

**Review Article**

# Revisiting Subjective Wellbeing to Stimulate Empirical Research in Sub-Saharan Africa

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**Abstract:** This review article focuses on conceptualization, measurement and determinants of Subjective Wellbeing to shade light among researchers in the field of development studies, psychology, sociology, philosophy and economics in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), herein also referred to as a sub-continent. The aim is to revitalize empirical research on Subjective Wellbeing in the sub-continent where there is dearth information about this concept. Such scanty information is attributed to, among others, low interest among researchers to conduct researches on Subjective Wellbeing. The article argues that, although Subjective Wellbeing is difficult to define, researchers in SSA should strive to come up with a common definition that enables cross-country as well as cultural context analysis. In addition, the concept is determined by many variables, such that researches should be conducted in the sub-continent, between and within countries, to find out which ones are the most explanatory variables of Subjective Wellbeing. This is important as it can inform development policy to improve Subjective Wellbeing and development more generally in SSA.

**Keywords:** Subjective Wellbeing, Empirical Research, Sub-Saharan Africa

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## 1. Introduction

Subjective wellbeing (SWB), herein also referred to as wellbeing and/or personal wellbeing is not a new concept in the literature of psychology, sociology, philosophy and economics. This concept is a corner stone in Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia that is commonly translated as wellbeing [1, 2, 3]. Aristotle believes that wellbeing is an overarching goal of all human actions. It is multidimensional concept that is difficult to define. However, as the interest in measuring wellbeing grows in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and elsewhere in the world, it is crucial to know clearly what is measured when one is dealing with this concept [3]. To understand what is measured requires proper concept operationalization. This is important because it can guide researchers to collect data, analyse and interpret the results thereby informing development policy regarding improvement of SWB in the sub-continent. The reason is that SWB is multifaceted and so not limited to material wealth [4].

There is a growing body of literature, in the global north

than in the global south, portraying that wellbeing is directly linked to development, more so, standard of living and quality of life [5, 6, 7, 8]. As such, an improvement in SWB can lead to an improvement in development. Since the 1950s, economic growth and modernization theories have informed development objectives, strategies, interventions and measurement, not only in Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in particular, but also in developed countries, more generally [2, 8]. Following this approach to development, individual countries in SSA experience a mismatch or rather a paradox showing relationship between national level economic growth, which is generally impressive, and people's living standards that has generally remained poor relative to developed countries. To substantiate this paradox between economic growth and people's living standards, economic growth stands at 5% in SSA. However, majority are living in destitution [9]. For instance, [10] reported that 53.3% of the poor people were also destitute in SSA by 2014. Such situation is explained by poor education, health and living standards.

In developing countries like Tanzania, the paradox between

economic growth and people's living standards is more prominent; where in the past 13 years since 2004 the national economic growth has been impressive, standing nearly at 7% per annum, while majority in rural and urban areas are languishing in impoverishment [11, 12]. The fact that destitution deprives people's security and wellbeing [13], significant impoverishment in SSA translates into low SWB. This implies that an objective measurement of people's living standards based on economic perspective is not only narrow, but also inappropriate in SSA. Thus, focus should be on measuring SWB, which is an end for each development endeavour in addition to an economic dimension.

Clearly, among other reasons, the paradox between economic growth and poor living standards in the sub-continent is attributed to the fact that economic growth is wrongly taken as a complete measure of SWB while it does not adequately explain it. The reason is one; the measurement of economic growth involves macroeconomic indicators mainly GDP, per capita income and unemployment, among others. Basically, SWB is a self-evaluation by the people themselves. Although measuring economic growth based on macroeconomic indicators is an objective measurement in nature that uses clearly defined variables to enable cross-country analysis, it explicitly excludes social indicators including, among others, educational attainment, health, political, cultural, environmental, religion and gender issues. In this article, I argue that SWB is a general perfect goal for any development initiative in a society in SSA and elsewhere in the world. It is an appropriate final goal to all development actors including the private sector, currently taken as an engine of growth, and governments to which actors' evaluation of their efforts should be based.

