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T20 Policy Brief

Task Force 06

STRENGTHENING MULTILATERALISM AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Reframing The Concept of Well-Being and One Health Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge

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Abstract

Human and environmental health are intrinsically linked. The 'One Health' framework is connected to the concept of planetary boundaries within which humanity is safe. However, a skewed focus on economic growth as a measure of development and wellbeing has led to a human disconnect with nature. Attempts to address the social and environmental repercussions of the economic model, measured by gross domestic product (GDP), have seen the emergence of alternative narratives and well-being metrics. Nonetheless, if economic growth is seen as the main indicator of human wellbeing and advancement, we may push planetary boundaries to their limits and reach critical ecosystem tipping points. This narrow view continues to contribute to societal disparities, emerging mental health challenges, and ongoing environmental degradation.

This policy brief provides insight into nature-based Indigenous ontology, which is evolving into relational well-being within the scholarship of well-being science. It transcends the reductionist approach to well-being and One Health. Specifically, it evaluates the interconnection of health, well-being, and sustainability through the lens of Indigenous Knowledge, reconciling the discourse 'Beyond GDP'. This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being with both people and nature. This brief presents valuable perspectives on modernity's challenges of mental, physiological, and environmental health stemming from disconnection between humans and nature. It offers recommendations to develop an indigenous-inspired well-being index, fostered by inner capability growth and the (re)adoption of holistic vision of living in harmony with nature.



Diagnosis of the Issue

In the past three decades, the majority of the novel zoonotic infectious diseases originated and spread due to human activities such as ecosystem destruction, land use change, intensification of agriculture and international travel and trade. While development and technological advancements heightened mobility, they also altered ecosystems, leading to unprecedented health impacts. For instance, intensive breeding practices and extensive use of pesticides and fertilizers in farming induce stress in organisms (Destoumieux-Garzón et al. 2018). To address this, international organizations such as WHO, FAO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and national entities recognize the significance of interdisciplinary collaboration in the health sector (Mackenzie and Jeggo 2019), but a reductionist approach persists. This is, despite the necessity to move from traditional scientific disciplines to include law, politics, and ethics in sectors such as health, agriculture, land management, and urban planning.

The One Health approach seeks to safeguard the well-being of humans, animals, and the environment across local, national, and global domains. However, the concept has not adequately considered the integration of ecological, environmental, and evolutionary sciences with medicine (Destoumieux-Garzón et al. 2018). This challenge extends beyond One Health and is instead symptomatic across science, policy, and practice. It reflects the dominance of the Western knowledge system imposed worldwide, displacing non-Western knowledge systems, comprising many Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs). Over time, the resulting 'capitalist ideology of good life' or well-being has led to environmental destruction, wealth disparities, and emerging mental health challenges (Balogun, Weru, and Shen 2023), occurring amidst pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss.



Considering these characteristics of ‘modernity and human advancement’, One Health would be difficult without understanding how human-nature relationships benefit human health and well-being. In July 2022, a non-binding legal resolution of the UN requested nations to increase efforts to ensure their people have the right to access a "clean, healthy and sustainable environment” (UN 2022). However, for One Health to reach its objectives, there is a need to link One Health with environmental or ecological health 'EcoHealth' (Destoumieux-Garzón et al. 2018).

Human well-being and EcoHealth Beyond GDP

The current persistent pursuit of economic growth, as measured by the gross domestic product (GDP) indicator, overlooks socio-economic inequality and environmental health. This individualistic view inherited from the colonial era, separated individual health and well-being from both societal well-being and planetary health. Over the last three decades, international efforts have been made to measure well-being and human development beyond GDP. For instance, OECD's Better Life Index reflects on the risks across environmental and social systems for well-being; the UN's Human Development Index (HDI) includes education and health; and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) measures societal progress through cultural diversity, community vitality, psychological well-being, and ecological diversity. While more inclusive, these indicators inadequately reflect bottom-up perceptions necessary to achieve sustainability, and disagreement continues on the understanding and measurement of well-being (Cooke, Melchert, and Connor 2016).

Disconnecting human well-being from nature for societal progress has resulted in unintended consequences for achieving holistic health. Despite significant advancements in reducing mortality from infectious diseases, environmental changes and exposure to



toxic substances have led to an increase in unhealthy lifestyles and chronic non-infectious diseases (Destoumieux-Garzón et al. 2018). According to a 2018 Lancet study, approximately 1.1 billion people of the global population are affected by mental health challenges (Frankish, Boyce, and Horton 2018). Disregarding Indigenous knowledge and values, along with omitting their unique perspective on relational well being, as a measure of progress and human flourishing, may be contributing to rising mental health concerns (Balogun, Weru, and Shen 2023). Relational well-being goes beyond viewing individuals in relationships with others or objects; rather, individuals identify as the relationships they engage in (White and Jha 2023). IPLCs perceive the Earth as a nurturing Mother, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings. Such integration of relational well-being and understanding of human-nature connection is vital for future health beyond medicine. Thus, the continued exclusion of IPLC ontology nationally and internationally poses a barrier to incorporating their unique perspectives into health, well-being, and sustainability science and policy.



