

# Enhancing well-being for the future

NORFACE (the New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Cooperation in Europe) network, in collaboration with CHANSE (Collaboration of Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe), now proposes a major transnational programme on the topic of “Enhancing Well-Being for the Future”. This theme can be approached from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, primarily social sciences and beyond. It enables and encourages multi-disciplinarity and provides opportunities for pan-European research integrating researchers from different regions of Europe, and for comparisons across various contexts and over-time.

The program **Enhancing well-being for the future** will have three major objectives:

- To advance excellent and internationally leading theoretical and methodological research on well-being, which may be multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and comparative, and which builds synergistically on a pan-European basis.
- To develop and promote theoretically grounded, research-based knowledge and insight into well-being related to issues of high societal, policy, economic and practical relevance, in ways that have the potential to have substantive impact on people’s lives.
- To motivate and support excellence and capacity building for research on well-being on a cross-national basis throughout the countries participating in the call, Europe, and beyond.

## The Concept of Well-being

The conceptualization of well-being can be inclusive, i.e., including many aspects in its definition, or use a more restrictive concept. In addition, there are many similar concepts showing some overlap with the current concepts of well-being. For example, flourishing has close relation to well-being, and this concept has evolved over the years from a predominantly psychological approach complemented with social concern and the search for justice. Another distinction is between more affective evaluations, i.e., asking about a person’s emotional experiences, and more cognitive, judgment-focused evaluations, like life satisfaction or quality of life evaluations.

Some definitions of well-being have been rooted in the hedonic tradition, which accentuated constructs such as happiness, positive affect, low negative affect, and feeling good. Others have developed from the eudaimonic tradition, with an emphasis on positive functioning, psychological functioning, satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and human development. Well-being is, therefore, more than just happiness and life satisfaction; most researchers believe that well-being is a multi-dimensional construct.

Even if there is no consensus around a single definition of well-being, there is general agreement that at minimum well-being includes (i) the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness); (ii) the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depressed mood, anxiety); and (iii) satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning.

Well-being is linked to many desirable outcomes, such as healthier relationships, more prosocial behaviour, better health and life expectancy, greater productivity at work, better income, and increased creativity. Happy people are more likely to get involved with social, political, and environmental issues.

Longitudinal research with children shows that low subjective well-being can be predictive of future problems, while high subjective well-being was found to be predictive of those things that correlate with wellbeing, such as getting married, becoming parents, having a lower likelihood of a divorce, and a lower probability of losing or changing one's job. While well-being research has predominantly focused on the individual level, this concept also has an ecological utility, for example at the work, local community, school, or general societal level; community well-being, defined as the sense of well-being shared by a group, has recently emerged as a relevant concept.

Many indicators that measure living conditions fail to measure what people think and feel about their lives, such as the quality of their relationships, their positive emotions and resilience, the realization of their potential, or their overall satisfaction with life. Therefore, pan-European quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research can enhance the understanding of well-being.

### **Challenges and Themes**

There are a range of predictors, correlates, and causes of subjective well-being, and it is an outcome of diverse developmental processes including beneficial effects for many aspects of cognitive functioning, health, and social relationships. Much well-being research has been primarily data-driven, and an integrative, multi-level understanding of well-being and its reciprocal relationship with other variables is needed, accounting for the dynamics of well-being and its multi-dimensionality. This can include a life-cycle analysis as well as the study of intervention studies, among many approaches.

Therefore, there is a great need for a more coherent European research programme on well-being from a multi-level (individual, group, geographical, and demographic) perspective. The aim of this call is to stimulate research projects aiming to gain systematic knowledge on mechanisms underlying well-being as well as dynamic processes related to how well-being develops over time. This improved understanding of well-being is necessary to create evidence-informed interventions or policies on how to increase well-being for the future and make these improvements sustainable for all groups of the population. A special focus may also be needed on understanding well-being in specific (e.g., vulnerable) subgroups, including children, migrants, minority groups, and less economically and socially advantaged individuals.

In order to increase the evidence base for interventions, policy and politics, research on actions and interventions on individual, group, community, and national levels to enhance well-being is highly needed. Cross-national European comparisons may increase the understanding how culture, social structures, institutions, and contexts are reciprocally related to well-being. This may enable the impact of knowledge mobilization and provide policy-relevant knowledge of importance for political as well as social and economic processes.

There are several important lines of research that are key for the enhancement of well-being. Knowledge is needed on the distribution and determinants of well-being, consequences, potential targets for intervention, and policy options for widespread implementation. The present call proposes to focus the research on the following themes:

- (i) Crises, challenges, and well-being.
- (ii) Environmental challenges and well-being.
- (iii) Well-being and mental health.
- (iv) Well-being, economy, and politics.



The Call will finance the applications with the highest scientific quality, regardless of which theme(s) they relate to. The research needs to be novel and not merely a replication of previous research.

