measures, survey-based measures of subjective well-being, are sensitive to measurement methodology. A large part of this report is therefore devoted to explaining some of the key measurement issues that both data producers and users need to know about. Comparable data require comparable methods, and a degree of standardisation that will require both determination and co-operation to achieve.

Subjective well-being data can provide an important complement to other indicators already used for monitoring and benchmarking countries performance, for guiding people's choices, and for designing and delivering policies. Measures of subjective well-being show meaningful associations with a range of life circumstances, including the other dimensions of well-being explored in the Better Life Initiative. However, because a variety of factors affect how people experience and report on their lives, including factors such as psychological resilience in the face of adversity, and potential cultural and linguistic influences that are not currently well-understood, subjective well-being can only tell part of a person's story. These data must therefore be examined alongside information about more objective aspects of well-being, to provide a full and rounded picture of how life is.

As for any new area of statistics, there is still much to be learned. These guidelines set out what we currently know about good practice. Research on both the measurement and the determinants of subjective well-being is rapidly advancing. As our knowledge grows, good practice will need to be updated. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise just how far we have come in recent years. These

Guidelines represent the first attempt to provide international recommendations on data collection, including some prototype question modules. Although this report is more of a beginning than an end, I believe it represents an important step forward.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MD', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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