THEIR VIEW

We still don't know how to measure human well-being

SAUMITRA BHADURI



is professor, Madras School of Economics

For decades, economists and social researchers have sought ways to measure human well-being. The journey has moved from relatively limited measures such as gross domestic product (GDP) and gross national income to broader frameworks like the Human Development Index, to more sensitive measures such as happiness indices, and even assessments of the quality and habitability of our surroundings, such as the Global Liveability Index. Each approach has improved on what came before. Despite these advances, one question is unanswered: Are people actually living better lives?

We may enjoy higher living standards, better technology, longer lives and greater access to information, but we may also be facing a different kind of crisis. Loneliness is becoming increasingly common. Burnout is becoming part of our everyday existence. Work feels less fulfilling. The younger generation has fewer meaningful relationships and spends less time interacting face-to-face. Confidence in institutions is waning. Political conversation is polarized, and misinformation is spreading at an amazing rate.

Sapien Labs' recent *2025 Global Mind Health* report starkly highlights this crisis. Drawing on data from more than 2.5 million people across 89 countries, it uses the Mind Health Quotient (MHQ) to measure people's ability to cope with everyday demands using 47 dimensions covering emotional, cognitive, social and physical functioning.

The results reveal several disturbing trends. Although the global MHQ was marginally higher in 2024-25 than in 2023-24, 41% of those aged 18 to 34 were classified as "distressed" or "struggling" with their mental health, compared to just 12% of those aged over 55. In contrast, only 23% of young adults were classified as "succeeding" or "thriving," compared with 60% of the older group. India is no exception. Its *2025 Mind Health* findings point to a major challenge to young adults' mental well-being. India's MHQ score is 33, below the global average of 41. And 42.6% of young Indians are distressed or struggling, compared to 37.6% across countries. In terms of the share of 18-34-year-olds who said they were distressed or struggling, India ranked 10th among G20 countries and 22nd among 89 countries. Its MHQ score ranking for this age group fell nine places, from 51st in 2024 to 60th in 2025. However, when the comparison is restricted to countries included in both years, the decline is less dramatic, of three places.

Most importantly, these findings run counter to conventional wisdom about development. Conventional wisdom holds that as societies become richer, safer and more technologically advanced, people's well-being improves. However, the report strikingly finds that young adults in several affluent countries are doing relatively poorly. Surprisingly, Sub-Saharan African countries rank highly, while Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the UK rank near the bottom. This raises a concerning paradox in welfare economics: material progress does not naturally translate to human progress.

The report also identifies four factors that appear to matter most. The *first* is the weakening of family bonds. People experiencing poor family bonds were almost four times as likely to fall into the distressed or struggling categories. The *second* is spirituality, albeit defined broadly as a sense of connection with something larger than oneself, rather than simply religious affiliation. It finds that young adults reporting a stronger sense of spirituality tend to have considerably higher MHQ scores.

The *third* factor is technology, particularly the age at which children acquire their first smartphones. The report finds an association between early smartphone exposure and later difficulties, including sleep problems, social development and emotional functioning. The *fourth* is diet, particularly ultra-processed food consumption. Younger generations consume substantially more of it, and there is a systematic relationship between higher consumption and poorer mental health outcomes.

However, it should not be taken to mean that these factors alone cause the mental-health crisis. Human behaviour is far more complex, and as the report itself acknowledges, further research is needed to identify the precise causal pathways. The broader message, however, is difficult to miss. We may have spent decades improving the conditions that make life materially easier without paying enough attention to the conditions that make life meaningful. Finland offers a striking example. It consistently performs extremely well in global happiness rankings, which largely capture how people evaluate their circumstances. Yet, the report places it at 28th among people aged 55 and above and 40th among those aged 18-34 on the MHQ score.

The report offers neither a final verdict nor definitive evidence of robust causal relationships. However, it highlights a blind spot in our developmental journey. This matters especially for the disadvantaged groups.

An economy can post impressive GDP growth numbers while a large share of its population, especially young people, remains isolated, insecure or psychologically overwhelmed. Economic development cannot simply be about producing and consuming more. Ultimately, it must enable people to live better lives.

QUICK READ

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