Recommendations

The G20 nations need to critically consider the shift away from a global system entrenched in separatist ideologies, dominance, and violence towards one that embraces all life in harmonious coexistence. Thus, achieving One Health requires embracing IPLCs ontology and their relational and nature-inclusive understanding of well-being. In this light, we propose the following recommendations:

Invest in and promote Indigenous knowledge for One Health and well-being

G20 nations with Indigenous populations should advocate for and invest in integrating Indigenous knowledge and their relational views into national policies, thereby advancing the One Health approach. This involves accepting intellectual diversity on a global scale, incorporating Indigenous ontology, and fostering a "glocal" perspective. IPLC perspective embraces the relationships between individuals and larger collectives or biosphere. Emerging neuroscientific investigations are revealing that Indigenous kin relational or self-transcendent emotions like gratitude, compassion, and awe are at the core of Indigenous philosophies (Celidwen and Keltner 2023). This motivates individuals to act in favour of environmental protection (Thiermann and Sheate 2020).

For example, in 2024, India launched a global initiative called 'Lifestyle for the Environment' (LiFE) aimed at leveraging ancient wisdom to encourage individual and community efforts to conserve natural resources. Recognizing Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) to address One Health challenges would enable G20 nations to invest in research aligned with Indigenous Peoples' needs and rights, and the documentation of their knowledge systems. This must be carried out keeping in mind the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) as outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

Peoples (UNDRIP).

G20 nations must further explore and understand how Indigenous knowledge can contribute to the One Health approach. These efforts should be supported by Indigenous representative councils and dedicated national funds to formally reclaim and revitalize local cultural traditions, practices, and historical knowledge. For instance, Brazil has begun the documentation of Indigenous languages in line with UNESCO's Decade of Indigenous Languages from 2022 to 2032. The respect and responsibility for a relational existence encoded in Indigenous languages will unlock their expression and encoded meaning (Balogun, Weru, and Shen 2023). Furthermore, nations should establish (un)learning educational policies and programmes, for individuals to understand Indigenous 'ways of knowing' combined with Western knowledge. This "two-eyed seeing" approach (coined by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall in 2004) will empower individuals to weave multiple perspectives through deep listening and reflecting without privileging one over the other (Pipe and Stephens 2023).

Catalyze human-nature relationship to link health and well-being with sustainability

G20 nations should promote initiatives and implement policies that enhance human nature connection. This requires G20 nations to acknowledge that the current global economic structures, based on a separatist model of humans, are now giving rise to new forms of injustice and insecurity. Given that this model undermines the relationships that are fundamental to human psychological needs. In contrast, IPLCs perceive humans as inseparable from nature, intertwining thought patterns and emotional experiences with principles of mutual existence (Celidwen and Keltner 2023). This mutuality in relationships is governed by the values of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and



responsibility, ensuring the co-existence of human and planetary well-being (Balogun, Weru, and Shen 2023). Thus, reconnecting individuals with nature is essential for decoupling economic growth from environmental impact (Ives et al. 2018). This perspective allows for adapting national structures and policies towards care, protection, and the regeneration of nature to safeguard present and future generations.

G20 nations should invest in building the psychological or inner capabilities of their citizens through natural (re)connections that have been shown to treat mental conditions such as depression and anxiety, by providing hope and coping mechanisms for resilience building (Hatala et al. 2020). An exemplary practice incorporated into Japan's national health programme is forest bathing, or *shinrin-yoku*, which involves a deliberate and reflective immersion in the forest environment using all senses to experience seeing, sounds, and scents. Furthermore, national investments in public space, programmes and structures focused on promoting the psychological benefits of green infrastructure, ecosystem restoration, urban greening, and biodiversity conservation would help achieve the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) and sustainability goals.

