



ADVANCING A WELL-BEING NARRATIVE

Expanding how decision-makers
think about progress in order to
transform priorities and actions

Initial insights from collaboration
with grassroots organizations and
testing with decision-makers

October 2022



Metropolitan Group
the power of voice



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DEFINING WELL-BEING TERMS USED IN THIS DOCUMENT

We use Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's definition of **well-being**: "Individuals and communities are thriving and have opportunities to create meaningful futures. Well-being encompasses people's physical, mental, and social health, and the opportunities they have to create meaningful futures. It considers basic needs, like food, housing, education, employment, and income. It includes social and emotional needs, like sense of purpose, safety, belonging, social connection, and life satisfaction. And it is tightly linked with the well-being of our communities, our environment, and our planet."¹

Our working definition of **community well-being**: "The sum of what everyone in a place is feeling, along with relationships between people, institutions and nature; social cohesion and connection; trust and social capital; and the quality and sustainability of the natural world."² It happens in places where people can safely explore their values, fears, passions and needs, and feel a sense of possibility about the world.

EXPLORING THE POWER OF WELL-BEING NARRATIVES TO INFLUENCE EXPECTATIONS AND ACTIONS

When countries and cities take a well-being approach, they prioritize policies, budgets and other actions that create conditions for a shared future where all people and communities thrive. For example, in New Zealand's Living Standards Framework,³ which guides the country's "wellbeing budget," there is a push to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of institutions and government to respond to complex needs. In turn, countries with higher levels of well-being (e.g., subjective indicators, such as greater optimism) also are healthier, more connected and more productive; growth becomes sustainable and creates opportunities for more people.⁴

The proof about the value of well-being approaches is already established in research, and that analysis continues to grow (see sidebar on the key findings). But an emphasis on well-being has not been the primary focus of core United States data, policies or budgets.

Applying this proof to scale up the still-emerging approach of using a well-being framework to guide policy across countries and communities faces headwind. In narratives at play in the U.S.—

as observed in our prior research⁵—progress has been mostly defined around economic growth and consumption. **We see great potential in a broader narrative about progress, focused on individual and community well-being. As that narrative takes hold, it should create new expectations, and incent and reward dramatically different decisions and outcomes.**

This idea—the need for narrative shift to move the research on well-being into broader social change⁶—emerged during a 2018 convening of innovators from around the world,⁷ and we explored it further in a scan of global narratives and experiments with U.S. organizations.⁸ **We now offer an initial well-being narrative—developed in collaboration with grassroots organizations and tested with policy influencers and business leaders—along with ideas for experimentation and early action.**

We invite you—activists, researchers, economists, storytellers and anyone interested in redefining progress—to try on these ideas in your internal

WHY DOES WELL-BEING MATTER?

- Well-being is an outcome that is meaningful to the public.⁹ It is a valid measure—beyond morbidity, mortality and economic status—that tells us how people perceive their life is going from their own perspective.¹⁰
- Well-being is associated with numerous health-, job-, family-, and economically-related benefits.¹¹
 - Higher levels of well-being are associated with decreased risk of disease, illness and injury; better immune functioning; speedier recovery; and increased longevity.^{12,13,14,15}
 - Individuals with high levels of well-being are more productive at work and are more likely to contribute to their communities.^{16,17}
 - Countries with higher levels of well-being are healthier, more connected and more productive; growth becomes sustainable and creates opportunities for more people.¹⁸
- Well-being is not zero-sum; rather, when well-being increases for some people, everyone benefits. People's happiness depends on the happiness of others with whom they are connected, and in that sense, happiness is "contagious."¹⁹

culture, strategy and systems; across your program, policy and innovation work; and throughout your communication. In addition to people already working on well-being policies, measures and narratives, other early adopters might include:

- People working to advance the well-being of the communities they serve, including policymakers, business and organization leaders (as well as human resources managers, wellness directors and equity directors), educators and others.
- Advocates in social impact, public health and other fields working to link health (mental, physical, spiritual) to the broader dimensions of well-being (community, environmental, systemic and economic).
- Grassroots organizations, movements and policy campaigns hindered by an economic-driven, short-term, zero-sum narrative.
- Reporters, storytellers and others who want to paint a fuller picture of how people are doing, as well as those interested in ongoing learning and evidence in the field of narrative change.

This guide presents new findings from a project to examine how a sample of grassroots organizations, business leaders and policy influencers respond to well-being messages, and the extent to which they embrace a well-being narrative. It builds from a first report, **What if Progress Meant Well-Being for All**, which examined how countries outside the U.S. are using well-being frameworks and messaging about well-being, and explored how U.S. stakeholders could use global narrative insights for their work on well-being.

As with the first report, this guide advances the study of narrative and messages. It continues to provide new research on well-being narrative testing, which has not been pursued in this way in the U.S. Since this is a narrative guide, we invite readers to use the findings and the ideas generated from this study in your work. **As you try out what we learned about stories, messages and experiences that advance a well-being narrative, please share what you're finding in your work with the project team at wellbeing@rand.org.**

NARRATIVE TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Metropolitan Group uses the following terms and definitions in our work to analyze, amplify and shift narrative²⁰; we use these definitions throughout this document.

