

„PNRR: Fonduri pentru România modernă și reformată!”

POLICY BRIEF

EU policies for well-being beyond GDP: From policy screening to legal and institutional recommendations

Authors

Bogdan-Constantin IBANESCU
Andra IFTMIEI
Mihaela CLINCU
Daniela-Andreia DAMIAN
Carmen MOLDOVAN
Andreea Oana IACOBUTA-MIHAITA

Iași, June 2025

SAGES Policy brief no.1



**UNIVERSITATEA
„ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA”
din IAȘI**



Contents

1. Executive summary.....	3
3. Existing legal framework regarding well-being.....	5
4. EU policies and strategies regarding well-being.....	7
Recommendation 1. Make well-being a central pillar of EU strategic documents and policy frameworks	11
Recommendation 2. Establish a unitary and coherent EU approach to well-being	12
Recommendation 3. Develop a European well-being framework directive	13
Recommendation 4. Create a European Agency or Observatory for Well-Being	14
Recommendation 5. Strengthen the EU approach to mental health and vulnerable groups	15
Recommendation 6. Develop a specific EU initiative on children's digital well-being	16
Recommendation 7. Improve democratic participation and territorial adaptation in well-being policies	17
6. Concluding recommendation.....	17

1. Executive summary

This policy brief examines how well-being beyond GDP is reflected in European Union policy, law, and governance. It identifies a fragmented landscape in which well-being appears across health, social, environmental, employment, digital, and cohesion policies, yet remains weakly integrated into a common strategic and institutional framework.

The analysis shows that the EU does not currently recognise well-being as an autonomous legal right. Instead, well-being is indirectly addressed through several legal and policy instruments, including the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Pillar of Social Rights, EU health programmes, environmental strategies, and employment-related directives. These instruments cover important dimensions such as human dignity, healthcare, fair working conditions, social protection, environmental quality, work-life balance, and access to essential services. However, their contribution to well-being remains dispersed and insufficiently visible to citizens, Member States, regional authorities, and local actors.

This fragmentation constrains the ability of EU institutions and Member States to translate well-being into coordinated, measurable, and preventive policy action. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the political visibility of well-being, but a crisis-driven approach is insufficient for a long-term policy agenda. Overall, the brief calls for a shift from dispersed references to a coherent European well-being architecture that makes progress beyond GDP visible, measurable, and meaningful to citizens.

2. The fragmented visibility of well-being in EU policy frameworks

Well-being has become an increasingly important concept in European policy debates, especially in the broader context of moving beyond GDP as the dominant measure of progress. However, despite its relevance, the concept still appears insufficiently translated into EU policies in a clear, visible, and operational manner. From the perspective of citizens, national authorities, regional actors, and local administrations, well-being often remains more of a guiding principle than a fully structured policy objective. The issue is not necessarily a lack of

interest at the European level. On the contrary, well-being is present in multiple policy areas and institutional documents. The problem seems to be a lack of coordination, coherence, and visibility across institutions, policy sectors, and levels of governance.

At present, well-being is addressed through several thematic lenses. It appears in health-related documents, in social policy frameworks, in debates on quality of life, in cohesion policy, in environmental strategies, and in discussions on resilience and sustainability. This confirms that the presence of this concept is dispersed. It is often treated as a secondary or implicit outcome of other policies rather than as a central and integrated objective. This dispersion may become problematic. If the well-being dimension is not properly framed at EU level, it becomes more difficult for Member States, regions, and local authorities to translate European orientations into their own contexts. Without a coherent and visible EU-level framing, national and subnational actors may struggle to adopt well-being-oriented approaches in a coordinated, structured, and strategically backed manner.

Because well-being directly concerns citizens' lives, this dispersion weakens implementation. Institutions use different definitions, and Member States interpret the concept through distinct priorities, administrative traditions, and policy cultures. Contextual diversity is valuable, but without shared principles and indicators it can produce inconsistency: well-being may be referenced widely without being embedded firmly in decision-making.