Spearhead new well-being measurements through knowledge exchange and strategic cooperation

G20 nations should leverage their economic and biocultural diversity to prioritize 'life over lifestyle' and promote a planetary 'more-than-human' identity. They must invest in enhancing strategic cooperation and collaboration for knowledge exchange and capacity building to develop a comprehensive and culturally sensitive relational well-being index. The growth of relational well-being should be measured with the same importance as income growth and wealth accumulation, guided by the Declaration of Human Rights,



the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination. Strategic cooperation among G20 nations should initiate and institutionalize a standardized set of recommendations to measure this growth, similar to the current GDP's System of National Accounts (SNA). Nations that enhance their citizens' inner capabilities, fostering healthy relationships with the self, others, and nature, should be the most valued. By enhancing citizens' inner capabilities through a human-nature (re)connection, individuals rediscover themselves as agents of change, rather than objects to be changed (Thiermann and Sheate 2020). They are empowered to create innovative solutions for societal benefit beyond merely pursuing economic gain (Sen 2000). Such inner capabilities can be developed through human-nature educational and creative arts programmes for enhancing emotional intelligence and building life skills.

Strategic cooperation among G20 nations should pave the way for creating holistic well being by linking efforts of global initiatives like the Transformation Initiative on Well being, Innovation, Sustainability, and Equity (WiSE) of the United Nations University and the Fifth Element Initiative of the Club of Rome, which explore the interconnections between inner capabilities, well-being, and sustainability transformation. The findings of these Initiatives should be linked with the ongoing work of transnational networks such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), and the International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI), which aim to measure nature-positive outcomes for society. An indigenous-inspired well-being index could measure national growth in inner capabilities that foster nature positive outcomes both within and beyond national borders in a new economic model such as the recent Brazilian initiative to promote Indigenous economy.



Scenario of outcomes

'A stitch in time saves nine' fits best in the context of the debate this brief tries to cover. Innovative climate and sustainability solutions can be unlocked by legitimately including ILK in health, well-being, and sustainability debates and research. This would enhance inner capabilities, foster reconnection with nature, and address current mental health issues. Although there are ongoing debates, no "real" solution to address current thought and behavioural patterns has emerged. This brief offers options that minimize trade-offs with other strategies while enhancing synergies across various objectives, including promoting holistic health, building climate resilience, and achieving the 'living in harmony with nature' vision by 2050.

High synergies with global and national goals for future good life

Well-being conceptualizations must be central to national goals and policies. This will help to utilize existing knowledge and infrastructure to implement global goals as a part of health, climate change, biodiversity conservation, and sustainability. Should nations empower IPLCs through the documentation of their ancient wisdom on health and well-being, it would be in alignment with the achievement of several SDGs. By prioritizing ILK, for example, the integration of relational well-being measures into national health and environmental policies can be achieved. If implemented, outcomes would feed into the Paris Agreement's Article 7 which promotes accounting for vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems, and integrating traditional knowledge of IPLCs for the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA). Further, it would synergize with the KMGBF's emphasis on the relevance of nature to people for good health and well-being, and nature being vital for human existence and good life. Target 12 of the Framework aims at



biodiversity-inclusive planning, improving human health and well-being, and connection to nature. Furthermore, the suggestions correspond with SDG Goal 3 on good health and well-being and it is in accordance with the sustainable development agenda. However, this integration into the global and national agenda requires strong political leadership.

Stakeholder engagement and social acceptance

The recognition of ILK has been a key topic of discussion during the UN climate change and biodiversity conferences, leading to a rise in Indigenous peoples' participation in decision-making processes. At the same time, there is a risk of (re)traumatization and exploitation of IPLCs if current power dynamics are not adequately addressed. It is crucial to acknowledge that current colonial power dynamics, which sustain narratives of societal incapacity for substantial and equitable change pose a threat to all of us (Gram-Hanssen 2021). Therefore, Indigenous engagement must be carried out with reflectivity, sensitivity, consultation, and collaboration to foster their participation. It is necessary to establish trust and reform policies and programmes to fit their needs, although this could be affected by bureaucratic hurdles and red tapism. Addressing these challenges, while embracing the potential scenarios of balancing Indigenous science with contemporary thinking requires decolonized mindsets to foster genuine commitment, collaboration, and a willingness to learn from and engage with Indigenous peoples.

Resources and capacities for implementation

Ensuring One Health objectives are met entails high resource investment in knowledge creation following the “two-eyed seeing” principles. This includes knowledge exchange, education, and training for developing capabilities to achieve the interlinked goals of



climate, biodiversity, health, and sustainability. While the low- and middle-income nations continue to face competing priorities such as poverty and infrastructure development, high-income nations struggle to fulfil the global financial pledges of USD 100 billion and USD 200 billion for climate and biodiversity respectively. The ability to achieve these goals will hinge on the mindset shift from “nature-destructive” towards “nature-positive” relationships.

A deep integration of different ways of knowing and learning should become a national research and education priority for G20 nations. This will enable the establishment of a systematic and societal unlearn and relearn processes for intellectual diversity that leverages marginalised knowledge systems. Ultimately, urgent investments are needed for decolonising research and knowledge production, and creating new education and training programmes.

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