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Data harmonisation and collection for wellbeing and sustainability indicators – discussion paper

1. Executive summary

For decades, there has been an increased recognition of the limitations of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to provide an accurate measure of people's wellbeing. Policymakers, academics and civil society organisations have emphasised the need for a broader, more inclusive set of indicators to better reflect the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of progress, and inform decisions and policies. Nonetheless, despite the proliferation of different alternatives, no measuring framework has emerged as a clear alternative to the dominance of GDP. As a result, efforts remain fragmented, which in turn undermines their ability to position themselves as compelling alternatives to traditional accounting frameworks.

Most recently, these critiques crystallised in the United Nations (UN) Pact of the Future, where Member States requested the establishment of an independent high-level expert group to develop a set of recommendations to complement and go beyond GDP. This process – which will be followed by inter-governmental discussions – paves the way for a potential international framework that could provide guidance on the topic. At the same time, it is also possible that good practices developed and implemented at the national level

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can be a productive starting point to explore potential for harmonisation, but also innovative policy uses.

Whether this happens through top-down or bottom-up mechanisms, there is a need to explore pathways towards greater harmonisation and coordination across Member States. In this context, the MERGE project aims to contribute to this broader goal by providing some insights and learnings from a series of interviews with National Statistical Institutions (NSIs) staff members. As part of this process, we interviewed 18 experts in 9 countries, covering a wide range of experiences with frameworks for measuring wellbeing and sustainable development. The interviews not only helped us uncover new challenges and provide greater detail on known ones but also shed light on promising developments and potential ways forward.

While interviews covered a wide range of topics, it is worth highlighting the findings related to harmonisation. Country interviewees generally regarded the harmonisation of indicators as important, though not necessarily the harmonisation of frameworks. Concerning specific indicators, there was broad consensus that harmonisation is, all things being equal, a positive development. However, several NSIs expressed reservations, particularly in relation to breaking time series, overlooking national perspectives, and challenges with demographic breakdowns.

Several interviewees noted that within the European Union (EU), there is already a strong degree of harmonisation of indicators. When discussing specific indicators or topics where further harmonisation was desired, the following areas were mentioned: defining planetary boundaries, developing synthesis indicators based on national accounts, and addressing social relations and loneliness.

At the global level, NSIs looked to international organisations to provide frameworks that could be used or adapted. Interestingly, it was also clear that not all NSIs viewed harmonisation as a one-way process; rather, they recognised the importance of demonstrating the value of their own methods to an international audience, potentially informing practices in other countries. When asked which organisations they turn to for guidance, three main actors were cited: Eurostat (and the ESSys), the OECD, and the UN.

Recommendations for NSIs can be summarised as follows: i) build on international guidance and models while ensuring national relevance by engaging civil society and citizens in the development and implementation of the framework; ii) establish a strong institutional set-up that is resilient to political change, including but not limited to embedding it within legal frameworks; iii) maintain support for the framework through clear communication of its

benefits and active collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders; and iv) ensure direct links to policy, for example by integrating the framework into budgets, impact assessments, and other policy instruments.

- **Acronyms used**

BES	*Benessere Equo i Sostenibile* (Equitable and Sustainable Wellbeing)
DG RTD	Directorate-General for Research and Innovation
ESSys	European Statistical System
EU-SILC	EU Statistics on Income & Living Conditions
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HLEG	High Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP
IRN	*Indicateurs des Richesse Nationale* (Indicators of National Wealth)
JRC	Joint Research Centre
NSI	National Statistics Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations

2. Context

2.1 The Limits of GDP

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has long been regarded as the principal benchmark for assessing economic progress. However, although GDP is correlated with many aspects of wellbeing, it only provides a narrow perspective on the success or progress of a society. While it can be useful for providing an overview of the market value of goods and services produced within a national economy, it offers a limited picture of wellbeing and its inequalities, ignores key drivers of human and societal development, such as non-monetary production (e.g. unpaid childcare, volunteerism), and counts every expenditure as positive, including welfare detrimental activities such as environmental degradation or defence expenditures (Giannetti et al., 2015).

Over the past decades, policymakers, academics and civil society organisations have increasingly emphasised the need for a broader more inclusive, set of indicators to better reflect the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of progress, and inform decisions and policies.

2.2 Early international efforts

Since the end of the 20th century, several initiatives have attempted to complement GDP with alternative metrics, for example, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or the Human Development Index (HDI) have been developed, adopted, and monitored across the globe for several decades to overcome some of the limitations of GDP.

In 2008, the French Government created "The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress" to review the statistical information about the economy and society and examine how progress could be measured. This led the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission report, which identified limits of GDP as a measurement of progress and assessed the feasibility and needs for developing alternative metrics.