The COVID-19 pandemic was perhaps the only recent period when well-being was placed more clearly in the spotlight. During the pandemic, the links between health, social protection, mental well-being, working conditions, housing, education, mobility, and territorial inequalities became highly visible. However, this also reveals an important weakness: well-being tends to become politically central when the need for it is at its peak. This crisis-driven visibility is insufficient. Well-being should not be treated mainly as an emergency concern, activated during periods of shock. It should be considered continuously, during normal periods as well as during crises, as part of a preventive, structural, and long-term policy approach.

A second issue concerns the EU's position relative to other international organisations. Although the EU increasingly gives greater prominence to well-being, its framework remains less systematic than the OECD's. The EU nevertheless has stronger regulatory, budgetary, and multilevel-governance instruments and is more directly visible to citizens. It is therefore well placed to develop an accessible and operational approach to well-being beyond GDP.

Studying well-being today is therefore important because it concerns measurement, governance, visibility, coordination, and implementation. The challenge is not simply to

acknowledge that well-being matters, but to understand how it can be integrated into policies in a more unitary and effective way. A more coherent EU approach is required, one that can connect health, social inclusion, territorial cohesion, environmental quality, legal guarantees, and administrative capacity. The key question is how the EU can build a coherent framework while preserving the multidimensional and context-sensitive nature of well-being.

3. Existing legal framework regarding well-being

At present, the European Union does not recognise well-being as a distinct legal right. Instead, it addresses the concept indirectly, through a wide range of legal instruments and policy strategies concerning health, social protection, employment, education, environmental quality, gender equality, work-life balance, territorial cohesion, and access to essential services. From this perspective, well-being functions less as a codified legal entitlement and more as a cross-cutting objective that informs several areas of EU action.

The right to well-being may be understood as an emerging legal and policy concept that connects individual and collective well-being with broader human rights, social rights, environmental protection, and public policy frameworks. It refers to the recognition and protection of the conditions that allow people to live healthy, secure, dignified, and fulfilling lives. However, in the current European legal order, well-being is not generally formulated as a single, autonomous and directly enforceable right. Rather, its substance is embedded in a broader set of legal guarantees, institutional objectives, and policy commitments.

A first relevant legal basis can be found in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Article 9 introduces a horizontal social clause, requiring the Union, when defining and implementing its policies and activities, to take into account requirements linked to a high level of employment, adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, education, training, and human health. Article 151 further refers to the promotion of employment, improved living and working conditions, adequate social protection, social

dialogue, and the development of human resources, all of which are closely connected to a broader understanding of well-being (European Union, 2016).

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union also contains several provisions that contribute to the legal architecture of well-being. Although the Charter does not expressly establish a right to well-being, it protects rights and principles that are essential to it. These include human dignity, the right to life and integrity of the person, respect for private and family life, non-discrimination, healthcare, fair and just working conditions, social security and social assistance, and environmental protection. In particular, Article 1 on human dignity, Article 31 on fair and just working conditions, Article 35 on healthcare, and Article 37 on environmental protection provide important legal references for understanding well-being as a multidimensional concern (European Union, 2012).

The European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed in 2017, represents another central reference point. It sets out 20 principles structured around equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. Although it is not legally binding in the same way as treaty provisions or directives, it provides a strong political and normative framework for EU institutions and Member States. Its relevance for well-being lies in its focus on access to education, active labour market support, gender equality, secure employment, work-life balance, childcare, healthcare, inclusion of people with disabilities, long-term care, housing, and access to essential services (European Commission, 2017).

Health policy is another important component of the EU well-being framework. **The EU4Health Programme 2021–2027** aims to strengthen health systems, improve crisis preparedness, address cross-border health threats, and support access to medicines and medical devices. Similarly, Europe's Beating Cancer Plan connects prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment, and quality of life for patients and survivors. These initiatives show that well-being is strongly present in EU health-related action, even if the term is not always used as a central legal category (European Commission, 2021a; 2021b).

Environmental and sustainability frameworks also contribute directly to well-being. **The European Green Deal and the 8th Environment Action Programme 2021–2030** link environmental protection, climate neutrality, biodiversity, pollution reduction, and resource efficiency with human health and quality of life. These frameworks are particularly relevant because they place well-being in relation to the quality of the living environment, intergenerational responsibility, and the long-term sustainability of European societies (European Commission, 2019; European Union, 2022).

