

# Three suggestions for the Intergovernmental Process on Beyond GDP informed by historical research

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## I. Introduction

This document is intended to contribute to discussions in the context of the Intergovernmental Process on Beyond GDP, drawing on insights from long-term and historical research produced in the field of economic history. In particular, my arguments relate to the report that the High-Level Expert Group (HLEG) has published entitled ‘Counting What Counts: A Compass of Progress for People and Planet’(1). This report outlines an ambitious and necessary conceptual framework with key dimensions of progress and an associated dashboard of 31 indicators that can guide policy making.

The historical perspective I take here is relevant in framing current debates on how to measure societal change, for various reasons. First, the measurement of living standards and overall progress is at the heart of economic history. Therefore, we can rely on a rich body of expertise that has grappled with the same questions as the HLEG and other involved stakeholders. Second, past events can be understood as a ‘laboratory’ to learn from, by drawing on episodes illustrating some of the difficulties associated with measurement of societal change. Lastly, looking at current challenges and anxieties with a historical lens helps avoid the consequences of recency bias and assuming that current measurement problems are unprecedented. Economic history reminds us that we have tools at our disposal to understand how societies, citizens and their environment have navigated continuous structural changes before our current age.

My comments and suggestions below are aimed at complementing the comprehensive and excellent report (henceforth *the report*) by the High-Level Expert Group. In particular, I develop three main points: 1) relevant aspects of health are overlooked in the dashboard; 2) aggregate metrics of progress have led to limited consensus on narratives of long-term progress; 3) the use of historical sources and methods can be employed to validate the indicators included in the dashboard.<sup>1</sup> I elaborate on these in the following.

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<sup>1</sup> These points relate to the guiding questions shared by the HLEG, particularly those under the header ‘II. Conceptual Framework, Measurement and Governance’.

## II. Suggestions for the Intergovernmental Process on Beyond GDP

**Point 1.** *Meaningful aspects of health are overlooked in the dashboard*

**Point 1.1** *Health inequality, a long-standing source of societal unfairness, is missing in the 'Equity & Inclusion' dimension*

The indicators on 'Equity & Inclusion' (page 17 of *the report*) do not include a direct reference to the health domain. This is a missed opportunity since health inequalities have long been a source of societal unfairness. Differentials in mortality have been identified through history in terms of income, class, race and location (2-4), among others, to a similar extent and even greater to differential health outcomes currently (5). Besides income, historical research has shown that access to public goods and useful knowledge had a changing impact on health. For example, the unequal spread of knowledge stemming from the germ theory of disease initially lowered mortality among the families of physicians and individuals in closer contact with healthcare institutions, who became more aware of effective hygienic practices (6, 7). This widened mortality gaps that later declined when the expansion of health technologies reached large swathes of the population, such as sanitary infrastructures or penicillin (8, 9). Income inequality was also related to health outcomes, though in some cases these were actually driven by discriminatory beliefs about race, as the case of the Black-White mortality gap in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows (4).

The HLEG could consider, akin to the poverty index already included in the dashboard, adding an indicator that identifies how and when a minimum acceptable health threshold is not met. An example could be the presence of 'avoidable' diseases in the population, such as diarrhoeal conditions and similar communicable diseases that can be largely treated. Alternatively, one could add direct measures of health inequality, but in keeping with *the report's* spirit of ensuring feasibility by relying on existing data collection efforts, the latter approach may be more challenging and costly.

**Point 1.2.** *Children's health has been a key source of long-run well-being and it is missing in the health domain*

The current dashboard indicators on health refer to healthy life expectancy and infant health, as measured by the percentage of low-birthweight newborns (page 16 of *the report*). While relevant, these metrics miss the experience of children during critical phases of development when they are most vulnerable. One way to improve on this is by incorporating growth stunting rates. Historical research has shown that past children were probably stunted for centuries due to strenuous working conditions, deficient nutrition and living in a hazardous disease environment (10). Once these constraints were lifted during the 20<sup>th</sup> century the growth pattern of children improved dramatically (11).

Measures of child stunting are widely available and therefore feasible to include in the Beyond GDP dashboard, so that global comparisons of children's growth experiences can be meaningfully made. Stunting, in many regards, captures early-life deprivation in a more comprehensive way than low-birthweights or healthy life expectancy.

**Point 1.3.** *The indicator on regional inequalities misses access to critical public health infrastructures*

The dashboard contains a single indicator to measure regional inequalities: the proportion of the rural population living within 2 kilometres of an all-season road (see page 17 of *the report*). Certainly, transport infrastructures are essential to mobility and national integration. However, the exclusive focus on roads neglects the fact that access to public health infrastructures is critical for citizens' well-being in rural areas, who often have to travel long distances to reach the most basic services, such as improved water sources (12).

The history of public goods in the form of education and health shows a clear bias towards urban areas (8, 13). This bias even led to noticeable divergence that would only narrow when public health spending started reaching meaningfully broader sections of national populations living in rural areas. Consequently, access to pumped water and healthcare became crucial in bringing down mortality in these contexts (14, 15). In light of this evidence, I would suggest that the HLEG includes metrics of access to various critical public health infrastructures which are likely available to national statistical agencies.

