

# **The Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies: A global movement for a global challenge**

## **Introduction**

Is life getting better? Are our societies making progress? Indeed, what does “progress” mean to the world’s citizens? There can be few questions of greater importance in today’s rapidly changing world. And yet how many of us have the evidence to answer these questions? For the greater part of the twentieth century, economic indicators - such as gross domestic product (GDP), gross national product (GNP) or the economic growth rate - came to be used as a proxy measure of a nation’s overall well-being. However, citizens are increasingly concerned with their quality of life.

In recent years, a consensus has emerged around the need to develop a more comprehensive view of societal progress, taking into account social, environmental and economic concerns, rather than focusing mainly on economic indicators. The Istanbul Declaration, signed in July 2007 by the United Nations, the OECD, the World Bank and several other organisations ([www.oecd.org/progress](http://www.oecd.org/progress)), calls statistical offices to work alongside other stakeholders to take this agenda forward. The Global Project on “Measuring the Progress of Societies”, hosted by the OECD and carried out as “network of networks” among several international organisations and other institutions, seeks to become the worldwide reference point for those who wish to understand and measure the progress of their societies.

## **Why is the measurement of societal progress important?**

### *Information and democracy*

Information plays a vital role in economic and political processes. The increase in available information, coupled with advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT), has changed the ways in which markets and societies work. However, the ideal of a “fully informed decision maker” is far from the case: although citizens are constantly bombarded by information, this information is not necessarily translated into knowledge. This is a key issue for democracy. The better an electorate is able to hold its policy makers accountable through evidence of their performance, the greater the incentive for policy makers to make better policy.

In the last ten years, there has been an explosion of interest in producing measures of societal progress. Initiatives to develop sets of progress indicators are being run around the world, in rich and poor countries, at local, national and regional level, and by many different types of organisation including governmental agencies, non-profit foundations, academic institutions, and community groups. More recently, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy has established in 2008 the “Commission on measuring economic performance and social progress”, chaired by Joseph Stiglitz and participated by four Nobel Laureates and several world experts. The World Economic Forum has established the Global Council on “Benchmarking progress in societies”, which is chaired by the OECD’s Chief Statistician. A number of national initiatives have also been launched to engage whole societies in the measurement of their progress using key statistical indicators.

Hundreds of initiatives are assessing the progress of local communities.

### **Different approaches**

Many approaches are possible to measure societal progress, but they generally fall into three broad types: the extension of the basic national accounts schemes to cover social and environmental dimensions; the use of a wide range of indicators referring to economic, social and environmental dimensions (the use of composite indicators to summarise them in a single number is also possible); and the use of “subjective” measures of well-being, life-satisfaction or happiness. Each approach has some strengths and weaknesses, but the most promising (and feasible in the medium term) approach seems the second one – the use of indicator sets - with two important qualifications:

- first, the integration of objective and subjective indicators is now considered more positively than some years ago, as the latter have demonstrated to provide important and additional information to evaluate several dimensions of well-being (health, relational goods, etc.);
- second, the selection of key indicators is a political process and needs to be carried out in a democratic way, i.e. with the involvement of all components of the society (government, opposition, trade unions, business associations, civil society, etc.), to provide a “bipartisan” legitimacy to the indicators set, a necessary condition to have it trusted by citizens and recognised as shared knowledge.

### **The Istanbul Declaration**

In recognition of the emergence of this world movement, the OECD, in collaboration with other international organisations, ran the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Forum in Istanbul in June 2007 taking as its theme: “Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies”. Some 1200 people, from over 130 countries attended.

The conference led to the Istanbul Declaration, signed by the European Commission, the Organisation of the Islamic Countries, the OECD, the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF, UNESCO, the United Nations Fund for Partnership, the World Bank, and several other organisations. It calls for action to identify what “progress” means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to stimulate international debate, based on solid statistical data and indicators, on both global issues of societal progress and how societies compare. The World Forum participants also shared the view that the world needs leadership in this area. With this in mind the OECD, decided to work towards the establishment of a Global Project on Measuring Progress to provide guidance and to encourage discussion at an international level on these key issues.

## **The Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies**

### *Goals and activities*

The Project mission statement says that “the project is open to all sectors of society” and aims to assist societies to measure their progress, by assisting with:

- **What to measure?** To measure progress one needs to know what it looks like. Progress undoubtedly means different things to different societies, and we will encourage and assist societies to have a dialogue about what progress means to them. The Project is developing

guidelines on how to organise initiatives to measure level at national and local levels.

- **How to measure?** Working with experts from around the world the Project will develop a better understanding of how progress can be measured – especially in emerging and complex areas not yet covered by statistical standards. There is consensus that these areas (such as safety, human rights, different aspects of quality of life, etc.) are important but much less consensus about how progress in them should be understood and assessed. Developing an accurate and representative set of progress measures for a society can be challenging, especially for developing countries. The Project will prepare a handbook and deliver training courses and other support for those who need it. If information on progress is to be used, it must be trusted and seen as accurate and objective: therefore, the Project will develop quality principles for a set of progress measures and will use them to judge whether or not to accredit a set of measures that wants to be associated with the Project.
- **Ensuring that the measures are used.** When good statistics exist they too often go unnoticed or misunderstood by a broad audience. New ICT tools have the potential to bring dramatic improvements: the Project will foster the development of new tools and approaches to help decision makers and citizens develop a better knowledge of their society using statistical information.

The Global Project is a collaborative initiative, which aims to take a “network of networks” structure, providing a space for learning and exchange for all groups and individuals around the world interested in the measurement of societal progress. The main

partners in the Global Project are the OECD, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF, the Inter-American Development Bank, the African Development Bank, the UN Economic Commission for West Asia, the International Association of Auditor Generals, and the European Commission. Several research institutes, non-governmental organizations, and statistical offices from both developing and developed countries are also associated to the Global Project.

The activities of the Global Project will be based around four separate pillars:

- statistical research;
- development of ICT tools to help in transforming statistics into knowledge;
- advocacy and institutional building; and
- development of a global infrastructure about progress.

Several outputs and activities are foreseen over the next biennium. They include the publication of handbooks on Measuring Progress at national and local levels; various training materials and courses; reports on how to measure relevant dimensions of societal progress and the development of “Wiki-Progress”, a global online platform to help everyone around the world understand and debate if the world itself or a particular region is making progress by means of statistical indicators.

The Global Project has gathered momentum since the second World Forum in Istanbul and is currently advising some national initiatives carried out by other institutions.

The Global Project:

- Does not aim to develop a common set of progress measures for the entire world, rather it aims to foster discussion within each society about the meaning of progress.
- Does not aim to replace the vital statistical work which has been carried out in association with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and other existing strategies. MDG indicators are proving to be a useful tool for tracking progress towards the development objectives set out in the MDG strategy. The efforts of the Global project to encourage discussion in the developing and developed world on what progress means is intended to complement existing statistical projects, rather than replace them.
- Is not purely about measuring happiness. Societal well-being and change are highly complex phenomena which will never fully be encapsulated by any number or set of numbers, however sophisticated.

### **Towards the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Forum**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> World Forum on “Statistics, Knowledge and Policy” will be held in Busan, South Korea on 27-30 October 2009. The Forum will attract some 1 500 high level participants with a mixture of politicians and policy makers, opinion leaders, Nobel laureates, statisticians, academics, journalists and representatives of civil society, from over 130 countries. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Forum, organised by the OECD, the Korean national statistical office and the Government of Korea, builds on the outcomes of the previous World Forums and the Istanbul Declaration.

In the run-up to the Korean Forum, regional and thematic events will be organised around the world.