Wellbeing Policy Roundtable Notes

Participants:

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Improving Communications with Policymakers

Opportunity

- New wellbeing frameworks, indices, and measures, at the local and national level aim to make sure that the needs of people and the planet are given a layered voice in policymaking.
- Investment in good measurements is critical but not always enough to change the policy conversations.
- There are lots of perspectives on communicating with policymaker, highlighting the need for standardization.
    - Debates on whether one number is enough: if it simplifies communications, it is also challenging to capture the complex reality of what it means to live well in one single number.
    - Pervasive influence of GDP which influences everything, beyond just treasuries and central agencies.
- Policymakers are a diverse group of people: Politicians, governments, lobby groups, analysts – they bring in a variety of viewpoints. However, they all have limited availability and attention span.
- COVID-19 is another uniting factor. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of collaboration between governments. It has also shown that in times of crisis governments can go beyond GDP and other economic criteria to make decisions.
- How to build the space for wellbeing? Or can wellbeing be the uniting principle that brings together policy objectives in a coherent manner?

Examples

- Countries around the world show different levels of openness when it comes to adopting a wellbeing approach.
- Initiative in England: The GDWe is an index, with all the potential pitfalls of a single number, but that reminds policymakers that the economy should be in the service of wellbeing, rather than wellbeing in service of the economy
    - GDWe shows the disconnect between the rise in GDP and the lower rise of GDWe. We may be able to show that while GDP suffered during the Covid-19 emergency period, there was a far longer tail of negative outcomes for people on the GDWe front.
- Example of the city of Santa Monica that spearheaded the creation of a wellbeing index as a benchmarking tool.

Crafting the Wellbeing Narrative

- Few governments were writing their wellbeing policies – they tried to implement strategies and policies they didn't quite understand and own and weren't aligned with their interests. There is

a need to develop tools and case studies to help governments develop strategies and policies that are aligned with their goals and their "why".

- Critical to bring wellbeing into the national narrative: In the U.S. the convergence of the pandemic and endemic racism awareness has helped force a wakeup call.
- We need to have a national and hyperlocal dialogue going on at the same time.
  - U.S. national context: if there's going to be national wellbeing data in the US it has to be done in partnership with the CDC.
  - *Transform public health data,* RBJ Foundation, entails a strong set of recommendations from local and national participants to better capture local dynamics of wellbeing.
  - Some movement happening in local communities to include wellbeing into the narrative of health.
- The term "Wellbeing" isn't as cutting edge or as able to make the kind of change as a social justice discourse. It is a discourse battle to show that these positive health measures and wellbeing metrics can set a higher bar than tracking disease outcomes and some of the conventional ways we try to build health equity.

Strategies

- Recognize that the "how" matters as much as the "what."
- Engage policymakers in a **visioning exercise** – imagine what they would like for their communities to look like in 10 years and articulate what wellbeing mean to them. Unlock the ability to move from short-term solutions to a longer-term, holistic vision of wellbeing.
  - Importance of **multistakeholder and participatory processes**: we don't want to tinker with the system but transform our values. We need all hands-on deck for this transformative vision so that it is understood by as many people as possible.
- **Promote empowerment and connections**: policymakers can be trapped in the current system, preventing them from driving transformative change. It can be helpful to show them that they can be an example of best practice and innovation and that they are connected to a broader movement, for example, through a wellbeing policymaker forum – it is important to create a safe space for governments to speak about challenges and share innovative practices.
- Go beyond government to influence policy. Measures of wellbeing aren't enough to influence policy. Policy is influenced by data, but also by other politicians, media, special interest groups, unions, professional associations, civil society lobbyists, businesses, the community, etc.
- How are the measures communicated and to whom? It varies based on how converted the audience is, how sophisticated it is and how they get their information.
- Identify different spokespeople for different audiences, different geographies.
- Bridge the trust gap between policy makers and statisticians: Without understanding each other, statisticians create indicators that are useless to policy makers.
- The budgeting process is incredibly important and knowing how to insert wellbeing language and data as part of this process is a good top-down strategy

- Find new, creative ways to pair data and storytelling
- Pay attention to the wellbeing of the workforce
- Understand how this aligns with systemic racism, the design of our systems, and how those systems have destroyed communities
- Align research and practice