Building on this momentum, in 2011, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched its Better Life Index and the How's Life reports to measure and assess wellbeing across countries.

In Europe, following the 2009 Commission Communication "GDP and beyond: measuring progress in a changing world", the work of the European Union's statistical office, Eurostat, was central in advancing Beyond GDP. Eurostat took the lead in developing new statistical frameworks that better reflect progress on wellbeing, coordinating efforts to develop a Quality-of-Life Framework and an EU-specific SDG framework, leading to new data collection as part of the EU Statistics on Income & Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey.

2.3 Renewed efforts since the UN Common Agenda.

In the 2021 report, Our Common Agenda, and the follow-up policy brief on Beyond GDP, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General reaffirms the need for moving beyond GDP. In September 2024, UN Member States committed to the Pact for the Future to develop "a framework on measures of progress on sustainable development to complement and go beyond gross domestic product". A High-Level Expert Group was set up to propose a set of 10-20 headline Beyond GDP indicators in 2026 to facilitate the global coordinated move towards beyond GDP measurement.

The interim report of the HLEG (UN High Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP, 2025) adopts the increasingly popular distinction between three key dimensions: wellbeing, equity and inclusion, and sustainability. This reflects the convergence of the Beyond GDP topic towards the overarching goal of sustainable and inclusive wellbeing to ensure the wellbeing of all people of current and future generations, and of the planet (Rum et al., 2024).

In the European Union, these efforts have also been progressing steadily in the last few years. After the publication of the 2020 Strategic Foresight Report of the European

Commission, which recognised the need for complementary indicators to GDP, the Commission set up an inter-service working group to develop a multidimensional dashboard using 50 existing indicators. This dashboard was published by the JRC in 2025 (EC: JRC, 2025). Meanwhile, in 2024, a research report commissioned by DG RTD introduced a proposal for supplementing GDP with just three headline indicators (Charveriat et al., 2024).

2.4 Progress in national statistical institutes

The work of national statistical institutes (NSIs) and their statisticians is key to operationalising the Beyond GDP and wellbeing frameworks and allows for the success of this agenda at the national level. In the quest to broaden the understanding of progress, statisticians provide the technical background that ensures that concepts such as wellbeing or sustainability are translated from theoretical goals to measurable data. NSIs define national indicators, ensure the data quality, and produce insights that can inform national policymaking.

As of 2024, the OECD estimates that two-thirds of OECD countries have developed national frameworks, development plans or surveys with a wellbeing focus. These efforts, which NSIs often play a central role in developing and maintaining, demonstrate the commitment to integrating wellbeing metrics into public policy and national development strategies. National statisticians also play a key role in international collaboration. Through their involvement in expert groups, task forces and networks, for example, in the UN Conference of European Statisticians (CES), they contribute to the knowledge exchange on best national practices, the improvement of methodologies, and the movement of data harmonisation across countries.

In the eye of the UN process to reach an international consensus on Beyond GDP indicators, the MERGE project reached out to national experts across the European Union, and beyond, to understand better the current landscape for measuring sustainable development and wellbeing across the EU and the challenges and opportunities for the collection, harmonisation, and coordination on wellbeing, beyond GDP, and sustainability indicators.

3. Interview process

We interviewed 18 experts in 9 countries and one international organisation, including:

- 13 working in NSIs
- 4 working in other government bodies
- 1 working in an international organisation (OECD)

The countries covered include Austria, Croatia, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Poland.

Interviewees were identified through a combination of channels, including MERGE's existing networks, approaching people working on cross-national projects (such as the UNECE Guidelines on the measurement of wellbeing), and public channels (i.e. NSI websites).

Interviewees were sent a concept note which described the aim of the interviews as "gaining an understanding of how wellbeing, sustainability and Beyond GDP indicators are collected and what is limiting harmonisation and greater data collection." Interviews considered both the individual indicators and the wellbeing or Beyond GDP frameworks used by NSIs and other public bodies.

Based on a recent review (OECD WISE, 2024), we developed a categorical framework distinguishing between countries that:

1) Have no existing wellbeing or Beyond GDP framework
2) Have a measurement framework, but one that is not formally embedded in policymaking processes
3) Have a framework and intended policy use

Although we indeed focused on countries which have frameworks, we included a few countries without frameworks in order to better understand why they currently do not have a framework. In those countries, we spoke to staff responsible for SDG frameworks. We distinguish SDG frameworks from wellbeing or Beyond GDP frameworks, although there are significant overlaps: whereas the SDG framework is a politically defined framework with short to mid-term goals, wellbeing and Beyond GDP frameworks start from more conceptual perspective, and typically focus on desirable outcomes that are intended to be relevant over the long-term.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Teams (with the exception of one interviewee, who participated by responding to a series of questions by email), with recordings used to ensure complete information capture. A grounded approach was taken to coding, developing a categorisation system based on what interviewees said. Interviews were conducted in compliance with GDPR. Interviewees were assured confidentiality, although most (but not all) indicated on their consent forms that they were happy with responses being attributed to their country or indeed institution.