Existing literature including [14] argues that African countries, particularly SSA, have low SWB compared to countries in Northern America like the USA and Canada, and also compared to countries in Western Europe. This observation is largely explained by the fact that SWB is not given considerable emphasis in research to inform policy making process and development, more generally, in SSA, compared to countries like the USA and Canada. The outcome for all these is low SWB. Some poor Latin American countries are reported to have high SWB relative to countries in the Northern Europe, a situation, which is difficult to theorize [14]. Therefore, it is imperative to rethink about SWB, in terms of its conceptualization, measurement and determinants for the benefit of SSA's research and development policy. This can help to revitalize research on SWB that can identify major variables, which can explain SWB in the sub-continent up on which development policy can be formulated, enforced and implemented. Currently, there is dearth information on SWB in SSA. The next sections of this article deal with conceptualizing SWB, its measurement and determinants. Finally, the chapter charts about conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. Conceptualizing Subjective Wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing is a buzzword that lacks universally

accepted definition. The concept is mainly faced with competing interpretations. Some writers have concluded that the question on how wellbeing should be defined is unresolved research agenda in the literature [2, 3]. While some authors including [5] view SWB as a general description of the state of people's life situation, others including [15] view it as people's satisfaction with life as a whole.

Subjective well-being involves a multidimensional evaluation of life, including cognitive judgments of life satisfaction and affective evaluations of emotions and moods [2, 3]. Gender, though hardly features out in the literature of SWB, is an important dimension in conceptualizing and measuring subjective wellbeing, more so in SSA where gender inequality is relatively prominent than in the global north.

According to [3], wellbeing stems from individuals' perceptions of their current situation and their aspirations and goals. In many literatures including [6] the concept of wellbeing is used interchangeably with the concept of living standards and quality of life and so causing efforts to define the concept muddy. It seems that a narrow emphasis on quality of life cannot adequately help us to define SWB. Indeed, it would seem that living standards and quality of life appear to be dimensions of wellbeing rather than all-embracing definitions.

According to [3], some writers discuss the concept in terms of good life. Wellbeing means developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community. Wellbeing should be considered to be a state, a condition of a system in which the essential qualities are relatively stable. [3] also proposes that wellbeing is a balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced. This suggests that the concept is dynamic depending on resources available (skills) and ability to address challenges in life.

Other writers including [16] clearly show that the concept of SWB has two main aspects known as classic components of wellbeing. They include:

- Affective domain, which refers to positive and negative emotions or generally, emotional reactions, and
- Cognitive domain or cognitive evaluation that refers to satisfaction with life.

Based on the available literature, the concept of SWB is multidimensional such that researchers should strive to define it and vigorously come up with a comprehensive definition so that they can measure it properly. A comprehensive definition also enables policy makers and development actors to design appropriate interventions to improve human wellbeing.

## 3. Measurement of Subjective Wellbeing

I have argued in section one of this paper that the end outcome for all development efforts, in any society, is to see people's wellbeing improved. Yet, traditionally, measurement of those efforts, which by extension, wellbeing measurement has, for many decades, been based on narrow economic indicators. Nonetheless, new measures have emerged in the previous two to three decades including, among others, Human Development Index (HDI) that is used in each UNDP

human development report since 1990, and Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI) [17]. The new measurement challenges the hegemony of economic-centric nature of wellbeing measurement and measuring development efforts, more generally, by involving non-economic indicators [2].

Since wellbeing is the multidimensional concept, some writers in sociology and economics view it being synonymous to happiness, and a lot of happiness studies can be seen in the literature. To them, the subjective open measure of wellbeing is happiness or life satisfaction. This measure is subjective because, in the survey, respondents are simply asked whether they are satisfied with their life as a whole, and it is open because researchers do not portray, to respondents, the components or aspects of wellbeing [15]. That means respondents appraise themselves whether they are satisfied or not satisfied with life. However, some psychologists, while agree on subjective nature of wellbeing and life satisfaction, they tend to dissociate wellbeing from happiness and argue that happiness is a narrow wellbeing dimension among multiple dimensions. This leads us to an argument that, in order to measure wellbeing properly, a comprehensive understanding of what the concept entails is very critical especially among researchers and policy makers in the south where impoverishment and poor wellbeing are persistent and widespread.