Employment and social policy instruments further reinforce this approach. The European Semester increasingly integrates social and well-being-related indicators into the coordination of economic and fiscal policies, allowing social performance and inequalities to be considered alongside macroeconomic objectives. **The Work-Life Balance Directive** (EU) 2019/1158 is also relevant, as it promotes parental leave, carers' leave, paternity leave, and flexible working arrangements, contributing to gender equality, family life, labour market participation, and quality of life (European Union, 2019).

Overall, the existing legal framework shows that well-being is already present in EU law and policy, but in a fragmented and indirect manner. It is not regulated through one coherent legal instrument, nor is it framed as a unified legal right. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of several legal domains: fundamental rights, social policy, health, employment, environmental protection, and economic governance. Beyond the binding normative texts mentioned above, a series of strategic documents, communications, recommendations, and policy frameworks also contribute to shaping the broader normative environment in which well-being is understood and promoted. These documents are particularly important because they clarify how the concept can be operationalised, even when they do not create directly enforceable legal obligations. Therefore, the main challenge is not the complete absence of well-being from EU law and policy, but the need for a more coherent, visible, and coordinated framework capable of translating well-being into concrete policy action.

4. EU policies and strategies regarding well-being

The question of how to integrate well-being into European policymaking has gained increased attention over the past two decades, reflecting a broader recognition that economic indicators alone cannot adequately reflect the conditions that enable people and communities to flourish.

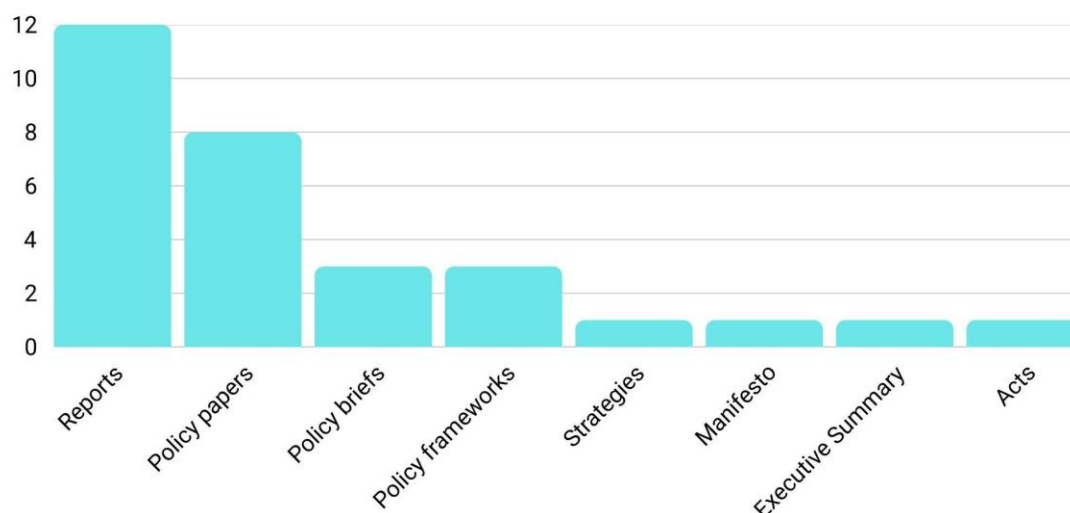


Figure 1. Distribution of well-being concept within international policy documents
Source: Authors' representation

Despite several important advances, the policies and measures remain fragmented, with well-being appearing in multiple documents but lacking a unifying framework (Figure 1).

The Council Conclusions on the Economy of Well-being (2019) marked a turning point by framing well-being as a governance approach and calling for cross-sectoral collaboration, robust indicators, and alignment with the European Pillar of Social Rights and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These conclusions articulated well-being not only as a value in itself, but also as a foundation for economic growth, productivity, fiscal sustainability and societal resilience. They stressed that people's well-being is at the very heart of the EU, as stated in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. In practical terms, the Council called for greater cross-sectoral collaboration between health, education, employment, and social policy in assessing the impact of EU policies. However, subsequent implementation remained partial: despite the gradual incorporation of social and environmental indicators into the European Semester and other sectoral initiatives, no overarching EU well-being strategy, systematic well-being impact assessment mechanism, or harmonised cross-policy monitoring framework emerged (Widuto et al., 2023).