Minding the Wellbeing Data Gap

- We don't really know what wellbeing means and therefore how to measure it: There's the objective definitions of well-being as the universal needs or capabilities approach, and then the subjective approach of what a good life means to a person from their own perspective, which has to match their own personal preferences, values and ideals.
- Limitation: A measure of wellbeing assumes that people can report this accurately in a few moments in consistent manner, but that's not the case:
  - We know that the retest correlation is about .6, so scores change based on random factors
  - People tend to over-report their happiness especially in face-to-face interviews
- The data revolution has enabled a new level of scientific rigor and policy impact around wellbeing. E.g., US Daily poll, Gallup world poll, GSUB, EURO barometer, world happiness report.
- To operationalize wellbeing with data is to be reductionist: Putting a number on something as complex as wellbeing will displease some people, regardless of whether it's a number or a whole dashboard or an index with a weighted average. Agreeing on definitions on anything is difficult, and wellbeing is probably one of the most difficult concepts to capture. But it's still worthwhile because without it there won't be any practical impact on the economic or policy front.
- Need to move away from a binary approach: In the past people have dismissed subjective wellbeing data because of methodological issues or have used the data without acknowledging its complexities (interpersonal vs intrapersonal comparisons, when and how the data is to be used)
- Need to make the metric attractive, understandable, and useful for all parties
- The issue is the volume of indicators: We need to get to a coherent measurement model, where all this information is integrated into a single number that won't be perfect but comes close to representing how well life is in terms of their own subjective ideals
- The data Gallup has on life satisfaction, optimism, worry and stress show consistent connections to outcomes, e.g., the match between lack of hope and despair is incredibly robust across millions of people.

- The growth in subjective wellbeing inequality is growing: the difference between the top and bottom quintile has been increasing over the years and is at the highest level since they started measuring (source: Gallup World Poll).
- What we need
  - A good monitoring system for wellbeing based on theory so it's more neutral and transparent than politically driven
  - Accountability
  - Budget: measuring wellbeing is hard and costly
  - Improve social cost-benefit analysis – so less focused on economic and more focused on climate and biodiversity issues

Opportunities

- Big data: We need to understand how to leverage natural machine learning and language processing more effectively.
- Cultural nuances of wellbeing in the stories, the songs, the art that we share with each other, and which can help depict an incredibly rich picture of wellbeing.
- Gallup's questions on wellbeing as part of the World Poll follow the tripartite model of subjective wellbeing: Positive affect, negative affect, and life evaluation. It also includes measures like physical, social, and financial wellbeing areas and is looking to expand outside of the framework to include non-western constructs e.g., balance and harmony, communal wellbeing. Considering additional constructs that might be important like eudemonic wellbeing, relationship to government, mastery, resilience, satisfaction with leisure.
- The US is the only country with "pursuit of happiness" in the constitution, but it doesn't have a nationally available public wellbeing metric being collected
- Need a framework to understand the conditions in which we can reliably use measures like life satisfaction.
- The biggest data gap: Currently there is no overarching measure of how people think their lives are going in the U.S. no way for academics or policy members who want to evaluate how wellbeing is going in the US to do so
  - CDC used to have life satisfaction measure in their early 2010s – but that's it and there's nothing at the moment so there's

Conclusion

- Meeting policy makers where they are
  - Know your audience
  - There are windows of opportunity currently because of the maturity of the data
  - There's a readiness of the environment but we must be mindful of what the policy makers priorities and mindset are and meet them where they are
- It's a multi-stakeholder process: Policy makers need to know that they're not alone

- Climate change, racial and ethnic injustice, COVID – important to understand how wellbeing connects to and helps solve for a lot of these issues. Wellbeing can be a tool for delivering better policies for people.
- Types of evidence matter
    - Evidence takes many forms, it's not just data in the sense of quantitative numbers
    - Important role of storytelling and narratives
    - You have to be able to shape your evidence in whatever form meets the consumer where they're at
    - Individual stories can be powerful, but they don't always connect well with policy makers who are trying to shape policies for a whole country
- Data opens doors: It's a starting point, but it's not the end of it
- Technical points that are important
    - Better measurement of inequalities
    - Understanding the implications of interventions, which is different from just monitoring