4. Findings

The findings presented here are structured according to the categories that emerged from the interviewees' responses:

1. Existence of framework and staffing
2. Initial impetus for framework
3. Stages involved
4. Factors in the development of frameworks
5. Implications of frameworks on data collection
6. Factors relating to the maintenance of frameworks
7. Harmonisation and inter-country learning
8. Barriers to better quality data
9. Existing areas of innovation
10. Data dreams
11. Policy uses to date
12. Ideal policy use
13. Complexity

4.1 Existence of framework and staffing

Wellbeing or Beyond GDP frameworks existed in six out of the nine countries we covered (consistent with the OECD's assessment that 2/3 of OECD countries have relevant frameworks), with the remaining three countries having SDG frameworks. In two countries, two simultaneous frameworks could be identified (France and New Zealand). In France, this included both the *Indicateurs des Richesse Nationale* and the work on augmented national accounts. In New Zealand the two frameworks were the Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand and the Living Standards Framework.

Staffing for frameworks was hard to assess precisely. In all countries with frameworks, we were able to identify someone whose main duties included developing the wellbeing or Beyond GDP framework. But in most cases, there was no single "unit" responsible for frameworks. Instead, expertise was pulled from different sections within organisations. However, some NSIs seemed to have more resources available than others, with the Netherlands and France being amongst the best resourced, with several staff devoted to work on wellbeing or Beyond GDP.

Of the eight frameworks discussed, five had policy implications, whereas three are best described as purely measurement frameworks.

4.2 Initial impetus for framework

The impetus for creating a framework often came from **national political decisions or processes**, for example, a Parliamentary Committee or a change in government. For Finland, the Economy of Wellbeing process that was set up as part of its EU Council Presidency was important. In France, the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress was a key driving factor for initial work.

In a couple of countries, the initial impetus could be identified within NSIs themselves, typically **entrepreneurial senior staff**. This impulse, however, required connection to policy processes (e.g. a Parliamentary Committee) to lead to an established framework.

In those cases where we spoke to staff responsible for SDG frameworks, **international developments,** in particular Eurostat requirements, were mentioned as instrumental to triggering framework development.

4.3 Stages involved

There were several similarities between the processes different countries took in developing frameworks. **International recommendations** and examples (particularly the OECD wellbeing framework) were cited by many interviewees as a key first step. Other international reference points were the recommendations of the Conference of European Statisticians and the World Health Organization.

Several countries then mentioned **consultation or stakeholder processes** – typically including civil society or community groups, but also academics. In one country, the desire to consult with citizens more broadly was mentioned, but budget and time constraints prevented the country from following that route.

The **trade-off between international and national factors** in shaping frameworks was often mentioned, with many interviewees stressing the importance that frameworks should reflect national context and priorities. In New Zealand, the two distinct frameworks that were developed followed slightly different paths – one being initially driven more by international practice, whilst the other strove harder to be country-specific. Interestingly, in this case, the framework that had initially been shaped more by international practice was eventually revised to also be more country-specific.

4.4 Factors in the *development* of the framework

4.4.1 Supportive factors

Based on the interviews, the following factors were identified as facilitating the creation of a framework:

- **Political commitment** is essential for giving an official mandate, a direction, legitimacy and resources into the development of a wellbeing framework. A strong example comes from the Netherlands, where political engagement from a Parliamentary Committee investigating the measurement of wellbeing led to a request for Statistics Netherlands to develop the Monitor of Wellbeing to inform parliamentary debates about the effectiveness of governance policy (Horlings & Smits, 2019). In France, the recommendations from the influential Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission, were born from a proposal from then French President Nicolas Sarkozy**.** This momentum led to the adoption of the Law 2015-411 of April 13, 2015, which calls for the inclusion of new indicators of wealth, the IRN, in the assessment and formulation of public policies (INSEE, 2025).
- **Individual leadership** within the NSI can also be a key component for initiating the process. In two countries with well-developed frameworks, individual leadership within the NSI was mentioned as a key to their development.
- **Role of independent public bodies**. A few NSI staff noted the autonomy that the NSI has in defining its work plan as an enabler. Such autonomy can create a space for experimentation, driving the development of innovative methods that can later be integrated into official statistics. In other cases, we noted the importance of *other* independent public institutions in developing the frameworks, namely the Institute for Health and Welfare in Finland and the National Economic and Social Council in Ireland. Often having an advisory or consultation role to the government, these bodies have relative independence from the government and flexibility to experiment. They can offer a great understanding of policy issues and the outcomes considered in wellbeing frameworks.
- **Input from civil society/academics.** In several countries, input from non-government actors was seen as important to establishing frameworks. In France, the NSI's programme is defined by a Council which includes civil society actors. This Council was partly responsible for the Beyond GDP initiatives, including the establishment of the law requiring data collection. In Italy, two interviewees noted that collaboration with social partners and academics has been crucial in creating traction for the *Benessere Equo i Sostenibile* (BES). Academics bring the conceptual and methodological basis and rationale for measuring well-being, and ensure that frameworks are grounded in the latest evidence from the scientific field. The