## **Theme 1: Crises, challenges, and well-being**

European countries (as well as countries world-wide) have been confronted with numerous crises and challenges in recent years, many of which are ongoing. This increasing uncertainty includes economic crises, energy crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the current experience of war in Europe, the movement of refugees and migrants into Europe, and the challenges related to climate change impacts. To be able to better respond to these crises and challenges in Europe at a population level, it is important to better understand the effect of well-being-related factors on coping with crises and challenges as well as short- and long-term effects of crises on well-being. Individual and societal resilience in the presence of external shocks is a relevant topic for enhancing well-being in the future.

Surviving crises, including traumatic experiences, can have long-lasting effects on individuals and is one of the most pervasive risk factors for psychopathology but also for somatic, decreased social and occupational functioning, and mortality. Similarly, these experiences can leave long-lasting traces on families, other social groups, and society, including rise in social, economic and educational disparities, social division, and social unrest. However, surviving a crisis and trauma can also lead to personal growth and trigger positive developments on a societal level. Although immediate effects of trauma have been studied extensively, there are still crucial gaps in our understanding of long-term consequences of trauma that can be best addressed using a multi-disciplinary and trans-national research program.

In sum, the first theme focuses on the impact of crises and challenges on well-being, with a specific focus on the *dynamic processes* unfolding over time and in conditions of increasing uncertainty in turbulent times. The research conducted as part of this theme should contribute to the overall aim of enhancing well-being for the future by identifying potential targets for future interventions and contributing to an increased understanding of the driving forces behind changes in well-being.

**Research questions** related to this theme may include but are not restricted to:

Dynamic features of well-being in response to stressors and crises. What are the positive and negative consequences of systemic disruptions on the life and well-being of European citizens? How do the effects of trauma at the different levels (individual, group, society) interact? What are the factors buffering the negative effect of stress, crises, and trauma on well-being? What are the moderators of disruptive vs. growth-related effects of traumatic experiences at an individual and societal level? What is the impact of implemented policy measures on well-being?

Modelling well-being over time and developing prediction models using different data sources, with a specific focus on understanding fluctuations in well-being, e.g., in response to crises and challenges, and using prediction models to identify individuals at risk of decreased well-being and/or identify contextual markers for deterioration in well-being.

Long-term effects of ongoing crises and challenges on well-being at a population level. What role do cultural, political, and economic factors play in this regard?



## Theme 2: Environmental challenges and well-being

It is commonplace knowledge that the living environment influences well-being and health. Much research has focused on intra-individual factors or the impact of social environment. The effects of external environmental as well as national contexts have not been studied in an equally systematic way.

Ongoing climate change is already having considerable impact on well-being and mental health in several ways, including heightened exposure to hazards as well as impact of changes in temperature and the natural environment.

There is an indication of decreased well-being, happiness and mental health among individuals living in cities. This highlights the necessity to understand underlying processes as a possible basis for targeted prevention aimed at increasing urban resilience. Some aspects of the external environment, such as housing and community structure, can have a considerable impact on well-being and mental health, but their details are still poorly understood. Investigating the effects of these factors may have important implications for urban planning, but also infrastructure provided for disadvantaged minority groups, especially in the context of enhancing well-being.

Work-place environment also plays an important role in shaping well-being. Many changes in the European labour market are likely to have an effect, such as implementation of widespread remote work, virtual coworking at a large scale, flexible work, flexible contracts, as well as legislation and management mechanisms aimed at increasing employment inclusiveness and equality.

The theme deals with the impact of environment and environmental changes on the well-being dynamic, with a specific focus on the effects of urbanization, climate change, and work environments. It should contribute to the overall aim of enhancing well-being for the future by increasing mechanistic understanding and identifying potential targets for future interventions that may be applied to enhance well-being.

**Research questions** related to this theme may include but are not restricted to:

Effect of urbanicity on well-being: An increasing number of people in Europe live in cities, and cities also host the largest number of disadvantaged minorities. There is indication of decreased well-being and mental health in populations born in and living in cities, highlighting the necessity to understand underlying processes as a possible basis for targeted prevention aimed at increasing urban resilience.

Effect of workplace and work organization on well-being: Studies indicate that subjective well-being is causally linked to higher productivity on the job, more creativity and self-regulation and better citizenship behaviour. More research is needed, particularly from a cross-country perspective, to enhance the evidence-based for increasing well-being in the workplaces including the platform economy. This includes examining processes and efforts that may have increased in turbulent times such as the importance of job characteristics, notably, scope of creativity, autonomy, and flexibility, as well as type of contract, features of work environment, such as diversity, equality and inclusiveness, and managerial practices and legal regulations.

Effects of housing, and community structure on well-being: Rise in the cost of living, low housing affordability creates new inequalities and generational tensions, strengthened by financial uncertainty and labour insecurity. Spatial organization of neighbourhoods, their accessibility, quality of amenities, green spaces, and infrastructure, has a direct effect on well-being of inhabitants, but also an indirect effect via quality of neighborhood ties, interactions, and cohesion. It is important to understand how well-being can be enhanced by spatial designs aimed at accommodating diversity and eradicating inequality.



Effect of climate change on well-being: Ongoing climate change is already having considerable impact on well-being and mental health in several ways, including heightened exposure to hazards well as the impact of changes in temperature and the natural environment. This may also include psychological reactions to the threat of climate change (eco-anxiety or fear of climate change).

