

## Well-being clouds come with some silver linings – Marie Briguglio

While there has been a decline in well-being and well-being inequality, there is now data, research and evidence of how to improve things

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There are only 27 other countries in the world that experience worry, sadness and anger as frequently as we do in Malta. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

Last week, the world marked the International Day of Happiness established by United Nations because “the pursuit of happiness is a

fundamental human goal”.

To mark it, the Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society and the University of Malta shone a spotlight on some findings emerging from the well-being INDEX project. I will review five key insights emerging from the project this year.

First, we now have data. Collecting data on well-being is not easy but it is increasingly possible, scientific and comparable. The challenges of data collection are various. Given the fluctuations in migrant population it is hard to sample. To capture a wide array of lifestyle questions, the data collector risks exhausting the respondent. Vulnerable minorities are among the most important people to survey – yet also among the hardest to interview.

Despite these difficulties, Malta’s National Statistics Office now collects a set of well-being questions annually – in a mammoth sample as part of the EU SILC exercise. In addition, to compare Malta with European Union countries, Eurostat offers us a Quality of Life Dashboard. And, to compare Malta with other countries, we have data from Gallup.

Second, interest in happiness and subjective well-being has boomed worldwide. What started as research in Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) societies is now a much more global phenomenon.

This interest is reflected in Malta too. Students are taking this up as a topic of study and research from their choice of courses to their choice of PhD topics. Institutions are commissioning this kind of research. The Open Access Repository at the University of Malta contains many relevant publications with well-being, happiness and/or life satisfaction. Well-being is a topic of rigorous data collection and research. Well-being is not something that’s “up in air”.

Third, there were some drastic changes in the last four years, a period partially marred by the pandemic. As we now have data over multiple years, it is becoming possible to see trends.

For instance, we note that a rather significant decline in life satisfaction from an average of 7.5 (out of 10) in 2018 to seven in 2021. Relative to 2018, people were more likely to feel downhearted and depressed and the frequency of feeling happy declined by 2021.

Granted, the years were marred by a pandemic. But regardless of the reason, the results are remarkable.

A similar story emerges from the last World Happiness Report (2022) issued by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network using Gallup data.

Malta slipped a few places from 33rd to 37th in the world for life evaluation, despite holding an impressive position of being 25th on GDP per capita and 12th on Healthy Life expectancy.

We need to think how to embed well-being within education  
- Marie Briguglio

Yet when it comes to how we feel, there are only 27 other countries in the world that experience worry, sadness and anger as frequently as we do.

We did observe an improvement in rank for frequency of positive emotions like laughter, enjoyment and doing interesting things but still rank very low in the world.

Fourth, there is also inequality in well-being in Malta. As the data now allows us to drill down beyond national averages, we begin to realise that people feel very differently. For instance, people in the populous Northern Harbour region seem to be experiencing the [lowest levels of well-being](#) in Malta.

There is also a clear age gradient: in 2018, the under-18 age category scored an impressive 7.91 out of 10 in their self-assessed life satisfaction, while the 65+ category scored 7.39. Three years later, in 2021, the under-18 age category scored 7.10 but the over 65+ category scored a paltry 6.65.

In other findings, by various measures, women in Malta report lower in well-being than men.

Fifth, the time is ripe for policy action. While evidence-based policy is often talked about, it is far less often acted upon. Well-being policy requires governments to go beyond data collection and research to ensure that well-being is considered in strategies and policies and to ensure that the way public finances (including EU funds) are spent promote well-being (beyond material well-being) rather than harm it.

The government needs to empower a well-being watchdog – a role effectively being handled by the Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society – but also to build capacity across the administration.

There needs to be some strategic thinking on how to embed well-being within education. Consulting with citizens and ongoing communication is also part of what could constitute well-being policy.

So, on the one hand, we have witnessed a decline in well-being and well-being inequality. But on the other hand, we now have data, research and evidence of how to improve things.

That's a cloud. But it has a silver lining.

***Marie Briguglio is an economist and the principal investigator of the well-being INDEX project [www.wellbeingindex.mt](http://www.wellbeingindex.mt).***

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