Wellbeing and social cohesion

Analysis of data from the European Social Survey explores how policy can support high levels of wellbeing for all. The research shows marked differences in wellbeing and the degree of trust in government between different regions, age and socioeconomic groups.

**Policy recommendations**

- Policymakers need to engage more with marginalised groups – such as ethnic minorities and those with lower levels of education – when formulating policy, for instance by including them in consultations.
- Effective policies addressing the low-income bottom 20 per cent of the population have the most potential for high-impact population gains, and should be a priority.
- Decisions about government spending and economic liberalisation should particularly take into account how this will affect unemployment, which is a main driver for inequalities in wellbeing.
- A programme similar to the ONS ‘What Matters’ exercise (preceding the Measuring National Wellbeing programme) could help to identify the factors that are important for a good society, using public consultation in the process.
- Policy interventions for wellbeing usually focus on the young or the old, ignoring those in middle age. There is a need for initiatives considering this overlooked age group.

**About the research**

There is growing international recognition of the value of including wellbeing as a policy objective, complementing the emphasis on economic prosperity. Organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the UK’s Office for National Statistics (ONS) acknowledge the importance of measuring wellbeing for developing effective and sustainable policy.

The UK has been one of the pioneers in the move towards measuring wellbeing. In 2011, the ONS launched its Measuring National Wellbeing Programme, with support from the Prime Minister. However, while there have been several examples of wellbeing evidence being used in local policymaking, the influence on national policy has remained limited.

Drawing on evidence from 19 European countries, a recent report explores how policy can support and encourage high levels of wellbeing, using data from the European Social Survey. The analysis goes beyond using the traditional (and limited) measure of personal wellbeing, expanding the analysis to four topics: comprehensive psychological wellbeing, inequalities in wellbeing, participation in behaviours to improve wellbeing, and perceived quality of society.

The report shows marked differences in wellbeing and the degree of trust in government between different regions, age and socioeconomic groups.
Key findings

- Examining several, specific aspects of wellbeing – rather than limiting to a single measure such as happiness or life satisfaction – provides more detailed insights into a society’s level of wellbeing.

- A more comprehensive measure of wellbeing shows that it has generally increased from 2006 to 2012.

- Economic factors drive inequalities in wellbeing – in particular unemployment rates.

- Good governance (such as low levels of corruption and high levels of transparency) may be one of the best ways of reducing wellbeing inequality.

- People of working age in the UK connected socially less than their European peers, suggesting this group may need more policy attention regarding wellbeing.

- The more marginalised groups in society – such as those who claim membership of a discriminated group, and those with lower education – have a more negative view of the functioning of societal institutions.

- There are marked regional inequalities in the UK when it comes to how people perceive quality of society. London and the South East have high levels of economic and governmental satisfaction compared to other regions, particularly the Midlands.

Policymakers need to engage more with marginalised groups - such as ethnic minorities and those with lower levels of education - when formulating policy, for instance by including them in consultations.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The report Looking through the wellbeing kaleidoscope: Results from the European Social Survey is the final output of the ESRC research project Making Wellbeing Count for Policy, combining contributions from City University London, the New Economics Foundation and the University of Cambridge to explore new ways of understanding and measuring wellbeing.

Web: www.wellbeingcounts.org/?p=155

FURTHER INFORMATION

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