participation of civil society organisations can mobilise demand for such a framework, provide them with greater legitimacy and connect them with real-world concerns.

- **EU funding.** Under the Single Market Programme, Eurostat provides financial support to national statistical authorities to improve the collection and dissemination of European statistics (European Commission, n.d.). Two countries mentioned using these grants and the resources allocated under the EU Recovery and Resilience programme to develop or improve their monitoring frameworks.
- **International guidelines.** Although no interviewee explicitly stated that international guidelines were a key factor in allowing the creation of a framework, as noted in section 4.2, international guidelines were often used to inform approaches. One interviewee in a country with no existing framework suggested that their country would only be likely to develop a framework if clear guidelines emerged from important international organisations (e.g. the UN or the European Commission).

4.4.2 Hindering factors

From interviews with NSIs that do not currently have a wellbeing or Beyond GDP frameworks, but also from the challenges experienced by other NSIs and international organisations in developing such frameworks, we identified practical and institutional factors that can hinder the establishment of those initiatives.

- **Costs**. Unsurprisingly, resources were mentioned as a hindering factor in developing a framework. Even if countries rely on existing data and do not generate new data collection, there are still costs associated with human resources, coordination costs, capacity building, IT capacities, communication and sometimes public consultations.
- **Priorities**. The absence of wellbeing frameworks was also attributed to the lack of political interest, even in cases in which the wellbeing data for developing the framework already existed (and therefore the cost for producing such a framework would be relatively small). In turn, this was sometimes connected with insufficient connection to a specific political institution or ministry that could take leadership in its development as part of their mandate. In one case, the value of having a clear set of wellbeing indicators, coming from multiple sources, that are reported regularly, was not identified.
- **Focus on core statistics**. Related to this was the message that NSIs (particularly if they face resource constraints) focus on collecting what they *need* to collect, as per regulation or government demands. The European Statistical System (ESSys) was attributed an important role here, if they were to mandate the production of a wellbeing / Beyond GDP framework, this would have a very important impact.

Similarly, it was mentioned in the context of having to choose between maintaining an SDG framework or a wellbeing framework that the SDG framework was preferred to report the Voluntary National Review to the United Nations.

- **Complexity**. For some actors, Beyond GDP frameworks were seen as too complicated. This is a point to which we will return later.

4.5 Implications of frameworks on data collection

New wellbeing, sustainability or Beyond GDP frameworks have the potential to lead to NSIs collecting new data. For example, the Wellbeing framework developed by the UK NSI in 2011 led to the inclusion of four subjective wellbeing questions in the large-scale Annual Population Survey. We sought to explore whether this phenomenon occurred in other contexts.

Generally, we found that the **development of national frameworks did not lead to new data collection** – we heard this from at least five countries. Rather, it appears that frameworks were often developed with existing data capacities in mind. When frameworks did require indicators that were not yet being collected, this rarely led to new data collection. (sometimes because of a change of priorities). When it happened, this was funded by a Eurostat grant. In other words, based on what we heard, national frameworks alone seem to be insufficient in leading to the use of national funds to collect more data.

By contrast, **the OECD framework** has led to new indicators being collected by NSIs across countries. This can suggest that international frameworks with established credibility and incentives may be more effective in stimulating the collection of additional data.

4.6 Factors relating to the *maintenance* of frameworks

In section 4.4, we reviewed factors that lead to (or hinder) the creation of a framework. We also sought to understand what ensures/prevents their continuation, particularly in the context of budget cuts and changing political priorities. Some of the factors discussed here overlap with the factors mentioned in section 4.4.

4.6.1 Supportive factors

- **Political neutrality**. Perceived political neutrality was the most commonly cited positive factor. The institutional set-up of the framework and political discussions around it probably play a role in determining this perceived neutrality. In contrast, frameworks housed in independent bodies such as NSIs are more resistant to government change.

