MERGE Workshop "Towards a European Semester that promotes wellbeing in the medium-long term?" – Concept note

17 November 2025, from 10:30 to 12:30 (welcome coffee at 10:00)
European Policy Centre
Rue du Trône 14 16,B 1000 Brussels

Building economies that deliver sustainable and inclusive wellbeing for all—now and in the future—requires complex tools. In this context, MERGE, a Horizon Europe-funded project, aims to foster science-policy exchange on developing indicators and models to strengthen sustainable and inclusive wellbeing policies.

Through its policy stream, led by ZOE Institute for Future-fit Economies and the European Policy Centre (EPC), MERGE conducts "policy deep dives" workshops to analyse how a holistic set of metrics can enhance and monitor the implementation of key EU policies. This workshop is the last of a series of six workshops on (non-legislative and legislative) priority files for the 2024-2029 European Commission[i]. It will focus on the European Semester, the EU's governance tool that coordinates Member States' economic, fiscal, employment and social policies and reforms.

Objective:

This workshop aims to identify and discuss opportunities and challenges of adjusting the European Semester to better integrate dimensions and metrics of sustainable and inclusive wellbeing (SIWB), aiming to ensure EU level policy coordination which better balances all facets of social, environmental and economic wellbeing, for today and for future generations.

Focus:

The workshop will be opened by expert presentations from the MERGE project and the Joint Research Centre on the most recent state of play regarding converging frameworks and indicators to measure SIWB. Then participants will discuss the opportunities and challenges of adjusting the European Semester, in the medium-long term, to better integrate SIWB metrics. Subsequently, two small groups will work on case studies based on selected 2025 CSRs, exploring the thematic focus on **housing** and **skills** (social dimension) and on **energy** and **green (transition) skills** (sustainability). A visionary exercise will be carried out by exploring how recommendations might look if SIWB dimensions in the Semester were reinforced and which indicators could be used to do this.

Participants:

The workshop will bring together European Commission officials working on the European Semester across different Directorates General and officials working on the policy domains of housing, skills and energy, as well as invitees from the European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee, the Social Protection Committee, the upcoming Presidencies of the Council of the EU and non-institutional experts from the MERGE project (academia, civil society and think tanks).

Agenda

10:00	Welcome coffee
10:30	Introduction to MERGE and participants' tour de table By *Valentina Caimi*, European Policy Centre
10:40	Setting the scene: • *Joseph Eastoe*, University College London • *Ana Boskovic*, JRC
11:00	**Plenary discussion: Opportunities and challenges of adjusting the European Semester in the medium-long run to better integrate SIWB dimensions and metrics** Opening remarks by *Luca Jahier*, President of the EESC European Semester Group
11:45	Break-out group activity: • Thematic area on affordable housing and on skills • Thematic area on affordable energy and on green skills
12:20	Plenary and closing

