

A global project on “Measuring the Progress of Societies: The OECD World Forum on *Statistics, Knowledge, and Policy*”

The issue

Around the world, societies are increasingly concerned with their quality of life. And a consensus is growing around the need to develop a more comprehensive view of progress – one that takes into account social, environmental and economic concerns - rather than focussing mainly on economic indicators like Gross Domestic Product, which while an important measure of economic activity, was not developed to be the sole measure of a nation’s progress. There is also a broad recognition that the development of cross-cutting, high quality, shared, accessible information about how a society is doing is crucial to ensure that decision-making is simultaneously responsive and responsible at all levels (policy makers, businesses, citizens, etc.). But, in an age of unprecedented, and overwhelming, information flows, the common understanding necessary for informed public discourse is often inadequate.

In response, organisations all over the globe are developing comprehensive measures of a society’s progress (or sustainability, wellbeing or quality of life – all terms closely linked to progress). Work is being done at the sub-national, national, and international levels, undertaken by the public, private and citizen sectors, academia, and the media, sometimes in collaboration.

Many challenges are emerging as this work unfolds. Globalisation is making the measurement and assessment of a country’s overall progress an issue requiring statistical and analytical approaches that go beyond national borders. Civil society is increasingly taking the lead in calling for – and even building – sets of progress measures. These challenges are putting pressure on all parts of society to find new ways of working with one another to improve their understanding and assessment of societal progress. This collaboration crosses national borders and spans sectors – governments, for instance, are seeking new ways to collaborate with civil society. But until now there has been no “global” discussion about how to do this.

The OECD World Forum on *Statistics, Knowledge and Policy*

In 2004, the OECD organised the first *Statistics, Knowledge, and Policy* World Forum event in Palermo, Italy. Attended by 540 people from 43 countries and followed by several thousand people via ‘webcast’, participants discussed the key indicator systems and other tools to evaluate progress. The 2004 Forum was the first international discussion about improving the use of statistics for evidence-based decision making and the development of a shared-knowledge about the progress of societies, a cornerstone of any modern democracy.

The OECD has committed to build on the success of this first conference and develop an ongoing project around the theme of statistics, knowledge and policy. In March 2006, a group of eminent people from four continents, spanning the public, private and citizen sectors, met in Bellagio, Italy to discuss the project’s direction. Representatives from the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Central Bank, the international development sector and several national indicator initiatives, were among those who joined leading members of civil society in pledging their support to the OECD’s work.

The project on measuring the progress of societies will be built around a series of bi- or triennial World Forum conferences and will also encompass associated work within and outside of the Organisation. The project will create a global community who come together, both virtually and at meetings, to learn from one another about how best to define, measure and achieve societal progress.

Our Mission

The *Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies* exists to foster the development of sets of key economic, social and environmental indicators and their use to inform and promote evidence-based decision-making, within and across the public, private and citizen sectors. These indicator sets can be at the sub-national, national and international levels. The project is open to all sectors of society, building both on

good practice and innovative research work, organised by the OECD in co-operation with national and international organisations.

Three Key Goals for Achieving Our Mission

1. **Galvanise people and institutions to action.** By bringing together an engaged global community of practitioners we will facilitate the collaboration of diverse groups and the sharing of successes and failures about the development and use of progress indicators, thereby fostering the development of evidence-based public choice and a facts-based civic dialogue.

2. **Improve the effectiveness of indicator work and their use for policy making.** By sharing information about good and bad practices among those working on indicator initiatives, and strengthening international comparisons, we will improve the ways in which indicator sets are developed, disseminated, understood and, most importantly, used. In addition to a technical discussion about indicators, an important element of the project will be to debate the ways in which policies can be improved through the appropriate use of indicators.

3. **Foster a global conversation about what progress actually means.** In order to measure and achieve progress, we need to know what “progress” looks like. There can be no single answer, but by bringing together different communities, cultures and interest groups the project will debate and recognise differing views with the aim of finding common ground, perhaps towards internationally comparable sets of indicators that have global application. Such a discussion will benefit anyone seeking to measure progress at the sub-national or national level, such as the USA’s *Key National Indicators Initiative*, or *Measures of Australia’s Progress*. But it will be important at the global level too: it has the potential to make a key contribution to the international conversation in the run up to 2015 when the international community will need to decide whether a replacement set of Millennium Development Goals and Indicators might be introduced.

What Sets the Project Apart?

The project and the World Forum events will provide opportunities for in-depth discussions about the measurement of progress, as well as some of the most important concerns facing the world, such as migration, health, and economic globalisation. It will stimulate an international dialogue based on available evidence, and at the same time expose gaps in our knowledge. It will be a place to discuss new and widely-applicable indicators to measure progress. And it will pay particular attention to the use of statistics to build indicators, the turning of information into knowledge, and improving the use of evidence to make better choices. Over the long-term, the project will create a virtual community who will work together to improve the way indicators are developed and disseminated.

The project will focus on progress, accountability and problem-solving through the use of trusted facts-based indicator systems that define and measure the progress of societies. Those discussions which focus on policy must be based on evidence.

The project and the World Forum events will seek to be perceived as credible, transparent and inclusive. They will rely on the quality of statistical and analytical work carried out by the OECD and other organisations supporting the Forum. They will bring together a range of stakeholder groups who too often work in isolation from one another. And they will reach beyond the OECD countries to nations at all levels of development, and will go beyond the public sector.

The World Forum events will be true “knowledge experiences”. They will use innovative communication and visual tools to engage people both inside and outside the conferences, so that we all increase our knowledge about the progress of different regions and interact through electronic means.