### **Theme 3: Well-being and mental health**

A developmental perspective on mental health among adolescents clearly indicates the shortcomings of using a traditional unidimensional deficit model of mental health, where mental health is regarded as the absence of mental disease. Expanding the perspective from a symptom- and problem-oriented view to a more positive and asset-based perspective adds additional value to studies of mental health and allows a better understanding of the processes that may result in enhancing both mental health and well-being.

At the same time, well-being and mental health are clearly related, and many of the factors showing an impact on well-being discussed in this call have also been shown to severely impact mental health. Therefore, the third theme focuses on a better understanding of the relationship between well-being and mental health particularly in the conditions of turbulent times. Research proposals for this theme should clearly go beyond static conceptualizations of these two factors and focus explicitly on the dynamic interaction of these processes over time, including responses to disruptions, crises, or challenges.

**Research questions** related to this theme may include but are not restricted to:

Uncovering the development of mental health and well-being among children and adolescents. Research is needed to better understand the development of well-being and mental health in children and adolescents, including the identification of distal and proximal causal factors, the role of the educational system, and the responses to disruptions and crises.

Similarly, investigating the long-term trajectories of well-being and mental health and their interaction beyond adolescence appears promising. A further possibility would be to have a generational perspective, thus applying a multi-generational life course perspective. A family perspective is also relevant for the intergenerational transmission of values and identities.

Building the basis for future population-based and individual-based interventions: It can be expected that promoting well-being has a preventive effect for the development of mental health problems. However, universal prevention in unselected samples typically shows only very small effects, most of which are not sustained over time. To build the basis for more targeted preventative interventions in the future, research examining potential targets for such interventions are needed.

### **Theme 4: Well-being, economy, and politics**

One of the focal points in well-being research is formed by the distribution of well-being in relation to income, age, education, geography, and other social, political, and economic factors. The inequality in well-being has also prompted much policy interest in left behind places, old industrial areas, run-down urban neighborhoods, less privileged ethnic minorities etc. It turns out that the interaction between people and places – through the link with place-based characteristics of an area – is important in shaping individual and group well-being.

Child poverty, particularly, when persistent over several years, is of concern not only for its immediate effect on this vulnerable group but also because of larger-term effects and its contribution to sustainable cycles of deprivation. Analysis of the influence of national policy and politics regarding equality on dynamics of well-being in different population sections is warranted. A further analysis of the impact of



economic growth with or without growing inequality on well-being in Europe, and the sustainability of the welfare state, could give policy-relevant knowledge.

Societal-level well-being complements individual, work, and community perspectives. Countries differ substantially in their levels of well-being. Studies have shown that societies with higher well-being are those that are more economically developed, have effective governments with low levels of corruption, have high levels of trust, and can meet the citizens' basic needs for food and health. Cultural and institutional factors also play a role in the national well-being. Therefore, well-being at the national level has been proposed as a measure of prosperity of nations that is complementary to GNP.

**Research questions** related to this theme may include but are not restricted to:

Analysis of economic growth and well-being: the impact of economic growth on well-being in countries with or without increasing inequalities seems highly relevant. Economic growth and development also include analysis on the welfare state and the labour market, among others.

Well-being of marginalized groups: Recognition and social presence of minority groups is crucial for their members' well-being but is also impacting the dominant minorities. It is relevant to study how the institutional provisions created to accommodate marginalized groups translate into their well-being, including their integration and relations with the wider society, especially from a comparative perspective.

Social and political polarization and well-being: the negative effect of inequality on individual and societal well-being has been studied mostly in relation to economic inequalities. There is a need to understand how political polarization and mobilization of pre-existing cleavages impacts well-being at both individual and societal level, and what factors can 'cushion' the negative effect of social and political conflict on well-being.

Well-being economics in political reality: well-being economics aims to actively use well-being metrics and tools to inform government priorities and policy making. Several countries have explicit policies related to well-being. Therefore, a comparative study on these policies or on the development of the well-being economy in Europe would be timely and relevant.

### **Cross-cutting Perspective**

The program will support research that addresses one or more of the four major themes. In addition, there are four essential cross-cutting themes of relevance for the program.

(i) Rethinking well-being and its measurement is critical for pan-European well-being research. Further development of theory and concepts of wellbeing as well as its measurement is a prerequisite for understanding the core of well-being. Therefore, theoretical, and methodological considerations are essential for research included in this call.

(ii) Interdisciplinary research is fundamental to this programme, which acknowledges the value of adding theoretical and methodological tools from several scientific disciplines in researching well-being. Moreover, the research can also be transdisciplinary and engage society, policymakers, and other stakeholders during and after the project.

(iii) Inequality is an important facet of well-being research. The distribution and driving forces behind inequalities, including differences between gender, age groups, socioeconomic strata and ethnicity are important considerations in researching well-being.



(iv) The research should include a pan-European perspective and a comparative focus on well-being. Applicants are encouraged to compare across European geographies and beyond, from different types of welfare regimes, historical legacies, different family patterns, household configurations.

Pre-announcement



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