Workshop Discussion

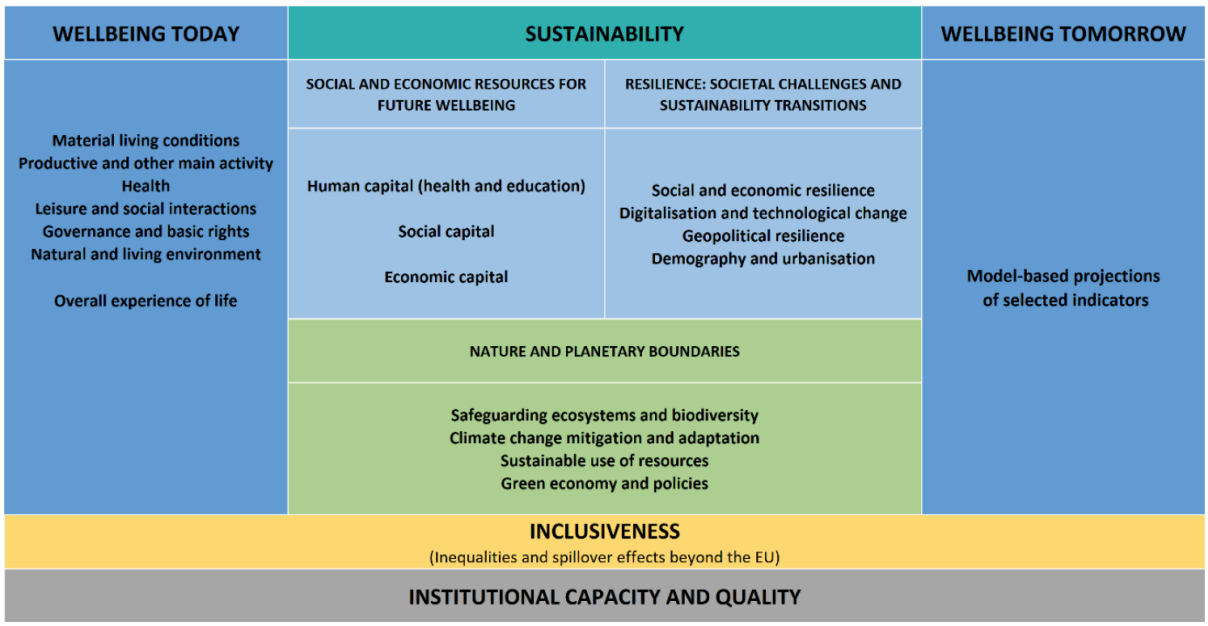
The context:

At EU and international level, there is growing political attention given to people's and planet's wellbeing of present and future generations. A wide range of related activities across the European Commission have been launched[ii], such as the Eighth Environment Action Programme, the EC Joint Research Centre dashboard of sustainable and inclusive well-being indicators, and the forthcoming Intergenerational Fairness Strategy.

The EC SIWB multidimensional dashboard is built on six pillars: a) Wellbeing today (current wellbeing); b) Social and economic resources for future wellbeing; c) Resilience: societal challenges and sustainability transitions; d) Nature and planetary boundaries; e) Inclusiveness; and f)

Institutional capacity and quality (see figure 1). According to the Strategic Foresight Report 2025 (key area no. 5), the dashboard has the potential to be embedded into policy evaluation, and investment and reform decision-making.[iii]

Figure 1. Main components and their dimensions of the SIWB framework (revised)



Source: by the authors, from Benczur et al. (2024).

The MERGE project has identified the European Semester as a governance tool that in the medium-long run could be complemented by integrating wellbeing dimensions and metrics to steer Member States' policies, investments and reforms towards SIWB, for the benefit of present and future generations. Indeed, since its creation in 2010, the European Semester has progressively been expanded from an instrument to purely coordinate Member States' economic and fiscal policies towards EU objectives and rules, to also cover Member States' employment and social policies and reforms. More recently, environmental and energy concerns have also been largely integrated. Now, the European Semester monitors the implementation of a variety of EU and global instruments: the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its Action Plan, the Recovery & Resilience Facility (RRF) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The European Commission's Communication on the 2025 European Semester – spring package states that 'with the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) coming to an end in 2026, the 2025 European Semester cycle moves to a more comprehensive set of Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs), phasing out the approach introduced during the earlier phases of RRF implementation. As such, the 2025 cycle provides guidance on reform and investment priorities in each Member State based on a broadening analysis to identify the relevant structural challenges'[iv]. Furthermore, the importance of the European Semester as a policy coordination tool has recently been increased, being linked with the Competitiveness Compass for the EU, the new fiscal rules and the Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF).

The same 2025 Communication contains an annex, providing an overview of the thematic areas covered by the CSRs (view figure 2).

Figure 2 – Overview of thematic areas covered by the Country Specific Recommendations

In 2025, most Member States received a recommendation on housing (being specifically on availability, affordability, social housing, renovation, energy poverty, energy efficiency, etc.), on skills (skills mismatches, labour shortages, general skills, digital, green skills, STEM skills, upskilling, re-skilling, etc.) and on energy (renewables, efficiency, grid, storage, fossil-fuel phase-out, energy poverty, etc.). This testifies to a broader approach compared to the past.