- Narrative: An aggregation of stories and experiences over time that shapes what people think, believe and do.
 - Dominant narrative: A narrative that is pervasive across a dominant society, culture or community; often held and reinforced by those in political, economic, social and other forms of power.
 - Counter narrative: A narrative that expresses an idea counter to the dominant narrative. Often present among communities experiencing oppression and intentionally suppressed by those in power.
 - Messages: The articulation of the narrative; the key ideas it encompasses.
- Stories and experiences: The building blocks of the narrative received and internalized through things people see, hear and experience in art, popular culture, traditions, the built environment, policies, systems and structures.
- Core values: The deeply held values that strongly influence how people interpret information and make decisions. People more readily adopt narratives that align with their core values. Narratives can both reflect and catalyze core values.
- Narrative change: Strategic efforts to disrupt dominant narratives.

BACKGROUND ON NARRATIVE CHANGE AND WELL-BEING NARRATIVES

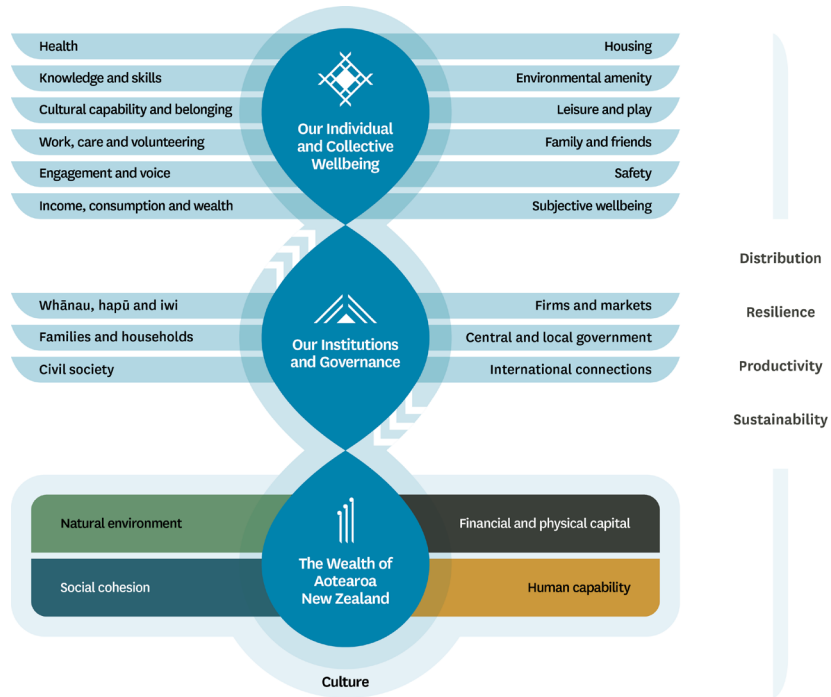
Narrative change can advance new and shared understanding, build support to address difficult social issues, and propel progress in policy and other actions.²¹ While evidence continues to build for when and where narrative change is most effective, use across many fields from health to human rights to climate change is illuminating which narratives are most impactful. An often-cited example is the narrative shift about marriage that changed the terms of the discussion and has been linked to organizing across sectors and parties leading up to the 2015 Supreme Court decision, which guaranteed the right for same-sex couples to marry. Organizations advancing the cause of marriage equality had been focused on fairness and health benefits for at least a decade before the decision, but the narrative shift to the empathy and values case, “love is love,” was one of the actions that turned the tide and brought new groups into the discussion. Further, public support of marriage equality jumped from 53% in 2010 to 63% by 2015.²²

We hypothesize that a narrative that positions well-being—including but not centered on a sustainable economy—as the definition of progress would have a profound impact on cultural expectations, policies and budgets, and many other decisions and actions. Narrative strategies play a particularly important role when there is large-scale change involving a fundamental redefinition or reframing of an issue.²³ Based on the current research, we assert that this is precisely what is needed to advance a well-being approach: shifting narratives about progress.

A narrative centering well-being is distinct from efforts to advance an “economy for life” or “well-being economy” narrative, which some think tanks and academic groups are importantly using to advance a rebuilding of a broken economic system to deliver good, meaningful lives for everyone.²⁴ While that evolution is important, there was another concern to address in well-being narratives, which was prominent in our prior global research and conversations with those working at the grassroots level in the U.S. That is, that well-being work does not sufficiently center community power and voice,²⁵ nor sufficiently include the various ways that well-being manifests in a society. We also hypothesize that narratives centered on the economy may inadvertently reinforce the “economic growth is progress” narrative.