Literature including [5], reveals two approaches to measure wellbeing.

- The first approach is to use objective indicators to complement, supplement or replace GDP measure, and
- Secondly, is through subjective measures by asking people to report on their life satisfaction.

As such, and for simplicity, wellbeing measurement is broadly categorized into two: objective and subjective measures. Objective measure focuses on observable facts such as economic, social and environmental statistics. People's 'objective wellbeing', in this case, is assessed indirectly using key measures. Subjective measure focuses on people's feelings or real experience in a direct way, assessing 'subjective wellbeing' through ordinal measures.

### **3.1. Objective Measure of One Dimension Wellbeing**

Conventionally, wellbeing has been identified with a single objective dimension, 'material wellbeing' measured by income or GDP, income per capita and poverty, among others. However, it is now widely accepted that the concept of wellbeing cannot be captured solely by such indicators because it is multidimensional encompassing various aspects of human life. While GDP does not capture all aspects of human life, income allows an increase in consumption that in turn increases utility. Yet there is disagreement on how an increase in consumption represents improvements in wellbeing [17]. This implies that the link between income and wellbeing is unquestionably not clear. Thus, to capture all aspects of life in measuring wellbeing requires a 'comprehensive measurement approach' because GDP measure has many flaws including:

- Some activities that are included in the GDP estimates are

difficult to aggregate, for example government services. As these services are given to consumers at a subsidized price, their output cannot be valued at market prices.

- GDP does not take into account changes in asset values which influence a person's consumption patterns.
- Externalities such as pollution or the depletion of natural resources are not counted.
- Finally, GDP does not take into account non-market activities, such as housework or illegal activities, and the value of leisure.

Despite shortcoming of using GDP to measure wellbeing, it is widely used as a proxy for wellbeing mainly because its data are readily available and reliable and so can be used for cross-country analysis.

### **3.2. Objective Measures of Multidimensional Wellbeing**

In addition to one dimension wellbeing approach, other approaches can be seen in the literature to complement one dimension approach. According to [17] those approaches can be summarized as follows:

- Non-economic indicators approach that takes on board variables including, among others, education, health and nutrition, environment and empowerment and participation. However, the quality and availability of this data makes inter-country analysis difficult.
- Adjustment of GDP by monetizing different aspects that are not counted in the GDP measurement, for example, social and environmental factors. The problem with some of these adjustments is that it is difficult to aggregate and monetize some of these additional factors.
- Replacement of GDP by constructing composite measures or index that would capture the multidimensional aspect of wellbeing. Such measures include Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI). This index combines infant mortality, life expectancy and adult literacy. Another example is Human Development Index (HDI) created in 1990, combining income per capita, life expectancy at birth, adult literacy and education enrollment ratios [17].

### **3.3. Subjective Measures of Multidimensional Wellbeing**

This is a measure of multidimensional wellbeing based on self-reported life satisfaction. It is a measure of subjective wellbeing. Based on this approach, SWB is taken as multidimensional evaluation of life, including cognitive judgments of life satisfaction and affective evaluations of emotions and moods [2]. Being multidimensional, SWB comprises pleasant emotions, unpleasant emotions, global life judgment (life evaluation), and domain satisfaction that include among other things, marriage, health and leisure. The approach involves asking people key questions to rate their life satisfaction, and one of the popular scale used is a scale from 0 to 10 used in the World Values Survey (WVS). The questions are framed to understand people's feelings [16, 18].

According to [16, 18], SWB is measured using two approaches.

- First, using a single item taking a form, how a person is satisfied with life as a whole. The challenge is that satisfaction in life can be translated differently in different societies. This becomes a limitation when one is dealing with a cross-cultural research as opposed to non-cross-cultural research.
- The second approach is multiple-item scale. This takes a form of single construct scales or life domain scales whereby scores are averaged to produce a measure of SWB [18]. Nevertheless, multiple-item measures may not reflect the way in which SWB manifests itself in a particular culture.

