TIMES OF MALTA

‘Well-being’ – where’s the evidence?

Dozens of projects are funded every year across the world with the intended outcome of improving people’s well-being. But do these projects really improve well-being?

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Some of the projects funded involve education. Photo: Shutterstock.com

Not everything we do in life needs to be evaluated. Our personal lives are full of projects we do without bothering to measure impact or keep records. But when projects are paid for by public funds, and when their intention is to enhance well-being, and especially when participants are vulnerable, then it is worth considering assessing actual impacts.

Dozens of projects are funded every year across the world with the intended outcome of improving the well-being of the elderly, children, people with disability, youth, migrants, working mothers and any other demographic possible to identify.

Some of these involve education, others sport, some involve engagement with the arts, others with blue or green spaces, some focus on spirituality or religious activities, some involve social gatherings. Some involve small expenditures; others, like infrastructural upgrades, involve millions of euros.

The question is, do these projects really improve well-being? How can we tell?

Without going into the detail of how to conduct an impact assessment, it is sufficient to point out that this is an important field of research in its own right.

The curious investigator could explore how participants fared before the project, how they fared after the project and whether the change in their well-being was due to the project at all. Ideally, participants would need to be compared to similar others who did not participate in the project.

> *Some projects may have the opposite effect of suppressing well-being rather than enhancing it*

Why does it matter? It matters because resources (time and money) are best spent where they have a real impact. Why continue to waste time and money on a project that is not achieving what it set out to do? Or that is not achieving it as well as a different project would? It also matters because documenting a project's impact is a way of leaving a legacy for the project beyond the impact on the participants themselves.

But perhaps most importantly, it matters as some projects may have the opposite effect of suppressing well-being rather than enhancing it.

For instance, projects which start and end abruptly may leave participants worse off having raised expectations of what could be; projects run by well-meaning contributors but lacking the required professional training may fail to deal adequately with possible mental health issues; projects designed without the required nuance to deal with diversity may leave people feeling more disconnected; projects which enhance the well-being of a particular group may have negative impacts on others and so forth.

A question which often arises is: how would we measure impacts on well-being? While the science is not perfect, a lot of work has gone into this across the world. For instance, there are scales that can reliably measure how people feel before and after the project: who better to tell us how a person is doing than the person themselves?

It is increasingly possible to refer to existing studies that document impacts of other projects. This is a useful shortcut for designing a project and in choosing where to focus (for instance, the evidence is clear on the positive impact of mental health services). And it is possible and necessary to pilot a project before unleashing it on a whole population. In all this, it is possible for practitioners to collaborate with researchers.

These arguments do not just hold for well-being interventions in the public sector but also for those in the private sector. These are becoming ever more popular as private entities seek to meet their social obligations. They also apply for publicly-funded projects more generally – beyond those targeting well-being.

The process of any significant projects' approval should include an assessment of its impact on well-being. Otherwise, we may well be funding projects – from taxes – whose net result on well-being is negative.

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