The ultimate goal is a United States where each person and community has the opportunity to thrive and create the futures they want. Evidence is building for this possibility. England, New Zealand (see figure on following page), Bhutan, Scotland, Finland, Canada, Australia and Iceland are among the countries moving in this direction. In the U.S., cities from Santa Monica, California, to North Point, Georgia, to Louisville, Kentucky, are committing to well-being as the guidepost for decisions that better support people and planet.^{26,27} For instance, those communities have organized around well-being measures and are starting to use well-being as the outcome of policy and investment decisions. Changes to health, economic and infrastructure policies have led to benefits in subjective well-being.²⁸ Using COVID-19 as a case study, Wellbeing Economy Alliance presents evidence that a commitment to well-being over economic growth in the design of strategies in Finland, New Zealand and Bhutan resulted in favorable outcomes for both public health and economic performance.²⁹

New Zealand's Living Standards Framework defining its well-being approach

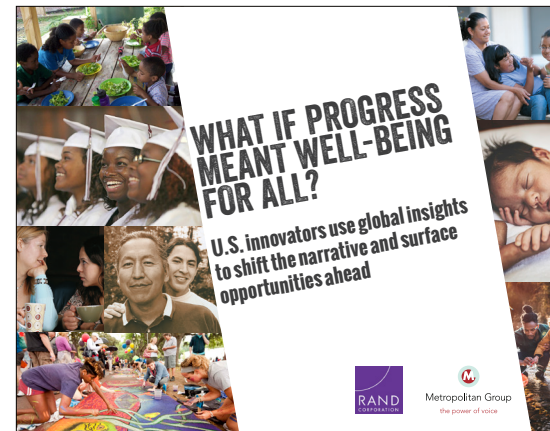


Source: Te Tai Ōhanga/The Treasury of New Zealand.³⁰

*New Zealand's Living Standards Framework offers an example of how one country has defined indicators of well-being and is designing policy and budget decisions to meet these indicators. "The good news is that the conversation has changed," says Girol Karacaoglu, former chief economist at the New Zealand Treasury and now head of the School of Government at Victoria University of Wellington. "There's a realization that we need to worry about other things than income."*³¹

Early indicators point to potentially viable pathways to a well-being narrative. We mapped how well-being narratives are taking shape in England, Mexico and New Zealand, countries at various stages of well-being approaches. Then, we engaged innovators working on social change issues from food security to fair wages in the U.S., to test emerging insights in their work.

Our exploratory report, **"What if Progress Meant Well-Being for All?"**³² suggests potential directions for well-being narratives, including a strong call for deep inclusion and leadership from grassroots organizations.



Download "What if Progress Meant Well-Being for All?"

Issues of equity are only now being explored in the context of well-being measures, policy and narrative. There has been notable effort to advance well-being in measurement and policy discourse in recent years. For instance, there has been some movement on the idea of measuring well-being years (WELBYs), augmenting current measurement tools, such as disability adjusted life years (DALYs), or quality adjusted life years (QALYs). Yet, with this momentum toward advancing well-being, research and policy development has been criticized for not fully accounting for collective well-being. It also has not fully prioritized issues of equity within well-being activities, including but not limited to measuring differential access to opportunity, historical and systemic barriers to well-being, and policies and practices that impede well-being.³³

We build on those pathways here, proposing an initial well-being narrative that sets the bar beyond growth alone; embraces opportunity, prosperity and dignity for all people; and leads to stronger, more stable societies.

A NEW NARRATIVE

We explored well-being narratives with three groups: grassroots organizations, well-being practitioners, and a sample of business leaders and policymakers. We briefly describe these three groups. (See **Page 20** for the names of these collaborators, whose contributions were key to this work.) Then we move to each group's insights.

- **Grassroots collaborators:** Guided by our commitment to prioritize grassroots voices, we workshopped initial narratives (based on our prior work³⁴ and integrating both documented support points as well as proactive responses to critics of a well-being approach) with six people from justice-focused grassroots organizations in the United States who are considered connectors, healers and builders.
- **Well-being practitioners:** We also conferred with a group of well-being practitioners working around the world.
- **Business leaders and policy influencers:** Then, to see whether the narratives resonate with people making decisions that shape systems, structures and practices, we tested emerging narratives in a survey of policy influencers and business leaders. The survey samples were drawn from a large, national volunteer research panel and a comprehensive leadership database managed by Prime Group, our research partner; participants were not stated supporters of well-being approaches.

With this input, we refined the narrative, along with supporting messages and story points, to be both authentic to the core narrative developed by grassroots collaborators and resonant with decision-makers. (A separately available **appendix** also includes more details on methods and findings.)

As we note later, this effort connected with these three types of stakeholders who shared their perspectives. Findings should be viewed in the context of the sample size and characteristics of each group.