- **NSI autonomy**. Related to that is the autonomy of the NSI. Interviewees stressed the importance of NSIs having some control over their own work plans.
- **Legal framework**. In Italy, BES is enshrined in law. However, this is not a guarantee. In France, the IRN also have a legal framework, but they appear to play a more limited role at present.
- **Relevance**. NSIs have sought to ensure that the framework is relevant for policymakers and civil society. Multidimensionality ensures resonance across political divides, whilst the creation of sub-national (regional or municipal) data ensures interest at those levels even when national level interest might decline. One interviewee highlighted how their framework links clearly to municipal functions, enhancing the municipal level interest. Additionally, we heard that there is a political interest in using the framework as an attractive way to communicate with the public.
- **Flexibility of the framing**. In New Zealand, there is discussion about changing the framing of the wellbeing framework to adapt to changing government priorities and language.
- **Quality**. Transparency, methodological rigour, independence and scientific credibility were all mentioned as factors sustaining measurement frameworks.
- **European regulation**. The European Statistical System regulation created a shared legal basis for producing statistics in the EU, enhances coordination and harmonisation and supports capacity building in the EU. Our New Zealand interviewees noted that European Commission laws help to stabilise developments in Europe, in a way that countries outside of Europe do not have.

4.6.2 Hindering factors

- Just as political neutrality was the most cited way to maintain a framework, **political change** was seen as the biggest problem for existing frameworks, with new governments having new priorities. It was suggested that **politicised** frameworks, i.e. those that had a closer connection to previous governments, were more vulnerable than those that are seen as neutral and technical.
- Another factor appears to be the **ascendance of the SDGs**. Austria was an early adopter of the OECD wellbeing framework in 2012. However, as the SDG agenda rose in global importance, and indeed became mandatory, whilst the Beyond GDP agenda appeared to decline, the resource-constrained NSI chose to prioritise SDGs over wellbeing.
- **Limited use**. A couple of interviews suggested that limited use of frameworks leaves them vulnerable to being dropped. This highlights the importance of ensuring that

measurement efforts are developed in tandem with policy tools and governance frameworks for using them.

4.7 Harmonisation and inter-country learning

One of the key questions we set out to answer was the degree of interest in harmonisation and inter-country learning. The general impression was as follows: country interviewees considered **harmonisation of indicators important, but harmonisation of frameworks less so**. As one interviewee put it, "We should seek to standardise the coats, but not the coat rack."

Indeed, this was also the case for our interviewee from the OECD. From their perspective, the purpose of developing a wellbeing framework was not to stipulate exactly *how* member countries should structure their frameworks, but rather to encourage the development of frameworks in general, and to provide a starting point for NSIs that are starting from scratch.

Having said that, one of the interviewees from an NSI with no framework did say that they looked to international organisations to define a framework that they could use.

When it comes to the specific indicators, there was a consensus that harmonisation was, all things being equal, a positive thing, but there were a couple of reservations which NSIs noted: **breaking time series and reflecting national perspectives**. Harmonisation in terms of the **demographic breakdowns** required (by Eurostat) was mentioned by one interviewee as undesirable, given that different countries have different demographic realities and relevant minorities.

Several interviewees considered that, within the EU, there is already a strong degree of harmonisation of indicators, particularly those that are regulated by the ESSys (e.g. EU-SILC). We note that there was, in one interview, **a lack of awareness of the importance of harmonising survey methods**. As highlighted by the OECD Guidelines on Subjective Wellbeing measurement, survey design, mode, and question order are all important to the harmonisation of data collection.

When it came to specific indicators or topics, where interviewees sought harmonisation, the following areas were mentioned: **defining planetary boundaries**, **synthesis indicators based on national accounts**, and **social relations and loneliness** (section 4.10 will list in more detail the 'data dreams' of interviewees, which could inform a broader research agenda).

Interestingly, it was also evident that not all NSIs see harmonisation as a unidirectional process, i.e. they also see value in **demonstrating the value of their methods to an international audience,** such that they might be used by other countries.

We asked interviewees which actors they look to for harmonisation. Three primary actors were mentioned: Eurostat (and the ESSys), the OECD and the UN.

- **Eurostat** was seen as a key actor in Europe, both in defining the mandate for data collection and in determining how data should be collected, considering existing data regulations and funding opportunities. Eurostat's leadership was regarded as essential; as one interviewee noted, if Eurostat were to establish regulations for a wellbeing framework, it would ensure that their country implemented one.
- **The OECD** was mentioned by several interviewees as well, with reference made to the How's Life reports, the Guidelines on Subjective Wellbeing, the Working Party on Wellbeing and their work on recommendations for loneliness.
- **The UN** was also mentioned. One interviewee referred to the HLEG recommendations, as a potential key factor in helping define a small set of headline indicators. However, it was surprising that no other interviewees referred to the HLEG. This may reflect a broader challenge: the need to improve alignment and communication across governance levels.

Generally speaking, the point was made that authoritative international actors like those mentioned above can help convince survey managers within NSIs to collect specific data, and can therefore be seen as allies by those within NSIs developing frameworks that need be populated.

