Citizens’ Expectations for Individual Well-Being: Rethinking Well-Being Around the Idea of Dignity

Habib Tiliouine
Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Oran

This short paper discusses what people aspire for in order to lead the type of life they desire; a life in which they can pursue their own goals, exercise their capacities, are able to express themselves and gain more in terms of happiness and life satisfaction. Put simply, a dignified life in which they experience good levels of well-being. Nonetheless, questioning the nature of human well-being and identifying its determinants and driving factors remains a central topic of discussion in diverse social research fields. These interdisciplinary debates have recently yielded very important implications in relation to policymaking. This paper begins by examining the notion of citizenship, and then explores the role of the socioeconomic factors in meeting the expectations of citizens in relation to their well-being. The limits of the economic factors as antecedents of any study of human well-being will be reviewed and alternative positions considered. This will lead to an analysis of the notion of dignity regarding well-being and social progress schemes. The final recommendations will throw some light on the way forward within the current contexts of the pandemic and violence.

Citizenship: An Evolving Concept

The meaning of “citizenship” has evolved considerably across time. While in the past, the label of “citizen” was assigned to the richest and influential few, nowadays it is given to all a state’s nationals, regardless of their social background, belief system or cultural belonging. Essentially, citizenship refers to the links between the state and its citizens. While citizens owe their allegiance, or simply loyalty, to the state, the latter, in return, guarantees its citizens a range of privileges, listening to their aspirations and providing well-timed responses to their demands. Securing them against internal and external threats also constitutes a crucial part of this role.

People’s ever-growing expectations vary from one society to another, inasmuch as the specific conditions of states and their capacities to meet them vary considerably. For example, what have come to be known as “welfare states,” are societies which already meet their populations’ expectations in terms of basic human needs, mainly food and housing. Welfare states also have good track records in running a variety of social security programmes. According to the definition of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), social security covers programmes targeting support of the elderly, children’s upkeep, medical treatment, parental and sick leave, unemployment, and disability benefits, support for sufferers of occupational injury, etc. Meanwhile, and in contradiction with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts, mainly in articles 22 and 25, that all members of a population have the right to social security and an adequate standard of living, developing countries are still struggling to secure their citizens’ basic needs. But, unfortunately, having higher incomes and more goods does not always go hand in hand with enjoy-

1 www.britannica.com/topic/welfare-state.
ing higher returns in terms of quality of life. We now know that the latter is a generic notion consisting not only of having material wealth, but also reaching good levels of life enjoyment, as exemplified by levels of satisfaction and self-reported personal happiness. Easterlin\(^4\) examined time series data for countries with different development levels and found that short-term fluctuations in happiness and income are positively related, but long-term trends are not associated. He observed a satiation level beyond which self-reported well-being levels do not increase, despite incomes and economic growth continuing to improve in developed nations.

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If, at the individual level, wealth can be estimated through the level of household or personal income, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a well-established and commonly used measure of a country's economic output. GDP measures “the market value of all final goods and services produced within a country's borders over a specific time period.”\(^5\) It combines the amount of spending for goods and services into one single number. When high, this number brings good news, and vice versa. But, Kuznets, the economist who proposed the GDP measure in the 1930s, warned against abuses of such measures. He stated that: “Distinctions must be kept in mind between quantity and quality of growth, between costs and returns, and between the short and long run. Goals for more growth should specify more growth of what and for what” (Goodwin et al., 2019). Political leaders such as Kennedy\(^6\) declared in 1968 that this type of macro-economic indicator “measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”

This leads us to the crucial question of what makes a good policy, and as a consequence of this, what is the best way to properly assess the impacts of policies, in view of the limits of GDP? O’Donnell et al.\(^7\) offered a good explanation of the basic assumption behind the standard economic model which dominated economic policy evaluation for many years: “consumers prefer more to less, that they have consistent and relatively stable preferences, and do the best that they can for themselves given the constraints they face. In the simplest version, they choose the bundle of goods and services that they like best given their incomes and the prices of each of those goods and services” (p.18). This type of thinking has survived because it simplifies the complex task of predicting consumer behaviour, especially when prices and incomes change. In the same vein, the highly influential Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission report declared that too much emphasis on GDP as the sole benchmark can lead to misleading indications about how well-off people are and entails the risk of leading to misguided policy decisions.