KEY THEMES FROM GRASSROOTS COLLABORATORS

The grassroots collaborators represented perspectives from birth justice³⁵ and climate justice.³⁶ As we workshopped the start-point narrative together, several themes emerged from those discussions with the six collaborators:

- **Well-being is context dependent.** It is at once deeply personal and culturally aligned. Elements of well-being—how to define, build and measure it—must be fluid and defined by communities, not prescribed externally or intended to encompass “everyone.” People and communities need agency and autonomy in deciding what well-being means for them. We must take into account the inherent privileges and barriers experienced by individuals, as that will impact what well-being means for them.
- **Love, connection, care and community are signposts for shared well-being.**
- **Well-being is compromised when one's value is seen as proportional to one's productivity.** Respondents in this group shared a view that the current notion of progress/productivity, and how we measure it, is grounded in white supremacy. Many of the respondents in this group argued that their role was to build a world without systems of dominance, where there is greater and more equitable opportunity to do well and thrive economically and otherwise.
- **At its core, well-being must be rooted in equity, justice, human dignity, and interconnection of people and planet.** A well-being narrative centers everyone's human right to thrive and operate from an awareness that humans are a part of, not apart from, Earth's ecosystems.

KEY THEMES FROM WELL-BEING PRACTITIONERS

This group represented a mix of local practitioners, movement leaders and researchers working on well-being in the United States and around the world, some of whom contributed to our prior work and others who were new to us. They echoed many of the grassroots themes and added the following considerations:

- **Testing is needed to determine whether the word “well-being” may be distracting or unclear.** To safeguard, they suggested introducing the term once, then using descriptive language to illustrate the many facets of well-being.
- **A zero-sum narrative, such as “if someone gets more, then someone else gets less,” can pose a challenge.** This can be countered with data and proof points that show “we all do/feel better when we all do/feel better.”
- **A narrative holding that economic growth cannot sufficiently create or measure well-being may be read as “anti-productivity” or “anti-growth.”** In fact, in some cases, higher well-being levels can and do go hand-in-hand with increased economic progress.
- **There doesn’t have to be a dichotomy between “the world as it is” and “the world as we’d like it to be.”** For instance, competition can be harmful when it creates opportunity for some and barriers for others. But when occurring in a healthy context, competition can create widely shared prosperity. The maker’s movement, for example, sparks rapid innovation and creation of new solutions in shared, public spaces filled with independent inventors, designers and thinkers; many of the solutions are offered in open-source technology platforms and/or brought to market via crowd-funding.³⁷
- **Well-being invites big, transformative thinking.** There is an unknown quality of what it would look like to live in a society where well-being was

the cornerstone of decisions, hopes and actions. A well-being approach fundamentally reimagines the purpose of society across existing sectors and radically reshapes and creates new systems, approaches and realities. Three Horizons Thinking³⁸ may be useful here, moving from status quo systems and approaches, to innovation aimed at making the current system more equitable or dynamic, to the third horizon: future-thinking transformation.

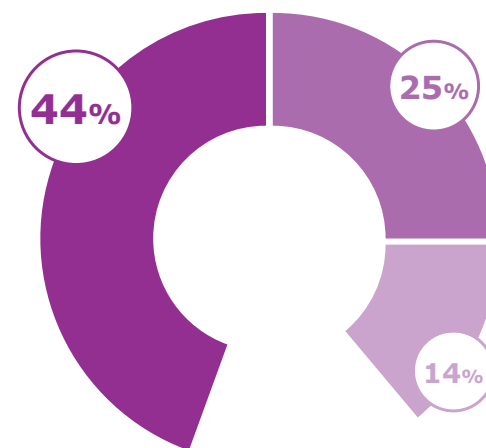
- **Feelings are a powerful way to discuss, understand and measure well-being.** Many people talk about their well-being by telling stories and describing how they felt in that instance. Moreover, metrics that measure quality of life are based on people’s feelings, which adds to their power. Both stories and metrics are needed to inform decisions.
- **A shared narrative can help justify and normalize a well-being approach.** This narrative work is giving mayors, for example, ways to speak about well-being. Using “the language of metrics” can help policy influencers and business leaders integrate well-being approaches into current models. At the same time, emphasizing community priorities and voices in the work creates the opportunity to expand the notion of evidence and proof to include lived experiences and other vital kinds of wisdom beyond typical academic data.

KEY THEMES FROM TESTING WITH POLICY INFLUENCERS AND BUSINESS LEADERS

Coming out of the narrative workshops, we fine-tuned potential narratives and then tested those in an online survey with 51 policy influencers (individuals with public policy expertise who work in federal, state and local governments; academia; and national associations or nonprofits) and 50 business leaders (principal decision-makers at private sector companies in retail, technology, construction, health care and other fields). Key findings from the survey included the following. As noted above, these findings represent the insights from this sample.

