

## **Between Thickness and Comparability: Measurement Drivers in Global Well-Being Metrics**

Global measurements of well-being shape how individuals, institutions, and governments understand and pursue the “good life”. The World Happiness Report (WHR) is one of the most influential: it publishes annual cross-national rankings based on survey data and links “happiness” to social and economic indicators, positioning itself as an empirical basis for public-policy debate (Helliwell et al. 2025). The WHR thus provides a paradigmatic case for examining how complex, value-laden concepts such as well-being are rendered measurable globally. To analyze the WHR’s measurement strategy, this paper draws on Basso and Alexandrova’s (2025) framework of measurement “drivers,” understood as competing epistemic, ethical, pragmatic, and metrological considerations that guide design choices and inevitably force trade-offs. I argue that in the WHR pragmatic and metrological drivers, especially global comparability and communicability, are systematically privileged over epistemic and ethical drivers, yielding a deliberately “thin” operationalization of well-being. This thinness is particularly visible in the WHR’s core measurement of well-being, which relies on a single life-evaluation item asking respondents to place their current life on a 0–10 ladder. Although this measurement is presented as neutral and universally applicable, its normative underdetermination leaves unspecified how people arrive at their evaluations and which aspects of life they take to matter for their well-being. While the WHR supplements its core life-evaluation measure with six explanatory factors, these function as predictors of reported well-being rather than as its constitutive dimensions, and thus do not resolve the underlying normative indeterminacy. This design choice is not without problems. Recent work in the philosophy of social science emphasizes that policy-relevant indicators do not merely inform decisions but also shape how those decisions can be publicly justified and criticized. In this vein, Thoma (2024) argues that, under conditions of persistent value disagreement, policy-relevant indicators should not restrict the public articulation and contestation of competing value commitments. This requirement becomes especially demanding in the case of well-being. As Alexandrova (2017) emphasizes, well-being is a thick, context-dependent concept: different societies endorse different considerations as constitutive of a good life. Since such considerations vary across contexts, global well-being measurement confronts persistent disagreement over which aspects are constitutive of well-being. This generates a conceptual dilemma: adequate measurement requires some degree of thickness in order to avoid arbitrariness and to legitimize policy guidance, yet substantial value-disagreement undermines the abstraction and standardization on which global comparison depends. How thick, then, can global well-being measures be while remaining comparable?

I argue that the WHR resolves this tension by prioritizing pragmatic and metrological drivers over epistemic and ethical ones, effectively standardizing away substantively relevant differences in what well-being is taken to be. However, this solution comes at the cost of normative adequacy. Drawing on Thoma’s (2024) argument that policy-relevant indicators should not foreclose the articulation of plural value commitments, I defend a minimum-thickness requirement for global well-being measurement. The core idea is not to replace thin global

metrics with a comprehensive theory of well-being, but to rebalance competing measurement drivers so as to make at least some normative commitments explicit and contestable. I suggest that this can be pursued by modestly enriching the WHR's life-evaluation measure with a small set of explicitly normative dimensions, and by presenting these dimensions in a pluralistic, dashboard-like format. Together, these moves shift priority toward epistemic and ethical drivers, at the expense of maximal comparability and communicative simplicity, and thereby making explicit the normative trade-offs involved in global well-being measurement.

#### References:

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