4.8. Barriers to better quality data

As we have noted, most of the countries we interviewed do have wellbeing or Beyond GDP frameworks. However, there is always potential for *better* or *more* data, which we explored with interviewees. In particular, we tried to identify what prevents them from collecting a) more granular data, b) higher frequency and c) new variables. Three barriers were mentioned:

- **Resources**. Surveys in particular were identified as costly, particularly detailed surveys such as time use surveys or household expenditure surveys. This restricts the possibility of an increased frequency. It also reduces the likelihood of conducting surveys at all in those countries where much data can be gathered from registers.

Surprisingly, sometimes resource constraints also held back more modest ambitions. For example, one country reported having data required for regional breakdowns, but not having the resources to invest in *presenting* those breakdowns.

- **Quality of survey data.** One interviewee was concerned about the decline in response rates of surveys. Of particular concern, is that certain demographics don't respond (e.g. young men) making it harder to collect representative samples.
- **Regulation.** In France, regulations were mentioned as a barrier. Data from third parties (e.g. private banks or Google) can only be used once a law is passed, which means the data provider cannot unilaterally hold back the data. This adds an extra hurdle to the process of integrating third-party data, although the interviewee believed this is the right approach, as it ensures stability and consistency once the legal steps have been taken.

4.9 Existing areas of innovation

We took the opportunity to map out the landscape of innovation across NSIs, with a view to sharing ideas and possibly developing coordination strategies. The following areas of ongoing innovation were mentioned:

4.9.1 Specific topics/indicators

- Measures of **social relations** (e.g. **loneliness**). The OECD is currently fundraising to develop guidelines for measuring these topics
- Guidelines on measuring **subjective wellbeing** (OECD released new guidelines in October 2025)
- Adjusted national accounts, including adjustments for inequality, climate change, health and social capital (France)
- Access to green space (OECD)
- Evolution of inequality (Italy)

4.9.2 Data collection

A key development in NSIs at the moment is the move from traditional censuses every 10 years or so to **register-based censuses supplemented with rolling large-scale surveys**. These large-scale surveys present the opportunity to collect key variables at a vast scale. For example, in Italy, the survey will cover 1 million households annually. Italy is planning to include questions on subjective wellbeing, safety and social relationships in this survey. Meanwhile, in Finland predictive modelling is going to be used to link survey and register data.

In New Zealand, there is also set to be a large-scale survey to inform the census, and there is going to be a public consultation to identify topics to include. There is hope that this would include subjective wellbeing, as in Italy.

Another area of innovation in data collection is the greater integration of administrative data and third-party data. Some of the innovative ideas we heard include:

- Using data from **shopping receipts** to inform household expenditure statistics (France)
- **Scraping social media** for data (OECD)
- **Citizen initiatives,** for example, to measure litter in public places (New Zealand)
- **Geo-information** on sealed surface coverage (Austria)
- Big data to inform **public transport coverage** data (Austria)
- Using **programming to extract new variables** from existing databases (Netherlands)

4.9.3 Other innovations

Other areas of innovation mentioned included:

- **Machine learning for nowcasting** (OECD)
- Innovations in curation of **online data presentation**
- **Municipal level versions** of frameworks (Italy)
- Use of **Small Domain Estimates** which can be compared with data for higher levels of geography (Netherlands)

4.10 Data dreams

As well as asking interviewees what innovations they are already developing, we also asked them what innovations, or new data, they would wish for in the future. The following specific indicators and topics were mentioned:

- Better definition of **planetary boundaries** and notably **social boundaries** – i.e. at what levels of inequality do societies begin to malfunction. Also, how to attribute responsibility for environmental impacts (e.g. to consumers vs. producers vs. shareholders?)
- A multi-region input-output model-based version of **domestic material consumption** in raw material equivalent. But this would require much better data from third countries such as the USA and China, which is not currently available.
- Data on **Social relations and loneliness**.
- Data on **food safety**.

- **"Instantial" capital** – which refers to the ability for citizens to deal with public services and bureaucracies.
- More **real-time ecological** data.
- Data on **commuting** from Google Maps.
- Better data on **child abuse**.
- Better accounting for **unpaid work**
- Monitoring the meaningfulness or social contribution of paid work

As well as these specific topics, interviewees mentioned the following areas where they are looking for help:

- How to **communicate big data**
- How to deal with **complex data infrastructure**.

4.11 Policy use to date

After discussing data and frameworks, we then asked interviewees to talk about the use of their frameworks to date in policy.

4.11.1 Limited use

The overarching message, which is consistent with other reviews of the impacts of wellbeing and Beyond GDP frameworks (Whitby et al., 2014; Mason & Büchs, 2023), is that **policy use is still relatively minor**.