- **Well-being appears to be a widely understood concept among those surveyed.** This illuminates an inconsistency in our input sources, with the group of well-being practitioners questioning the relevance of the term and concept, and this sample of policy influencers and business leaders resonating with it. First, through an open-ended question about what well-being is, respondents described a holistic notion of both individual and collective well-being, though the concept seems to be best understood at the individual level. They also then strongly agreed with the definition we offered: *Well-being means individuals and communities are thriving and have opportunities to create meaningful futures. It occurs when basic needs, like security, safety, food, housing, education and employment, are being met, as well as higher needs like dignity, purpose, social connection and life satisfaction.*
- **There seems to be an awareness about the inequity of well-being nationally or in other communities, despite a view of “things are better in my community” based on the respondent’s lived experience.** Most respondents rate as “excellent” or “good” their own personal well-being (91%) and the well-being of their community (78%), but only 43% provide the same rating for the well-being of “most people living in the United States.”
- **Respondents know their actions affect well-being.** The majority of respondents said they frequently or occasionally make decisions that may significantly affect the well-being of individuals and communities.
- **Policies based on well-being are preferred to policies based solely on economic impact** because they can lead to stable, healthy and productive societies. Although this is more pronounced for Democrats (77%) than Republicans (55%) or Independents (52%), the fact that the idea is resonant with more than half of all respondents is encouraging.
- **Policy influencers and business leaders prioritize values of common sense, fairness and health in decision-making. There is an interesting disconnect—and need for further exploration—around the value of interconnection.** “Interconnection” was less frequently selected as a value that guides decision-making, but the majority of respondents agree with a message that describes the negative impact of disconnection.
- **The three main components that resonated in testing were: increased purpose and connection, community-driven priorities, and sustainable growth and opportunities for all (see figure below).**

In combination, these messages reach 83% of respondents



This message resonates with 44%.
Increasing individual and community well-being can increase dignity, purpose, connection and productivity.

We layer in this message to reach another 25%.
When the community helps to set priorities for achieving individual and community well-being, there is a greater sense of belonging, purpose and connection for all.

Finally, adding this message gets us to 83%.
When we focus on well-being, growth becomes sustainable and creates opportunities for more people.

- **The dominant economic narrative is perceived to be one of the most widely recognized barriers to the well-being approach; using well-being data may be an antidote.** We asked respondents to agree or disagree with some reasons that people have suggested for why society may not focus on well-being in policymaking and budgeting. A wide majority agreed that “our culture prioritizes money, consumption and growth above all else.” But just 38% of Democrats and 39% of Independents agreed that well-being data do not exist, illuminating an opportunity to use, amplify and expand those data in decision-making. (Sixty-four percent of Republicans agree that well-being data do not exist, indicating that more evidence is needed for the validity and usefulness of well-being measures.)

COMMON GROUND BETWEEN GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS, POLICY INFLUENCERS AND BUSINESS LEADERS

Our objective is to center community-driven narratives and voices and identify a narrative that those working to advance well-being are enthusiastic to carry. We also need the narrative to resonate with those who shape policies, budgets, systems and structures. Key points of agreement and tension included:

- **There was agreement that a shared definition of well-being is useful, but it must leave room for communities to define what well-being includes and how to pursue it.** A consistent definition of well-being can create shared understanding of what is broadly included in a well-being approach. Grassroots collaborators and well-being practitioners emphasized the vital need for communities to add the details and nuance that make the definition culturally and geographically relevant, and elevated self-determination as a key component. Policy influencers and business leaders also prioritized community-driven approaches. Narratives will need to make clear that people still have autonomy to determine their own future, while also showing interconnection—and intentional choices that boost interconnection—will benefit them.

- **Personal and community well-being are inextricably linked.** Policy influencers and business leaders indicated a disparity between their personal well-being and well-being in their communities and across the country. Well-being practitioners suggested increasing narrative resonance by touching on shared human emotions. What does well-being feel like in our bodies when we know it’s happening, they asked? Testing offered a few hints:
 - Business leaders associated the following words with their individual and community well-being: freedom, health, togetherness, happiness, safety and peace.
 - For policy influencers, mental and physical health, community, safety, peace and resources were among the most popular.
- **Well-being is strongly influenced by inequitable structures—but this may not be fully understood.** Grassroots collaborators strongly emphasized that the well-being of individuals is interlinked with resolving structural barriers. The well-being practitioners emphasized the need to reinforce the role of government to create enabling conditions. “We need to connect and bridge why measuring, hearing and making space for the relational aspects of our humanity has a place in policymaking,” said a well-being practitioner who works with policymakers.
- **Shared values of peace, connection, purpose and health offer a strong common ground.** The value of interconnection bears further exploration.

INITIAL MESSAGES AND STORIES THAT CAN ADVANCE A WELL-BEING NARRATIVE, FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

From our exploration with grassroots collaborators and well-being practitioners, and testing with policy influencers and business leaders, we offer an initial narrative approach, shown below. (See **Page 4** for a definition of narrative terms.)

This approach provides an instructive starting point for initial experimentation. We invite readers to test out these messages in their strategy, operations, communication and stakeholder engagement. Given the formative nature of this work, we note several limitations:

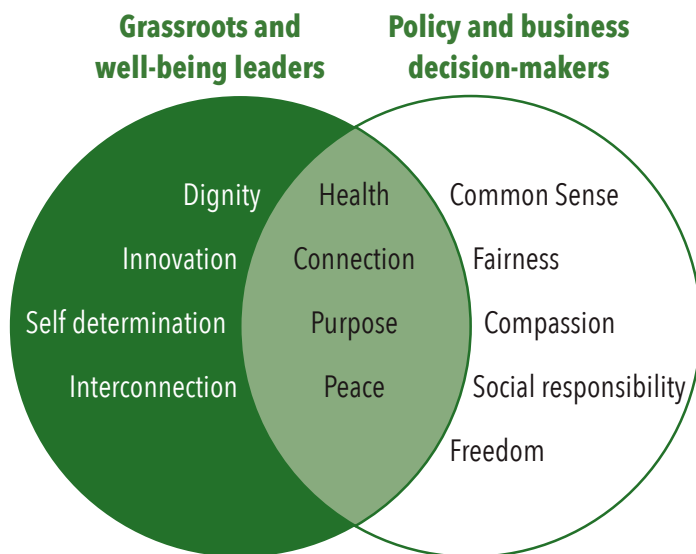
- We created these messages with input from a limited number of grassroots organizations and well-being practitioners, and from testing with 101 business leaders and policy influencers. We have not, however, tested the resulting messages with these stakeholders.
- Based on our initial testing we know what rises to the top. More work is needed to disaggregate and find the nuance within those message clusters, including breaking apart messages to isolate and simplify specific words and concepts.
- We want to further engage grassroots organizations beyond birth justice and climate justice, and engage decision-makers and actors beyond business leaders and policy influencers.
- While we were able to gather demographic data for the policy influencers and business leaders surveyed, we did not run bivariate analyses in this work based on race/ethnicity. Future work may explore that, and hopefully with a more diverse survey sample. (See **Appendix** for demographics.)

WELL-BEING NARRATIVE ELEMENTS SHAPED WITH THE GRASSROOTS AND EMERGING AS RESONANT WITH DECISION-MAKERS

Core well-being narrative:

Our culture prioritizes well-being as the ultimate indicator of progress. We make decisions based on their impact on well-being.

Values to amplify in well-being narratives:



Well-being definition: Well-being means all individuals and communities are not just surviving but are thriving in all aspects of life so they can have a hopeful future and sense of purpose.

This combination can hold off the counter narrative:

Our culture prioritizes money, consumption and growth above all else. A strong economy is a better measure of social progress and stability than a focus on well-being.

Most influential message points to build a well-being narrative

- Increasing individual and community well-being can increase dignity, purpose, connection and productivity.
 - These days, people feel increasingly disconnected from one other, their community and their country which leads to disunity and harms people, families and communities.
- When the community helps to set priorities for achieving individual and community well-being, there is a greater sense of belonging, purpose and connection for all. (This is one of the most democratic ways to make decisions.)
- When we focus on well-being, growth becomes sustainable and creates opportunities for more people.

Effective supporting points to express and demonstrate

- Well-being is by nature collective, considering relationships among people, interconnectivity of cultures and societies, and relationships between people and the planet.
- To understand whether individuals and communities have well-being, we have to look at combined data about health, education, jobs and other factors, and we have to ask people how they are doing.
 - This doesn't have to mean completely reinventing what we have; it means looking at how existing measures affect and are affected by each other, so solutions can be interrelated.
- Advancing shared well-being is the domain of both public and private sectors.

INITIAL IDEAS FOR BROADENING THE NARRATIVE OF PROGRESS

We see the crucial next step as moving from hypothesis and early insights to proof of concept. If you're working on issues that would benefit from a well-being narrative, please try on the insights in this document and consider the actions in this section.

As you work with influencers, system-builders, storytellers and others, invite them to make shifts in the way they describe, pursue and report on progress, through a well-being lens.

Given this is an initial narrative guide, we provide ideas below, sourced from the grassroots organizations and well-being practitioners as well as **prior work**. These are not tested solutions but can help to catalyze action for ongoing experimentation and action.

AUDIENCE: PUBLIC POLICY DECISION-MAKERS AND INFLUENCERS

Broaden the way you talk about and pursue progress to include well-being across many factors, including a sustainable economy. You might find inspiration in Jackson, Mississippi's "Dignity Economy" work, where they live the value that there are no disposable communities or people and all citizens deserve investment. Louisville, Kentucky, has adopted a "Cultural Wellbeing Index," that centers culture at the "core of human capacities for innovation, including vision, strategy, ingenuity, collaboration and perseverance."

- Work with your community to define, assess and set goals for well-being and track progress toward those goals. This is most effective when done in collaboration with communities, taking into account strengths and what's working, as well as disparities and needs. For tools and support, visit **Civic Wellbeing Partners** and **Wellbeing Economy Alliance**.
- Base policy and budget decisions on data that show a complete picture of how people are doing. Understanding holistic well-being requires a mix of data—as opposed to isolated data like economic growth or health outcomes—to see interconnected issues and systemic solutions.
 - Be sure to include: 1) objective measures across multiple dimensions; 2) subjective data, gleaned by asking people how they are doing; and 3) cultural and historical data that help explain why things are the way they are and the barriers that have been built over time.
- Be inventive about the indicators you are tracking. Well-being can affect many areas of life that can have an impact years later.
- Data are available to see the current state of well-being and track progress. Synthesizing existing data sets can show the full picture of how people are doing across the continuum of life, illuminate assets and opportunities, and evaluate what's working. By considering how existing measures affect and are affected by each other, solutions can be interrelated, not one-dimensional and isolated.
- If new data are needed, multiple tools exist for U.S. cities to track a range of indicators.³⁹ These can be good starting points and offer flexibility to tailor the model to your community.
 - In addition, well-being-oriented data are likely to continue becoming more prevalent as organizations including the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention adopt more holistic measures. See recommendations by the **National Commission to Transform Public Health Data Systems**.