The same year, Finland, which held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU, further elevated the concept by promoting well-being impact assessments and stressing that social cohesion, health, and equality are sources of competitiveness and resilience (European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies et al., 2019). Building on this approach, an EU-level well-being impact assessment should apply to major legislative proposals, strategic

initiatives, and funding programmes with potentially social, health, environmental, or territorial effects. It should be conducted ex ante, during the European Commission's existing impact-assessment process, by the lead Directorate-General under the coordination of the Secretariat-General. The assessment should use a concise set of criteria covering: (i) physical and mental health; (ii) equity and social inclusion; (iii) access to essential services and quality of work; and (iv) environmental quality and territorial cohesion. These effects should subsequently be revisited during the ex post evaluation of the initiative. These political moves at the EU level were complemented by the OECD's analytical work on multidimensional well-being. The OECD argued that an "Economy of Well-being" is one that expands opportunities for upward mobility, reduces inequalities, and ensures sustainability of generations (Llena-Nozal et al., 2019). The evidence showed that investments in education, healthcare, social protection, and gender equality bring benefits beyond GDP, creating a virtuous circle where prosperity and quality of life reinforce one another. For instance, the costs of mental ill-health are estimated at more than 4% of GDP across the EU, while improving gender equality could increase EU GDP by up to 9.6% by 2050 (Llena-Nozal et al., 2019). Such findings underline the economic as well as the social rationale for placing well-being at the centre of EU policy.

The OECD is a leading international source of research and policy guidance on well-being. Over the past decade, it has developed tools for measuring subjective well-being, established policy frameworks, and published comparative reports through the Better Life Initiative. These resources provide useful foundations, while the EU must adapt them to its legal competences, governance system, and territorial diversity.

Beyond these milestones, other EU strategies have also integrated well-being in more specific domains. The European Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (Council of the European Union, 2018) mainstreamed well-being into youth participation and inclusion, developed in close dialogue with youth representatives across Europe.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2021) provides a framework for upward convergence in living and working conditions, while instruments such as the European Semester have gradually broadened their scope from fiscal coordination to include recommendations on health, education, employment, and social inclusion.

More recently, the 2023 and 2025 Strategic Foresight Report (European Commission, 2023; 2025) explicitly placed "sustainability and people's well-being" at the heart of Europe's open strategic autonomy, linking quality of life to the EU's ability to address climate, digital, and geopolitical transitions.

One of the most consistent links in subjective and general well-being is its connection to health, a link that is frequently mentioned in policy documents. In this regard, the EU4Health Programme 2021–2027, launched by the European Commission, aims to improve the level and the quality of health, including mental health, which is expected to have a direct and positive impact on the well-being level of EU citizens (European Commission, 2024). Although health is an essential aspect of well-being, some policymakers may confuse health with overall well-being.