**Point 2.** *Historical research offers multiple, and often divergent, narratives of progress with different aggregate 'Beyond GDP' indicators, thus developing unifying 'headline aggregate indicators' is far from trivial*

*The report* (pages 19 and 27) advances the possibility of developing 'headline aggregate indicators' that complement the dashboard indices which can be used as a simple guide to guide communication and decision-making. The advantage of this approach is that instead of considering multiple individual indicators to assess societal progress, one would consider the evolution of a single index. However, it is extremely challenging, and some may say unrealistic, to expect that this goal can ever be achieved in a way that respects the varying preferences of policy makers, statisticians and citizens both across countries *and* over time.

Decades of historical research in economic history using composite measures of societal progress have yielded no consensus on which indicators are most preferable and which narratives of progress are most accurate (16, 17). This is particularly the case when one looks at the extent of temporal change and cross-sectional differences, and less so when considering ordinal rankings (17). This lack of convergence in views is exactly what

the HLEG experienced, as it could not reach a consensus on selecting one or multiple indices (page 20 of *the report*).

The main reason for the lack of consensus is that the nature of development and inequality is inherently multidimensional and extremely complex (18, 19). Key elements of human welfare that are sometimes correlated often exhibit divergent trends. Two historical cases illustrate this point clearly. The first is the early phase of industrialisation in England between ca. 1750-1850. In this period, GDP increased steadily, while relevant aspects of people's lives worsened, such as health outcomes, working time or inequality. One would hope *a priori* that an aggregate metric of progress, including these different dimensions, would present a more coherent picture. However, widely-used metrics of human development, such as the Human Development Index, exhibit growth throughout the period, while metrics grounded in revealed preferences portray a much bleaker picture of the period (20). The second historical case when well-being dimensions followed starkly varying trajectories was the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. On one side, European countries experienced historically-low rates of economic growth due to military conflicts and the Great Depression. At the same time, life expectancy increased at an unprecedented pace due to the diffusion of sanitary and medical technologies followed by sharp reductions in working-time after the introduction of the eight-hour day. As with the industrialization era mentioned earlier, aggregate indicators do not agree on a single pattern of development (21).

Periods characterized by different trends in individual indicators are precisely the periods in which any single aggregate headline indicator can become most contested, as competing narratives emerge. The same applies to cross-country differences, where the underlying drivers vary from one case to another. Therefore, the adoption of a global unifying headline aggregate indicator is a daunting task that may be insurmountable.

**Point 3.** *Historical methods could be used to validate the indicators of the dashboard*

*The report* (page 28) urges the international community to validate and refine the dashboard indicators. Historical work can help here, since economic historians have long measured long-run living standards and inequality going back for centuries (22-24). Of particular importance are metrics and sources that are comparable across contexts and time as well as revisable as data and theory improve. Two lessons stand out from the field.

First, monetary metrics are subject to substantial measurement error if appropriate data and methods are not used. Historical research, however, has shown that progress can be made in achieving more robust conclusions, though the path is far from smooth. To illustrate this, consider the latest release of the *Maddison Project*, the authoritative database on long-run economic performance initiated by Angus Maddison (25). This work argues that levels of living standards can change substantially when different price

benchmarks are employed to account for inflation and cross-country price differences. Indeed, societies can differ fundamentally in the composition and nature of the goods and services they produce, making comparisons challenging between periods far apart or countries at very different levels of development. In addition, reconstructing monetary metrics and their respective price indices can be difficult due to imperfect data, leading to the refinement of results on the evolution of material living standards in a given period, such as during the industrial revolution (26). To be sure, this argument applies to both long-run comparisons and current-day countries with different levels of statistical capacity.

The second lesson is that a wide array of sources can be compiled to underpin and validate the trends of certain indicators, and therefore the patterns of progress they portray. For instance, a strand of the economic history literature focuses on the study of anthropometrics to gain insights on the evolution of human welfare and contrast these with those implied by income, since adults heights at the population level reflects nutrition during childhood and caloric demands due to work and sickness (27). In addition, qualitative evidence can be extremely useful as a means to obtain quantitative information unavailable in traditional sources as well as a way to understand trends in quantitative indicators. An example of this is the use of personal accounts, drawing on autobiographies, to understand labour market dynamics and living conditions during the Industrial Revolution (28). Perhaps more importantly, qualitative sources offer a powerful empirical base to understand where the potential blind spots of quantitative metrics lie. Counting what counts, as the title of *the report* goes, is a noble ambition that in practice encounters limitations that both practitioners and the general public should be aware of. Economic historians can help in this regard by working with national statisticians.

### **III. Conclusion**

This brief document has outlined three points that the HLEG can consider to further refine the conceptualization and implementation of their ‘Beyond GDP’ framework, namely: 1) relevant aspects of health are overlooked in the dashboard; 2) aggregate metrics of progress have led to limited consensus on narratives of long-term progress; 3) the historical method can be employed to validate the indicators included in the dashboard.

*The report* takes little stock of what historical work has to say about this topic (except for a reference to the industrial revolution on page 2), which is understandable since the authors take a forward-looking perspective to measure well-being in both the present and the future (see page 9). However, overlooking some of the insights that historical research has to offer is a missed opportunity. I would go further and say that an approach that is both backward- and forward-looking has the advantage of tracking and understanding societal progress more accurately. At the end of the day, our present is tomorrow’s past and to promote meaningful policies we need to understand how we got here, not just where we are going.

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