**“Beyond GDP”: What Matters More?**

How close are we to finding effective alternative measures? And to what extent is there likely to be consensus in backing any new measures within policymaking circles? Based on social research advances, propositions that do not replace, but rather complement and reinforce GDP metrics have been considered most appropriate. For instance, the Canadian Index of Well-being, the UK’s Measuring National Well-being Programme, and the OECD’s “Better Life Initiative” constitute a prelude to some more official propositions. The “Beyond GDP” Movement, or the beyond material welfare movement, has therefore led to the resurgence of the need for new indicators of personal and societal progress. Today, this area seems to be witnessing a conceptual inflation, with the inclusion of numerous concepts such as: Happiness, Well-being, Subjective Well-being, Personal

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Areas of great concern as determinants of well-being are related to religion and spirituality, even beyond health factors

To sum up, the Beyond GDP movement has gained impetus and researchers have succeeded in developing alternative measurements. Critics, however, are warning against the so-called “hegemony of happiness.”

Other critics have focused on the absence of analytical frameworks for using well-being knowledge to improve well-being at the population level, knowing that such a framework should combine theoretical and conceptual aspects. For example, Cummins proposed that personal well-being is the average score of satisfaction for the 7 to 8 life domains. These result from the first-level elimination of overall satisfaction with life and contribute empirically to general life satisfaction. The domains are: standard of living, personal health, achievement in life, personal relationships, personal safety, community connectedness and future security. The religiosity/spirituality domain did not meet the set empirical condition in all the studied societies. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also developed a well-being framework, stating that well-being is multidimensional and blends both the material and the emotional aspects of lived experience. This framework includes 11 dimensions of well-being: income and wealth, jobs and earnings, housing, health status, education and skills, work-life balance, civic engagement and governance, social connections, environmental quality, personal security and subjective well-being. Additionally, it recognizes that four sets of resources generate well-being over time across each of those dimensions: economic capital, environmental capital, human capital and social capital. The OECD’s effort to understand well-being led the organization to later incorporate research on “Trust” within its “Better Life Initiative.”

Sources:

Basic Drivers of Individual Well-Being

A variety of factors has been explored in relation to well-being. For instance, O’Donnell et al. divided the factors influencing well-being into three categories: economic, social and personal.

**Income**: An important and recurrent finding of research is that satisfaction with income stands as the main contributor to an individual’s satisfaction with life, particularly in developing countries (e.g., Tiliouine et al., 2006). Relying on this evidence, policymakers are often required to increase incomes as a way to improve a population’s well-being. However, a “diminishing marginal utility of income” has been noticed, consisting of a noticeable difference in the effect of financial subsidies when comparing the poor and the wealthy. In short, it was noticed that “a poor person values an extra dollar ten times more than a person who is ten times richer than him.”

**Education**: Evidence has been found to corroborate high correlations between, on the one hand, education and, on the other hand, income: life satisfaction can be positively affected by education despite the difficulty in proving a direct relationship. But, the effects of education on a citizen’s understanding and commitment to social and cultural issues can be more straightforward.

**Employment**: Surveys indicate that the negative impact of unemployment is comparable in size to the negative effect of separation from or losing one’s partner. Its positive effect cannot only be noticed in improved incomes, but also in the psychological effect of being useful and can provide people with a sense of belonging and hence an improved life satisfaction. Generally, research found that any job can be better for well-being than no job.

**Family factors**: Good family life universally stands as a key factor in achieving higher levels of satisfaction with life for individuals. This is due to the support and often the protection which the family institution provides to its members. Achieving the balance between work and family life is decisive to one’s well-being.

**Trust, support, freedom and values in the community**: The Gallup World Poll surveys gathered important international data regarding the relationship between community factors and people’s life evaluations. The general results show that just six variables explained inter-country variations in average life-evaluation at a similar level: the levels of support, freedom, corruption, family break-up, life expectancy and per-head GDP. Trust within the community has recently opened new horizons for understanding issues raised in well-being research. Other areas of great concern as determinants of well-being are related to religion and spirituality, even beyond health factors.

**Human Dignity as a Central Driver for Human Well-Being**

The concept of dignity has a long history. All known religious traditions have the notion of dignity in their teachings. Catholicism teaches that God created man in His image and hence humans deserve the highest admiration and respect. In the Qur’an, dignity is understood as a valuable gift of the Almighty God to humankind. “Now, indeed, We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out...”