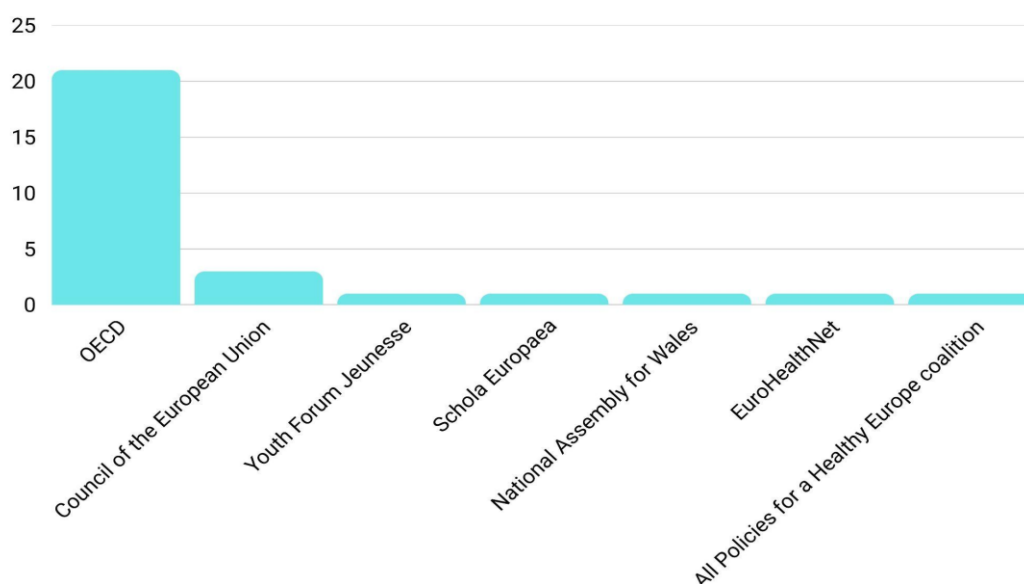


Figure 2. Distribution of well-being policies and measures within international bodies
Source: Authors' representation

Still, sectoral strategies, whether focused on youth, health, or employment, often promote well-being within their own silos, and the policy documents in the field of well-being are widely scattered across international bodies (Figure 2). The European Semester has moved closer to this role, yet its economic surveillance function continues to dominate, and GDP remains the central reference of performance. Moreover, the adoption of well-being indicators across member states is inconsistent, limiting comparability and undermining the EU's ability to monitor collective progress.

In short, the EU has made progress in linking well-being to competitiveness, sustainability, and resilience. The remaining challenge is to convert scattered initiatives into a coherent framework with clear responsibilities, comparable indicators, and mechanisms that influence policy design and resource allocation.

5. Policy recommendations: Towards a coherent EU framework for well-being beyond GDP

Well-being is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of sustainable, inclusive, and resilient societies. However, as shown in the previous sections, its presence in European Union strategic and legal frameworks remains partial, dispersed, and insufficiently operationalised. The EU has developed important initiatives in areas such as health, social rights, environmental sustainability, employment, digital regulation, and mental health, but it still lacks a coherent and binding framework that systematically integrates well-being across all policy domains. To address this gap, the following recommendations are proposed.

Recommendation 1. Make well-being a central pillar of EU strategic documents and policy frameworks

Well-being should be embedded more explicitly in the main strategic frameworks of the European Union, including the European Semester, the European Green Deal, cohesion policy, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the post-2030 agenda for sustainable development. At present, well-being is often present indirectly, as an expected outcome of social, environmental, health, or economic policies. However, this indirect presence is not sufficient to ensure visibility, coherence, or effective implementation.

A first step would be the introduction of a well-being impact assessment for major EU initiatives. Similar to environmental or social impact assessments, this instrument would evaluate how proposed legislation, strategies, and funding programmes affect quality of life, mental health, work-life balance, access to services, social inclusion, environmental quality, and territorial cohesion. Such an assessment would ensure that well-being is considered alongside economic, fiscal, and environmental effects.

A second action should concern measurement. Eurostat's role should be strengthened in the development of harmonised well-being indicators across Member States. These indicators should allow comparability, but also leave sufficient space for national and regional specificities. They should go beyond GDP and include dimensions such as health, mental

health, housing, education, employment quality, environmental conditions, access to public services, digital inclusion, safety, social participation, and territorial inequalities.

To operationalise this integration, a second action should concern measurement. Eurostat, working with national statistical institutes, should develop a framework of harmonised well-being indicators consisting of two components. The first component should comprise a mandatory EU core based on common definitions, measurement methods, reporting intervals, and minimum disaggregation requirements. It should cover health and mental well-being, housing and material conditions, education, employment quality, environmental conditions, access to essential services, digital inclusion, safety, and social participation. This common core would ensure comparability across Member States and support EU-level monitoring. The second component should consist of optional, context-sensitive indicators selected by Member States and regions to reflect specific territorial priorities, such as rural isolation, transport accessibility, cultural participation, local environmental risks, or disparities in access to services. This framework would preserve a comparable European baseline while allowing national and regional authorities to capture the dimensions of well-being that are particularly relevant to their populations and territories.