Reasons for the lack of policy use included:

- **Lack of political interest**/other political priorities
- **No direct link to particular departments**, multi-dimensionality of the framework. Departments tend to focus on existing department-specific indicators. There is a **lack of mechanisms to ensure that interlinkages are considered**.
- Policymakers **prefer input or output indicators** to outcome indicators (presumably because they feel more competent about influencing them)
- **Lack of legitimacy** (mentioned in only one case)
- **Need for comparisons** with other countries (mentioned in only one case)
- Policy priorities tend to be **short-term.**
- **Lack of technical capacity** amongst potential users, unfamiliarity with the language, and difficulties in interpretation.

Interestingly, a couple of interviewees within NSIs felt unable to answer the question regarding policy use, stating that ensuring policy use is *not* the responsibility of the NSI.

4.11.2 Best practice examples

Having said that, several examples of use were mentioned.

Most commonly, wellbeing and other frameworks were being used for **monitoring or reporting** purposes. Regular reports on wellbeing and SDGs were mentioned by several interviewees.

However, there was some scepticism as to whether simply reporting on frameworks can lead to actual policy change with "official policies being put in place to increase wellbeing" as a result. This suggests the importance of embedding the use of monitoring mechanisms into governance frameworks to be able to drive institutional and policy change.

Still, we note several positive examples of impact;

- In Italy, the integration of the BES in **regional sustainable development and cohesion plans,** and municipalities using the BES data to design **urban and social policies tailored to local needs**
- In Ireland, departments and government agencies are **obliged to show how wellbeing is considered in policy** and has implemented **budget tagging** (whereby different budget lines are assigned to different wellbeing outcomes).
- In New Zealand, **wellbeing was considered in the crisis response** to the Christchurch earthquake.
- Two interviewees also talked about the more **intangible impact** of frameworks in terms of shifting public narrative and the political conversation. For example, in one case, it led to a discussion of distributive justice, and gave leeway to engage with more 'contemporary' ideas. It was suggested that, in New Zealand, the past government's **focus on mental health and child poverty** can be partly credited to the wellbeing framework.
- Meanwhile, in Italy, BES has encouraged a broader understanding of progress that goes beyond GDP. It has influenced academic research, civil society initiatives, and parliamentary debates, promoting a culture of accountability and long-term thinking within Italian policymaking.

This suggests the potential for an important and positive impact of wellbeing frameworks on policy and politics.

For some of the newer initiatives considered during the interviews, there were some tentative positive signs mentioned. For example, although the augmented national accounts in France were first published only a year ago and are still in development, there has been considerable political and media attention. Parliamentarians were also reported to be interested in the "wellbeing elsewhere" concept in the Dutch framework. In both cases, the **novelty** of these approaches drives interest.

4.12 Ideal policy use

Although some challenges remain in translating law into policy, the Italian Budget Law was cited in several countries as a best practice and inspiration to have similar laws adopted in their country. For example, in Ireland, where departments are required to qualitatively assess impacts of policies on wellbeing, there was a desire expressed for quantitative assessment as well.

Meanwhile, in Italy, the wish was for BES to be embedded in the entire policy cycle, from agenda-setting to implementation and evaluation. It would ideally be used to define priorities, allocate resources, and assess trade-offs. There was also a recognition of the communication value of the framework, and a desire that it be used for more communication with citizens.

4.13 The complexity question

In the initial interviews we conducted, the issue of framework complexity emerged without being prompted. For example, we heard how the Finnish Wellbeing Economy Dashboard was intentionally created to be small to increase its policy usefulness. As a result, we chose to integrate questions around complexity in subsequent interviews.

The issue of Beyond GDP / wellbeing complexity was seen to be important in five of the nine countries we spoke with. Broadly speaking, there was recognition that large dashboards are hard to communicate or to understand. As one interviewee noted, past a certain number of indicators, it is impossible for a human being to fully integrate and synthesise the information. In Italy, the 150 indicators that form BES were seen as challenging to communicate, for example, with journalists. As noted, the Wellbeing Economy Dashboard in Finland has 15 indicators – the original intention had been to keep it down to 10.

This complexity is also noted from outside the Beyond GDP agenda, with one interviewee from an NSI which doesn't have a framework noting that GDP will also be favoured because it is simple.

Time will tell whether Finland's small dashboard approach will address the complexity issue. Two other promising solutions were highlighted in interviews.

Firstly, the augmented national accounts approach in France has been developed with a conscious recognition of the failure of the INR dashboard to capture attention. The augmented national accounts approach sets out to create a small set of adjusted economic indicators such as the "Real Feel GDP" based on adjusting for economic inequality.

