# **How do you measure happiness?**

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Paul Dolan and Oliver Harrison argue that the next set of development goals should take well-being into account.

Eight Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)) were established following the [UN Millennium Summit](http://www.un.org/millennium/summit.htm) in 2000. All 193 United Nations [member states](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_member_states) and at least 23 [international organizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_organizations) have agreed to achieve these goals by 2015. Regular progress reports have been published since 2004 and it looks likely that the initiative will be declared a “partial success” by its target year. But what will happen after 2015?

Well, these goals have focused quite explicitly on objective indicators. They are considered, quite rightly, to be important determinants of a good life. But, ultimately, a good life has to be good for the individual. At some point, this requires inquiry into how people feel.

There is significant evidence that happier people are healthier, more productive and more resilient to external shocks (for example, unemployment). In the wake of recent natural and man-made disasters, and unprecedented economic circumstances, there is new interest in strengthening the resilience of individuals, families, companies and nations to such external shocks.

Why do some people cope better with change than others (likewise families, companies or nations)? Because of the close link between happiness and resilience a better understanding of the drivers of happiness is a critical foundation for such work.

Fortunately, there have been enormous advances in the measurement of human well-being over the last couple of decades and we are now confident that we have measures that are reliable and sensitive to important changes. Modern measures of human well-being assess both how we feel on a day-to-day basis and how we think about life in an overall sense. Ideally, we should seek to measure well-being in different ways, as carefully selected approaches are complementary for research and building effective interventions.

In parallel to measuring human well-being, other objective indicators (for example, educational attainment, wealth and access to healthcare) would continue to be strengthened. These measures would be correlated with human well-being as potential drivers (that go part of the way towards explaining well-being measurements). In this way, we would be able to able to determine the “happiness impact” of a range of indicators and thus policy objectives, allowing for a more joined-up approach to decision-making at all levels. Over time, data would be collected to allow us to describe the correlations and causal relationships between objective measurements, human well-being and resilience. This will be a powerful toolkit.

Of course, many will remain concerned with specific objective outcomes in their own right. Of course, the aetiological model and regression analysis could also be reversed to assess the impact of human well-being as a determinant of existing outcomes (which we know it is). Well-being indicators have been shown to be highly predictive of health, productivity and many of the other good things policy-makers and citizens care about. Happiness is also contagious and we should do all we can to spread it.

There is a further compelling reason for including well-being measures in the next round of the MDGs. It appears likely that economic growth will continue to be patchy worldwide, with some countries experiencing relative falls in their ranking of national GDP across the world while others gain. Countries with falling GDP (Greece has been a recent example) might explicitly sharpen their focus on minimizing any negative impact on human well-being during falls in GDP, while countries gaining in GDP might focus on ensuring that it rises (or at least maintained) in the context of greater economic wealth.

We are not alone in thinking that the time has come for the systematic measurement of human well-being. The OECD is making serious attempts to measure well-being, the United Kingdom is already monitoring national happiness and the US is likely to follow suit in due course. A commitment to improving the state of the world (and strengthening resilience) requires a commitment to improving subjective well-being. Join us in our endeavour to measure and value it.

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Image: A man walks past shop-front shutters painted with the word happy in London REUTERS/Andrew Winning