

What is well-being and why should it be measured?

More and more governments in Europe and across the world are beginning to take an interest in understanding, measuring and improving the well-being of their populations. According to WHO, well-being comprises an individual's experience of life and a comparison of life circumstances with social norms and values. On a population level, objective well-being can be described through a number of indicators, such as education, income and housing. Subjective well-being is also important, and is captured in the European health report 2015 through the indicator on life satisfaction, which asks survey respondents: "How satisfied are you with your life these days?"

A growing body of evidence shows that subjective well-being can be measured reliably in local and national contexts; that it communicates something not captured by other metrics; and that designing policies which take well-being into account can have an important impact on how a government improves health services. For instance, it is becoming increasingly clear that higher levels of well-being are associated with lower risks of disease, illness and injury, better immune functioning, speedier recovery from illness and increased longevity.

How do cultural contexts affect well-being?

When people talk to each other about how well they feel, they usually refer to their individual and shared emotions and experiences. These in turn are strongly influenced by the cultural contexts which they inhabit. But what does "culture" mean?

In the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, UNESCO reaffirmed:

...that culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and belief.

Culture can influence how well-being is understood in several ways. For example, a person's cultural background can affect how they might interpret a well-being question from a survey. More importantly, however, some cultural features may improve perceptions of well-being. They can, for instance, play an important role in creating greater resilience in the face of economic hardships.

KEY FACTS

Measurement of well-being is evolving

- **The good news:** well-being can be measured reliably and has important health consequences, such as higher life expectancy.
- **The challenge:** comparisons between different countries are difficult and more research is needed.

Cultural contexts of well-being are being investigated

- **The good news:** culture can have a protective effect on health and well-being.
- **The challenge:** not enough is yet known about how culture influences health and well-being.

Qualitative and quantitative data are being used to measure well-being

- **The good news:** high-quality quantitative data about well-being are becoming available.
- **The challenge:** multidisciplinary research is needed to explain how well-being is experienced in different cultural contexts.

Countries are reporting on well-being

- **The good news:** many European Member States are beginning to report on the well-being of their populations.
- **The challenge:** attention must be paid to capturing the well-being narratives of hard-to-reach groups (such as migrants and children).

How can understanding and reporting on well-being in the Region be improved?

Although statistical (quantitative) approaches to reporting on well-being are necessary on a population level, much may be learnt about the well-being of groups, communities and even nations by systematically analysing other forms of qualitative evidence. These may include historical records, anthropological observations and varying forms of cultural output. A more multidisciplinary approach to measuring and reporting on well-being can therefore help policy-makers understand the specific health and well-being needs of culturally diverse groups of people.

Reporting on well-being should be used to create policies that empower people to shape their lives. To facilitate this, communication strategies are needed that allow individuals and communities to share their well-being stories.

What is WHO doing?

Measuring well-being raises many questions, which is why the WHO Regional Office for Europe has set up a project to address the cultural contexts of health. The project will systematically explore how people think about, experience and create health and well-being.

An expert group has been established to drive this work forward. A report from the first expert group meeting has now been published and several other publications, such as policy briefs and synthesis reports, have been commissioned to explore and explain further how culture affects health and well-being.