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15. Helliwell et al. op. cit.
of the good things of life, and favoured them far above most of Our creation” (The Qur’an, 17:70).

In Philosophy, Kant is a major theorist of dignity. He asserted that simply because human beings are capable of reason, they should be respected and their rights preserved. This means that dignity is an absolute inner value all human beings possess. For Kant, autonomy is the foundation of dignity, and “a man cannot be used merely as a means by any man… but must be used at the same time as an end” (Misztal, 2013: 102). This assumption contradicts the idea that dignity is associated with utility. Notable is that Kant’s views of dignity have impacted the world’s legislation. At the end of WWII, dignity was incorporated into human rights founding texts. For instance, article 23 (3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that “Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity.” This concept inspired the human rights prohibition of inhuman treatment, exploitative working conditions, slavery, discrimination, torture, etc. Endless discussions have been held over the operationalization of the dignity concept, either as a specific norm or as a general principle in law.

During the 1990s, coupled with the gradual decline of the religious foundations of morality, mainly in the West, the concept of dignity acquired a specific appeal to social scientists, perhaps as a replacement of the old notion of honour.19 Nowadays, discussions over topics, such as the elderly and end-of-life care, indigenous peoples, immigration issues and, among other things, animal rights have revived interest in the notion of dignity. Similarly, within current political theories, we are witnessing a surge of interest in this concept, not only as a key legal notion, but as a fundamental aspect of a democratic society.

During the recent revolts of the Arab Spring, besides freedom and economic factors, dignity was a basic demand of the populations involved.

At a wider level, the UNDP estimates that poverty is challenging human dignity worldwide. It hits 1.3 billion people, half of whom are under 18 and a third under 10, according to the 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index. For the UNDP “mapping the essentials for a dignified life” requires looking closely at what people are deprived of when they lack the essentials for a dignified and decent life. The expanding interest in the notion of dignity led human development theorists and practitioners to further examine its implications in processes that aim to eradicate poverty, as stipulated in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The following section will examine the predominant development frameworks, such as the capability and well-being approaches and the role of dignity in alleviating hardship and socioeconomic deprivation.

**Dignity, Capability and Well-Being**

Firstly, when "poverty" is understood as the deprivation of the capability of living a good life and "development" as the capability of expansion, this will lead to the re-examination of human well-being and the revision of the basic assumptions behind development efforts. Amartya Sen, the economist who initiated this broad normative approach, the “Capability

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Approach," had to address four basic concerns with regard to the evaluation of human well-being:20 1. Individuals can differ greatly in their abilities to convert the same resources into valuable functionings ("beings" and "doings"), i.e., we should not focus on the means per se without considering who is to use them; 2. The phenomenon of "adaptive preferences" leads people to internalize the harshness of their circumstances, such as a person who is physically very ill, yet says they feel fine. This means that evaluation should not rely on subjective declarations alone; 3. Evaluation must be sensitive to both actual achievements ("functionings") and effective freedom ("capability"). The fact that people are able to choose among many options is important, e.g., the choice not to eat should be recognized despite the fact that starving and fasting have the same nutritional state; and 4. Evaluation should reflect the complexity of the lived reality. For instance, happiness matters for evaluating how well people are doing, but this should not be the only aspect taken into consideration.21

Living and working in a safe environment and being treated with respect constitute the basis for a life of dignity

It is beyond the scope of this short chapter to present a comprehensive review of the ramifications that followed Sen’s propositions. Nevertheless, some brief illustrations may suffice to illustrate the link between capabilities and the development of citizens’ capabilities, their well-being and the idea of dignity. In fact, many researchers expressed their discomfort with the vagueness of a lot of Sen’s theoretical accounts. This led them to offer alternative explanations and suggest arguments with many applied intentions. For instance, the American philosopher, Nussbaum, emphasized that the capability approach is a human rights approach, and proposed to ground her version in the specific concept of human dignity. Nussbaum sought to provide a theory of justice which is based on dignity, a list of fundamental capabilities and a threshold.22

Nussbaum identified a list of ten human capabilities: 1. Life; 2. Bodily health; 3. Bodily integrity; 4. Senses, imagination and thought; 5. Emotions; 6. Practical reason; 7. Affiliation; 8. Other species; 9. Play; and 10. Political and material control over one’s environment. This list identifies the central capabilities in any human life, which should be pursued and provided as basic political principles and embodied at the same time in constitutional guarantees, human rights legislation and development policy. More specifically, capability 7 in the list provides for the elimination of any discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin, etc. As for capability 10, this indicates a political environment which should allow for effective participation in political choices that govern one’s life and having the right to political participation, protection of free speech and association.