Secondly, in Austria, we heard about the application of traffic light systems to simplify communication of large dashboards. Quantifying the number of indicators improving or deteriorating can provide a simple answer to the question of "how are we doing"?

Meanwhile, in Italy, the NSI is waiting to see what emerges from the UN HLEG, which has tentatively proposed seven domains of wellbeing to be measured, and could potentially lead to a simplified and harmonised, dashboard.

5. Recommendations

The purpose of this discussion paper is to inform the roundtable on 20th November 2025, with the intention of developing recommendations for NSIs, other national public bodies and other non-national actors. Based on our analyses of the interviews, we propose the following recommendations as a starting point for discussion:

5.1 Recommendations for NSIs and other national public bodies

When starting out:

- **International guidance and models** are an essential starting point, allowing an identification of the possibilities and mapping out the key aspects of wellbeing or Beyond GDP that should be considered. As Kubiszewski et al. (2025) & Zeidler (2022) show, there is a large degree of overlap between most frameworks that have been developed.
- Nevertheless, the **national context** is critical. Even for frameworks that come from international models, the success of frameworks is also dependent on their use *within* a country. Whilst the ability to make international comparisons is very useful, so is the ability to inform policy nationally. On the first point, being able to compare internationally, although supported by a consistency in frameworks, especially requires a consistency in the details of data collection of *specific indicators:* to have

those indicators being collected in multiple countries, and that the data collection is harmonised.
- **Engage with civil society and citizens** more broadly to inform framework development.

Building a strong institutional set up:
- **Ensure a whole-of-governance approach** which straddles different types of public bodies, ideally with coordination across the NSI, policy-oriented independent public bodies and departments within government. Whilst the latter is needed to ensure policy engagement and use, the former two can ensure perceived neutrality and resilience to government change. Many successful approaches have involved public bodies or government departments with cross-cutting or overarching responsibilities (for example the Office of the Taoiseach or NESC in Ireland or the Treasury in New Zealand) that are able to develop policy mechanisms that are relevant to multiple policy areas.
- A legal framework is important, but not sufficient to ensure use.

Maintaining frameworks, particularly in the face of political change:
- Ensure **perceived neutrality** of the data, maintaining separation between data collection and policy.
- Maintain **collaborative relationships,** both with civil society and academics. Stress the participatory approach to defining the framework.
- **Focus on communication** – this ensures public visibility of the framework but can also make it appealing to different governments. Showcase the common goals and connections to the lived realities of citizens.

Recommendations from policy best practices
- Link the framework to the budget, such as with the Budget Law in Italy, whereby the annual budget must be assessed in terms of its impact on key wellbeing outcomes, or budget tagging in Ireland.
- Develop local or regional level frameworks through geographical disaggregation of indicators, which can enable new and meaningful policy applications. (Italy)
- Develop frameworks and requirements to qualitatively consider wellbeing outcomes in policy (Ireland)

- Acknowledge that impact early on may be more intangible, shifting conversations rather than necessarily leading to specific policies. Consider evaluative methods to monitor this kind of intangible impact (Ireland, New Zealand, Italy).

5.2 Recommendations for non-national actors

The following recommendations are more relevant for actors working at the international level (e.g. the OECD and Eurostat), academics and research institutes.

On harmonisation:

- The priority for harmonisation efforts should be in terms of the ways in which specific indicators relevant for wellbeing and Beyond GDP frameworks are collected and produced across countries. The OECD's Guidelines on Subjective Wellbeing represent a good example of how guidelines on indicators can influence NSIs and lead to greater harmonisation and comparability. The UN's System of National Accounts is a model for how this can occur in other areas.
- International wellbeing frameworks such as that of the OECD have been very influential in shaping country-level initiatives, by serving as a starting point or a sense-check. In particular, some countries (perhaps those where the agenda is particularly underdeveloped), may find an off-the-shelf framework useful, particularly one developed by an authoritative organisation. Nevertheless, non-national actors must continue working together with NSIs – through networks and expert groups to understand how countries can move towards harmonisation while acknowledging, each country's own priorities and specificities. Notably, Eurostat has a key role to play at the EU level to continue coordinating and funding the development and harmonisation of innovative European statistics.

Specific areas where innovation and harmonisation are most needed:

- Social relations and loneliness
- Use of social media / big data
- Defining planetary boundaries
- Augmented national accounts
- Support on how to connect register-based censuses with rolling surveys

On complexity:

- Almost all interviewees acknowledged that wellbeing / Beyond GDP frameworks are often too complex.

- No single solution to this problem emerged from our discussions. Non-national actors can play a role in exploring different solutions from the development of single indicators to the creation of indices, to the feasibility of small sets of headline indicators. Research building on communication science and psychology could be conducted to understand what level of complexity is acceptable for different audiences, including policymakers, politicians and citizens.

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