

# Is Life Getting Better?

A beginners guide on measuring the progress of societies

Produced by

The Global Social Change Research Project  
<http://gsociology.icaap.org/>

## Is Life Getting Better?

This is the third in a set of pamphlets about measuring well-being and progress of societies

In this pamphlet we briefly discuss what we should measure about well-being and progress.

### How have well-being and progress been measured?

Typical measures of national well-being include: economic indicators like income, poverty, and standard of living; health indicators such as life expectancy, and child and maternal mortality rates; some kind of education indicator; and indicators of freedom or democracy, environmental sustainability and social cohesion.<sup>1</sup>

There is, however, no universal measure of progress, and, in addition, no universal agreement on which factors are the most important, nor exactly how to measure them.

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<sup>1</sup> Measuring national well-being. UK Office For National Statistics. See Box 4: Some frameworks for measuring national well-being. No date given. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/consultations/measuring-national-well-being/index.html>

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### How **should** well-being and progress be measured?

One useful approach is to first develop a set of domains, and then specific indicators within each domain, that are commonly accepted as being potentially important in describing well-being.

For example one set of domains might be material living standards, health, education, political voice (e.g., freedom, participation), social connections, environmental conditions, physical and economic security and life satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

The domains and indicators could provide a common starting point. Each society could then select their own set of measures of well being and progress, based on the values of their society. Selecting from the same set of domains and indicators makes it much easier to compare across societies.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. The Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress Revisited. Reflections and Overview. Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. 9/16/2009. <http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/en/index.htm>

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One set of indicators, used by the UN, World Bank and IMF, is the Millennium Development Goals<sup>3</sup>, which include:

- Ending poverty and hunger
- Universal education
- Gender equality (in education)
- Child health (Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate)
- Maternal health (Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio; Achieve universal access to reproductive health)
- Combat HIV/AIDS
- Environmental sustainability (reduce deforestation, air pollution, biodiversity loss, proportion of population without access to clean water and basic sanitation).

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<sup>3</sup> Millennium Development Goals. United Nations. <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

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Other organization developed their own lists, including:

**The UN list of specific global issues**

<http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/>

includes health, climate change, decolonization, land mines, food, democracy, peace, disabilities, refugees, terrorism, water, etc.

**Australian AID Global Education**

<http://www.globaleducation.edna.edu.au/globaled/page1.html>

includes biodiversity, children's rights, desertification, education, environment, food security, forests, health, human rights, peace, poverty, sanitation, water, etc.

**UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/global-issues/>

includes growth and development, terrorism, conflict prevention, climate change and human rights.

Even at least one major corporation developed a list

**Chevron**

<http://www.chevron.com/globalissues/>

includes energy, environment, global warming, health and safety, human rights.

These pamphlets briefly introduce some of these concepts/ indicators of progress and some of the current practices in their measurement.

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