In contrast with Sen’s emphasis on freedom, Nussbaum’s account is motivated by a view of human dignity, which she links to flourishing in the Aristotelian sense. She argues that her fundamental capabilities follow from the requirements of dignity. This was tested and adapted over the course of an extensive cross-cultural dialogue she carried out. Furthermore, for Nussbaum “everyone must be entitled by their governments and relevant international institutions to each of the cited capabilities in accordance with a ‘sufficientarian’ principle that specifies the minimum requirements of justice.” She argues that while access to these ten capabilities is required by human dignity, the free choice of not exercising one’s rights should also be respected as an aspect of one’s dignity, e.g., fasting may have a negative influence on bodily health, but should be respected if done voluntarily (see Wells).

Nussbaum’s propositions were also intensely criticized on epistemological, as well as ideological grounds. For example, the theory is viewed as stemming from an American liberal ideology, rather than global human values. For some researchers, the theory reflects an elitist vision and contains a paternalistic attitude. Nussbaum recognized that in order to...
be implemented, her theory is left to democratic deliberation and decision by those concerned. However, if Sen succeeded in providing a general framework for evaluating the quality of life of people, Nussbaum, among others, produced a more or less coherent philosophical theory of justice.

Citizens’ Dignity, Well-Being and Happiness: A Tentative Conclusion

It is clear from the way human development is approached that philosophers are primarily concerned with analysing what constitutes a good life and how people should live it. Meanwhile, the prime concern of social sciences, mainly the empirically-oriented ones, lies with measuring and designing interventions to improve citizens’ lives, either as individual citizens or as communities. However, these approaches complement each other. While dignity can act as a basic shared value that should be promoted for all, policymaking should stress capabilities which enable citizens to enjoy diverse life opportunities to the fullest extent.

Materialistic penchants alone have led to the expansion of consumerism, little respect for environmental considerations and an increase of inequalities between the world’s regions and between people in the same society. These, among other reasons, have led to increased levels of misery, violence, hatred and multiple fractures within and among human societies. Living and working in a safe environment and being treated with respect constitute the basis for a life of dignity. Such a life is also expected to enhance feelings of well-being, if one considers what social research has proved regarding the relevance to human well-being of, in particular, having a decent job, a family, rewarding social relationships and feeling accepted. Of course, people do differ in their life circumstances, but some levels of equity remain possible, meaning a justice system could be implemented based on human dignity and a well-negotiated list of capabilities.

Major recent events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, have proved once again how vulnerable humans, the world’s economy and geopolitical relationships are

It is worth remembering that the main functions of a government are to identify the ever-expanding expectations of people by opening public dialogue, setting development priorities and allocating the needed resources. Priorities however, differ from one society to another, and to some extent they vary from one community to another in the same country. This applies to Mediterranean countries, which are far from being a homogenous group, culturally, religiously, linguistically and, most obviously and above all, economically. They therefore have different expectations with regard to development priorities. Richer nations of the region have the institutions, the infrastructure, and the required know-how. They are attractive destinations to all kinds of competences. In contrast, the other regions of the Mediterranean are mostly impoverished and deprived of basic political, cultural and social rights. Institutions are generally weak, corrupt and badly managed. Non-organized immigration, for instance, is the cause of tragedy upon tragedy, with thousands drowning every year in Mediterranean waters. Moreover, the stability of the region is at risk, with the ongoing armed struggles in North Africa, sub-Saharan regions and the Middle East (e.g., Libya, Syria, Palestine, etc.). In these latter contexts, restoring human dignity is a priority. Authoritarian ruling, mismanagement of social services, anarchical development and corruption are all aggressions against the basics of human dignity. This concept, which should be an underlying principle of all development policies, is expected to strengthen populations’ well-being. In turn, such strength will create the required dynamics to induce the negotiated socio-cultural and economic change.