AUDIENCE: RESEARCH IN WELL-BEING AND MEASUREMENT AS WELL AS DATA ANALYTICS

- Consider a broader definition of what constitutes purpose and progress. Look broadly at well-being outcomes as central to monitoring and evaluation when designing, gathering and reporting data.
- Examine how factors such as context and equity, as well as concepts such as dignity, can be better monitored and tracked in well-being surveys and community studies. Consider who is funded to gather, interpret, apply and own well-being data; community-based researchers are vital here.
- The recommendations from the **National Commission to Transform Public Health Data Systems** can be instructive in designing holistic data sets and technological applications that capture information across multiple dimensions of well-being.

AUDIENCE: BUSINESS DECISION-MAKERS, INCLUDING EMPLOYERS

- Base decisions and practices on their impact on well-being, as defined by your employees, customers and other stakeholders; view this as essential to continued operations.
- **Welcoa** and **WIN with Business from the WIN Network** offer tools and learning communities for businesses, organizations and employers.

WELL-BEING NARRATIVES IN ACTION

One of the grassroots collaborators in this work, Elephant Circle, has been incorporating a well-being narrative into their storytelling, messaging and direct actions. For example:

- The organization's name itself, Elephant Circle, is inspired by how elephants give birth, with the herd circling around and offering support and protection. Their model is focused on giving all people a circle of support for the entire perinatal period, ensuring each person is equally capable of self-determination, and that self-determination is supported and amplified. These are key elements of holistic well-being.
- Elephant Circle frames itself as being a part of an ecology, inspired by how species move together, and lives this through practices that prioritize listening and seeing people as whole people.
- For example, in seeking funding for doulas to help pregnant people, the organization found that funders generally focus on doulas as addressing the problems associated with pregnancy. However, Elephant Circle is expanding the idea of a doula's role to not just addressing the needs of pregnant people in terms of preventing harm, but also in terms of creating whole-person well-being.

AUDIENCE: GENERAL PUBLIC (AS COMMUNITY MEMBERS, CONSUMERS AND VOTERS)

- Discuss your priorities for individual and community well-being.
- Ask candidates and elected officials what they are doing to improve well-being through all their actions.
- Hold decision-makers accountable for commitments to improve personal and collective well-being.
- Ask companies you frequent what they are doing to advance shared well-being.

AUDIENCE: NEWS MEDIA

- Consider the relative balance of how you report on progress. Does the morning news report always have to start with the stock market? Might there be another way to indicate how things are going?
- Report on new releases of well-being data, and continually use those data in your work.
 - The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development releases **annual country profiles on well-being** (latest update May 2022), and updates its **well-being database** three times each year.
 - See the list of data sources suggested for policymakers, above, for additional ideas.
- Help stakeholders see that well-being is more than mental health or happiness; it's having what's needed to thrive and create a future. It's a basic need, not a "nice to have."
- For example, see the Well-Being section of The Hill, a U.S. political website with strong readership among lawmakers across the aisle.⁴⁰

TIP

Include well-being information from trusted sources in your work. In the survey, policy influencers and business leaders identified the most trusted sources of information on well-being. We list those below. You can also work within your network to raise awareness of well-being approaches and help your trusted sources reinforce the narrative.

- Community organizers
- Academics and researchers
- Economists

AUDIENCE: ENTERTAINMENT, ARTS AND CULTURE

- Integrate well-being narrative in storytelling. When you depict “the good life,” “success and progress,” or even “the American dream,” is it always about money, consumption and power? Whose voice and priorities are centered in those stories?
- How are “successful people” depicted in your storytelling? Do your characters go after progress, success and happiness in multidimensional ways?
- When you depict communities, what cues do you give to whether they are healthy, vibrant places to live? Is there a sense of societal or shared well-being? Are cultural resources, museums,⁴¹ libraries, community centers and other amenities present? Do you draw workplaces as places where people feel belonging and purpose?

AUDIENCE: EDUCATION SYSTEMS

- Support students’ awareness and understanding of the world in a way that emphasizes striving for well-being, not solely wealth. The success of Professor Laurie Santos’ open-access class at Yale, “The Science of Well-being,” speaks to the desire and demand for this guidance.⁴²

**What other ideas do you have? What are you trying? What do you need?
Share with the project team at wellbeing@rand.org.**

TIP

Remember that repetition matters in advancing new narratives. The economic-centered narrative of progress is deeply entrenched, cemented in the birth of Gross Domestic Product and reinforced for decades. The public accepts stock market reports or unemployment rates as economic news because those are the indicators that have been set and reinforced daily. It takes a while to normalize a different set of concepts, stories and indicators, but it can and does happen.