Finally, well-being should be linked more directly to fiscal, budgetary, and funding processes. Indicators related to well-being could guide allocations under cohesion policy, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, and other EU financial instruments. In this way, well-being would no longer remain only a declarative objective, but would become part of the practical logic of EU investment, monitoring, and evaluation.

Recommendation 2. Establish a unitary and coherent EU approach to well-being

Fragmentation represents the main weakness of the current EU well-being agenda. Health, youth, employment, environment, digital, and social policies each address important components of well-being, but they are not always articulated within a common framework. Without stronger policy integration, the full potential of a well-being approach cannot be realised.

The EU should therefore adopt a European Well-Being Strategy, setting common objectives, targets, principles, and monitoring mechanisms for Member States. This strategy should reflect the principles of the Economy of Well-Being, align with the European Pillar of

Social Rights, and remain coherent with international frameworks such as the OECD well-being approach and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Its purpose would not be to replace existing sectoral policies, but to connect them through a common conceptual and operational framework. This strategy should be accompanied by a well-being policy roadmap, including clear milestones, institutional responsibilities, indicators, and review mechanisms. Such a roadmap would help avoid duplication between policy areas and would make visible the contribution of different EU initiatives to well-being beyond GDP.

To support horizontal coordination, the European Commission could also establish a dedicated well-being coordination unit. This structure would ensure coherence between Directorates-General, monitor the integration of well-being objectives into EU programmes, and support Member States in translating these objectives into national and regional strategies.

At the national level, Member States should be encouraged to develop legal or strategic frameworks requiring governments to define, monitor, and report on long-term well-being goals. These frameworks should involve public authorities, civil society, academia, businesses, and citizens. A quadruple-helix approach would strengthen democratic legitimacy and ensure that well-being objectives reflect both expert knowledge and lived experience.

Recommendation 3. Develop a European well-being framework directive

While well-being is embedded in several EU policy instruments, it lacks a unified legal foundation. Existing references in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and sectoral policies remain fragmented and domain-specific. A European Well-Being Framework Directive could provide Member States with common principles, minimum standards, and reporting obligations, while respecting national competences in health, education, social policy, and territorial governance.

The directive should define well-being as a transversal policy objective integrating health, mental health, social protection, environmental sustainability, decent work, access to essential services, digital rights, and territorial cohesion. It would not impose a uniform model of well-being across the Union, but would establish a common baseline of rights, indicators, and procedural obligations.

Such a directive could include several core elements: minimum standards regarding access to healthcare and mental health services; the integration of well-being impact assessments into EU and national policymaking; common indicators for monitoring progress beyond GDP; and obligations for Member States to report periodically on well-being outcomes and inequalities. It could also require that economic growth and competitiveness objectives be assessed in relation to their effects on social cohesion, quality of life, and environmental sustainability.

The legal feasibility of such an instrument can be linked to Article 9 TFEU, which already requires the Union to take into account employment, social protection, education, training, and human health when defining and implementing its policies. A framework directive would operationalise this obligation more consistently across policy fields. It would also strengthen legal certainty for citizens and provide Member States with clearer guidance on how to balance economic, social, environmental, and health-related objectives.

Recommendation 4. Create a European Agency or Observatory for Well-Being

A stronger institutional architecture is needed to support the implementation of well-being policies at EU level. One possible solution would be the creation of a European Agency for Well-Being or, as a more flexible alternative, a European Observatory for Well-Being Beyond GDP.

The rationale for such a body is clear. Citizens' well-being is a key pillar of social cohesion, democratic resilience, and long-term economic competitiveness. However, well-being policies are currently fragmented across Member States, with different standards, indicators, practices, and levels of institutional capacity. This limits comparability and may deepen disparities in access to prevention, care, support services, and quality-of-life improvements.

A European Agency or Observatory could provide a common methodological framework for measuring well-being across all Member States. It could monitor indicators such as mental health, stress, work-life balance, access to essential services, housing quality, environmental quality, digital well-being, social participation, and territorial disparities. It

could also support the development of common databases and coordinate comparative research projects at European level.

In addition to monitoring, the institution could identify and disseminate best practices, develop prevention guides, and support policy learning between Member States. For example, it could prepare guidelines on preventing burnout, strengthening psychological support, improving work-life balance, reducing loneliness, or addressing territorial inequalities in access to services. This would allow the EU to move from fragmented initiatives towards a more structured and evidence-based approach.