Challenges and opportunities

- The European Semester's competitive sustainability framework addresses inclusiveness (fairness) and environmental sustainability aspects in social and economic policy coordination, recognising that an economy must work for people and the planet. As highlighted by prof. Enrico Giovannini during the 2025 EESC conference, the European Semester, being an annual cycle, now mainly looks at dimensions of wellbeing today, while it does not encompass wellbeing tomorrow. The new medium-term plans will give the possibility for Member States to plan for four to seven years and will be an incredibly valuable tool for the Commission to monitor what is going on.[v]
- Depending on political priorities, political compromises and methodological constraints, different frameworks and indicators are used to monitor progress towards set policy targets and goals, as well as on how Member States advance in the CSRs' implementation. Consequently, there is an open question on how to better structure the monitoring process around the European Semester, in a way that is more transparent and predictable while also allowing sufficient flexibility in capturing the most appropriate indicators to measure what is at stake.
- As highlighted in the MERGE deep dive on Social Europe held in June 2025, the Social Scoreboard, within the Social Convergence Framework, should be strengthened and better complemented, to become a meaningful counterpart to the Macroeconomic Imbalance

Procedure. This involves addressing current limitations due to data availability, timeliness, precision and uneven granularity, while ensuring that indicators capture all the Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Some indicators lack granularity and fail to reflect the diversity of social challenges across the EU.

Framing questions:

- *What is the scope for adjusting the European Semester to better integrate SIWB dimensions and metrics (including the EC SIWB framework) and ensure a more holistic and long-term policy approach? What are the opportunities and the barriers/challenges?*
- *How could the monitoring process of the European Semester be better structured? Could some components and indicators of the EC SIWB framework be embedded in the European Semester in the medium-long run? Could the SIWB dashboard's indicators on vulnerability and resilience be used to identify risks for the future (wellbeing tomorrow)?*
- *Which could be the most appropriate indicators to monitor Member States' progress in the implementation of CSRs in the field of skills (including green skills), affordable housing and energy?*

Further readings:

BENCZUR, P., BOSKOVIC, A., GIOVANNINI, E., PAGANO, A. and SANDOR, A.-M. (2025), Measuring sustainable and inclusive wellbeing: a multidimensional dashboard approach, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

BENCZUR, P., BOSKOVIC, A., CARIBONI, J., GIOVANNINI, E., PAGANO, A. and SANDOR, A.-M. (2025), Sustainable and inclusive wellbeing: achievements and challenges of the European approach to prosperity, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Enrico Giovannini, Peter Benczur, Ana Boskovic, and Jessica Cariboni (15 October 2025), Sustainable and Inclusive Well-being: Feeding the Emerging New Consensus

European Commission (2025), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank. 2025 European Semester - Spring package

European Commission (2025), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. 2025 Strategic Foresight Report Resilience 2.0: Empowering the EU to thrive amid turbulence and uncertainty

European Economic and Social Committee (2025), The annual ESG Conference 2025 | EESC

Kubiszewski, I., Costanza, R., Eastoe, J., Lu, T., Mulder, K., Hernandez, G. P., Benczúr, P. & Dixson-Declève, S. (2025). Building consensus on societal wellbeing: a semantic synthesis of indicators to move beyond GDP. *Ecological Indicators*, 178, 114076.

[i] Past workshops covered the new Multiannual Financial Framework, the Clean Industrial Deal, Competitiveness, Social Europe and governance.

[ii] Enrico Giovannini, Peter Benczur, Ana Boskovic, and Jessica Cariboni (15 October 2025), Sustainable and Inclusive Well-being: Feeding the Emerging New Consensus.

[iii] European Commission (2025), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. 2025 Strategic Foresight Report Resilience 2.0: Empowering the EU to thrive amid turbulence and uncertainty.

[iv] European Commission (2025), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank. 2025 European Semester - Spring package, Brussels, 4.6.2025 COM(2025) 200 final.

[v] Conclusions of the EESC 202 conference on the European Semester

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