WHAT'S NEXT

We aim to further explore and advance well-being narratives, including larger scale testing as well as real-time application and evaluation. In the meantime, we're keeping an eye on promising momentum and persistent questions.

As we continue to review the well-being landscape, and through this narrative guide development, we identify areas needing further investigation.

DEVELOPMENTS WE'RE WATCHING THAT COULD ACCELERATE A WELL-BEING NARRATIVE

- The number of countries pursuing a well-being approach is growing.⁴³ Coverage of these decisions, public support or skepticism, and initial outcomes and impact will play a powerful role in establishing the narrative about whether this is the "right" or "wrong" way to pursue progress.
- Federal agencies, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Commerce, are gearing up to set, track and share progress and gaps in well-being indicators. How these indicators are announced, data gathered, and implications shared and applied will be critical for building trust, interest and use. Reflecting the grassroots collaborators' input, they must be grounded in equity, designed and interpreted by communities, and attuned to strengths as well as needs.
- Funders are supporting projects that inform both well-being actions and well-being narratives. How these efforts influence the actions of local policy influencers, what factors sustain an orientation toward well-being in programs and communities, and the extent to which these well-being actions incorporate a consideration of equity and culture in their work will be important to track.

PERSISTENT QUESTIONS

- How do we build a framing definition of well-being that can be embraced by all and better connect with a growing evidence base on well-being?
- To what extent will the voices and actions of grassroots organizations better connect with the efforts of academics and practitioners in well-being? How are decolonization and social justice playing a part in the well-being movement and narrative?
- How should communities and nations continue to establish well-being as a broad and holistic concept, anchored in equity and dignity? How should we ensure that well-being is not conflated with "wellness?"
- How can we build salience around the concept of interconnection and the fact that improving well-being for some has a positive benefit on the well-being of all?^{44,45} Interest in and urgency for this idea is building as researchers, organizations and others look for ways to bridge an increasingly divided public.
- How do we continue to build evidence on the causal links among well-being narratives, well-being actions and well-being outcomes?
- How do we convince stakeholders to prioritize centering individuals and communities who are being left behind and most affected by the current policies and systems in place?
- While this work did not explore the variable of race/ethnicity explicitly, given historical and structural barriers to well-being linked to race/ethnicity, how should this factor into well-being narratives?

- How do we leverage recent experiences, such as COVID-19, to build the case for interconnection and reinforce the value of multi-dimensional decision-making? The **2022 World Happiness Report** showed an increase in charitable giving; is there a commitment to interconnection through this example to leverage?
- How can we innovate within current systems while also amplifying, imagining and creating truly transformative approaches? What is the role of creativity, innovation, and multiple ways of being and knowing in well-being approaches?

THE POWER OF A WELL-BEING NARRATIVE

The shift toward a well-being narrative, inclusive of many voices and values, can support policy, practice and social norm changes that are prioritized across diverse fields, sectors, coalitions and movements, creating the possibility for a far more just, equitable and sustainable world.

Please share your reactions, questions, ideas, additional resources and other insights with the project team at: wellbeing@rand.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE PROJECT TEAM

This exploration, conducted from December 2021 to July 2022, is a joint effort between **RAND Corporation** and **Metropolitan Group**.

- RAND is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges. RAND has been leading efforts in social and economic well-being, including working with cities to measure community and civic well-being and implement policy and programmatic solutions. Anita Chandra worked with the Metropolitan Group team on this project.
- Metropolitan Group is a social impact organization that crafts strategic and creative services to advance a more just and sustainable world. MG has been leading narrative research, development and change strategies related to social justice, public health, environment and sustainability in the United States and internationally. The project team for this work included AAYAAN, Eric Friedenwald-Fishman, Kirsten Gunst, Jennifer Messenger and Thomas Price Lang, with design by Nate Currie. Research was provided by Prime Group, led by Wen-Tsing Choi and Greg Schneiders.

The RAND and Metropolitan Group teams co-developed this resource, which is posted on www.metgroup.com and linked to www.rand.org. It was supported by a grant to RAND by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

As noted earlier, this narrative guide is intended to share early findings from narrative testing, stimulate discussion, and further research on how narratives are playing a role in helping decision-makers broaden their definition of progress to center on well-being, and to solicit informal feedback from peers. The guide has been through a peer review process via RAND's Social and Economic Well-Being division. This report may be quoted and cited without permission. The guide does not necessarily reflect the opinions of RAND's research clients and sponsors.

GRATITUDE

We are grateful to the many contributors to this work; we value and respect your perspectives and transparency and hope you see your work and insights reflected here. A special thank you to our collaborators from grassroots organizations, who helped ensure that community and equity were centered in the conversation and reflected in the final well-being narrative and messaging; and to the well-being practitioners for applying your expertise on well-being and sharing your insights throughout the project.

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- Brian Gómez, nonprofit consultant; board member, Sierra Club and SustainUS
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- Kate Petriw, communications and narratives co-lead, WEAll
- Sue Polis, director, Health and Wellness, National League of Cities
- Julie Rusk, founder, Civic Well-being Partners
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