Such an institution should work closely with Eurostat, the European Environment Agency, Eurofound, the European Institute for Gender Equality, the European Labour Authority, and relevant health and digital policy bodies. Its added value would be to bring together dispersed knowledge and translate it into a coherent well-being perspective.

Recommendation 5. Strengthen the EU approach to mental health and vulnerable groups

Mental health should be treated as a central component of well-being, not only as a health-sector issue. The COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, climate anxiety, labour market insecurity, social isolation, and digital pressures have all increased the visibility of mental health challenges across Europe. However, mental health remains unevenly addressed across Member States and across population groups.

The EU should support stronger minimum standards for access to mental health services, early prevention, community-based care, and psychological support in schools, workplaces, prisons, and probation systems. Particular attention should be paid to vulnerable groups, including children and adolescents, elderly people, persons with disabilities, people in detention or probation, migrants, socially isolated persons, and residents of peripheral or disadvantaged territories.

Recent Council of Europe recommendations on the promotion of mental health among prisoners and probationers show the importance of dignity, equal access to care, specialised staff training, screening, consent-based treatment, self-harm protocols, supportive environments, and ethical safeguards. Although this example concerns a specific vulnerable group, it illustrates a broader principle: well-being policies must be inclusive and must reach those who are most exposed to institutional, social, or territorial vulnerabilities.

At EU level, mental health should therefore be integrated into the proposed Well-Being Strategy, the European Semester, social policy coordination, digital policy, education policy, and workplace regulation. This would ensure that mental health is not addressed only through isolated programmes, but as part of a broader well-being architecture.

Recommendation 6. Develop a specific EU initiative on children's digital well-being

Children's and adolescents' mental health has received increasing attention at EU level, especially in the context of digitalisation. Existing instruments such as the Digital Services Act, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, and the Artificial Intelligence Act already contain important provisions relevant to online safety, platform responsibility, harmful content, and data protection. However, these instruments do not fully address children's digital well-being as a distinct and integrated policy concern.

For this reason, the EU should consider a dedicated initiative on the safe and balanced use of electronic devices by children. Rather than necessarily creating an immediately binding act with rigid screen-time limits, the first step could be a European recommendation, action plan, or model legislative framework to guide Member States. This would respect differences in national education, health, and family policies, while establishing common principles.

Such an initiative should prioritise child well-being, healthy development, safety, privacy, and age-appropriate digital participation. It could include guidance on balanced screen time, protection against harmful digital content, parental controls, age-appropriate design, advertising restrictions, data protection, and digital literacy. It should also encourage schools to include digital safety and digital well-being in education programmes, while supporting parents through public awareness campaigns and practical guidance.

Device manufacturers and digital platforms should also have responsibilities. These may include screen-time management tools, child-friendly privacy settings, content filters, clear labelling of age-appropriate content, safety warnings, and transparent usage data for parents or guardians. Special attention should be given to children with disabilities, for whom digital devices may provide essential support, communication, or educational access. Exceptions should also be maintained for emergency, medical, or assistive uses.

The objective of such an initiative should not be to demonise technology, but to ensure that digitalisation supports, rather than undermines, children's well-being. A European

approach would help reduce regulatory fragmentation, support parents and schools, and place children's mental health and development at the centre of digital policy.

Recommendation 7. Improve democratic participation and territorial adaptation in well-being policies

Well-being policies cannot be designed only from the top down. Because well-being is multidimensional and context-sensitive, it must be adapted to territorial realities and citizens' lived experiences. Rural areas, urban neighbourhoods, peripheral regions, cross-border territories, and disadvantaged communities may face very different well-being challenges. The EU should therefore encourage participatory mechanisms in the design, implementation, and monitoring of well-being objectives. Citizens, civil society organisations, local authorities, regional institutions, universities, and the private sector should be involved in defining what well-being means in specific contexts. This would help avoid an overly technocratic approach and would ensure that indicators reflect not only institutional priorities, but also social realities.

Territorial adaptation is particularly important. Well-being should be connected to access to public services, mobility, digital connectivity, housing, environmental quality, employment opportunities, cultural participation, and administrative capacity. EU well-being policies should therefore be sensitive to rural–urban inequalities and to the specific vulnerabilities of peripheral and less developed regions.

6. Concluding recommendation

The EU does not need to start from zero. Well-being is already present in its treaties, rights framework, social policies, health initiatives, environmental strategies, digital regulation, and economic governance mechanisms. The problem is not absence, but fragmentation. The central recommendation is therefore to move from dispersed references to a coherent European well-being architecture. This architecture should combine strategic coordination, legal consolidation, institutional capacity, harmonised indicators, participatory governance, and territorial sensitivity. Only through such an approach can well-being beyond GDP become more than a policy aspiration and develop into a concrete framework for improving citizens' lives across the European Union.

References

- Angela Schwerdtfeger, The Human Rights Dimension in eds. Birgit Peters and Eva Julia Lohse, Sustainability through Participation? Perspectives from National, European and International Law Brill/Nijhoff, Leiden/Boston, 2023
- Council of the European Union. (2018). Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (2018/C 456/01). Official Journal of the European Union.
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2018_456_R_0001
- Council of the European Union. (2019). Council conclusions on the Economy of Well-being (2019/C 400/09). Official Journal of the European Union. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG1126\(06\)&rid=5](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG1126(06)&rid=5)
- Llena-Nozal, A., Martin, N., & Murtin, F. (2019). The economy of well-being: Creating opportunities for people's well-being and economic growth. OECD Statistics Working Papers 2019/02. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/498e9bc7-en>
- European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, Voipio-Pulkki, L. M., Heinonen, N., Korhonen, P., & Mustonen, P. (2019). The quest for more balanced policy and decision making: the economy of well-being. Eurohealth, 25 (3), 23 - 25. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/332511>
- European Commission. (2021). The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/downloads/KE0921008ENN.pdf>
- European Commission. (2023). Strategic Foresight Report 2023. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/SFR-23-beautified-version_en_0.pdf
- European Commission. (2024). EU4Health call for proposals to support a comprehensive, prevention-oriented approach to mental health in the Union. https://hadea.ec.europa.eu/calls-proposals/eu4health-call-proposals-support-comprehensive-prevention-oriented-approach-mental-health-union_en
- European Commission. (2025). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL. Strategic Foresight Report Resilience 2.0: Empowering the EU to thrive amid turbulence and uncertainty COM(2025) 484 final.
https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/2e1f1de3-dff6-44f7-b2a3-1dd8eee396bb_en?filename=COM_2025_484_1_EN.pdf
- OECD. (2013). How's Life? 2013 Measuring Well-being.
<https://share.google/xtSOD0BwrW3EY4xuA>
- OECD. (2024). How's Life? 2024 Well-being and Resilience in Times of Crisis.
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/how-s-life-2024_90ba854a-en.html
- Widuto, A., Evroux, C., & Spinaci, S. (2023). *From growth to 'beyond growth': Concepts and challenges*. European Parliamentary Research Service.
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747107/EPRS_BRI%282023%29747107_EN.pdf

Centrul de Studii Europene din cadrul Facultății de Drept –

Universitatea Alexandru Ioan Cuza din Iași

Iunie 2025

Web page: www.sages.uaic.ro, email: cde@uaic.ro

Material distribuit gratuit.

„Conținutul acestui material nu reprezintă în mod obligatoriu poziția oficială a Uniunii Europene sau a Guvernului României”

„PNRR. Finanțat de Uniunea Europeană - Următoarea Generație UE”

Website - <https://mfe.gov.ro/pnrr/>

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/PNRROficial/>

Cod proiect CF 20/27.07.2023, contract de finanțare nr. MCID - DGGCPNRR 760275/26.03.2024

Proiect finanțat prin Planul Național de Redresare și Reziliență, PNRR-III-C9-2023 – I8_runda 2, Componenta C9. Suport pentru Sectorul Privat, Cercetare, Dezvoltare și Inovare, I8. Dezvoltarea unui program pentru atragerea resurselor umane înalt specializate din străinătate în activități de cercetare, dezvoltare și inovare