Some scholars including [14] succinctly demonstrate that SWB measurement is problematic because of temporary moods. However, [19] contends that temporary moods have marginal effects on SWB compared to long-term influences. Other challenges that affect SWB multidimensional measures are culture and language, which normally can affect cross-cultural analysis. Despite these challenges using multidimensional perspective, there is consensus, in the literature, that SWB measurement used in the literature is a reliable approach [16].

Literature also shows that data used to measure SWB are collected using a Likert scale in a survey from adult persons whose age is at least 18 years [20, 19, 18]. Some use a 4-point scale with ratings ranging from 1-4. A common question asked to respondents is 'on the whole how satisfied are you with the life you lead?' The responses can be rated based on not satisfied at all, not very satisfied, fairly satisfied and very satisfied. Values of general life satisfaction question can be recorded into two categories: satisfied and not satisfied. Others including [8, 18] use an 11-point scale with ratings ranging from 0-11 where 0 means not satisfied at all and 11 means completely satisfied.

Many SWB studies including [8, 19, 18] show that the analysis of SWB involves descriptive statistics to examine relationships between satisfaction ratings and determinants. Cronbach  $\alpha$ , item total correlations and item domain correlations are calculated to determine the internal reliability of the SWB index and or personal wellbeing index (PWI). The relationship between domains of the SWB and satisfaction with life as a whole is computed using bivariate analysis. Chi-square or t-test computations are used to measure the equality of distribution of life satisfaction levels within different categories of determinant variables.

In addition, non-parametric tests are used to measure significant differences in terms of SWB between different groups in a community or society. Adjusted standardized residuals are used to determine categories of variables that show significantly difference from the expected distribution of values. Depending on type of data of the dependent variable, which is 'general life satisfaction', [19, 21] correctly argue that determinants of SWB can be modelled using ordered logit, probit model and ordinary least square (OLS).

## 4. Determinants of Subjective Wellbeing

Having discussed conceptualization of SWB and its measurement, some pertinent questions come in mind very quickly: (i) what are the main micro level determinants of SWB? (ii) Are determinants of wellbeing the same or differ across countries i.e. between developed and developing countries? (iii) why some individuals, communities, societies, countries or continents have high SWB while others have low SWB? Section 4 of this paper provides answers to these questions albeit in a more general way. The section discusses micro-level determinants of SWB rather than macro level determinants of national level aggregated SWB that include, among others, national income or GDP, inflation and unemployment. Literature shows a number of micro-level determinants that explain SWB. For example, [22, 4] posit that a persons' wellbeing is determined by functionings that are the valuable activities and states including body health, being safe, being educated, having a good job, being able to move and visit people. These factors are social and cultural context specific [4]. This implies that although cross-country studies are important, cultural or society level studies are considerably crucial as well. Table 1 summarizes types of determinants of SWB and their specific variables as reported in the literature.

*Table 1. Micro-level determinants of subjective wellbeing.*

Factor	Variables	References
Socio-economic	Wealth, income, positional and relational goods, education, marital status and employment status, type of work, self-esteem	[14, 16, 19, 23, 22]
Social capital	Honesty, freedom of choice and control and trust	[19]
Demographic characteristics	Age, gender, presence of children, and health	[23, 22]
Social relations	Caring for others, community involvement, seeing friends and relatives	[23, 1]
Attitudes	Trust in other people, religiousness	[23]
Culture	Total ways of life	[20]
Safety and security	Crime	[22, 7, 1]
Personality and Genetic	Optimism, self-esteem, extroversion, intelligence, ability to organize and plan, and low neuroticism	[1]

It appears from the literature that majority of the determinants are common regardless of cultural and wealth differences between societies. What varies is the magnitude and significance to which different determinants explain SWB in a particular context and culture. Understanding determinants' magnitude and their significance is unambiguously important because it helps to determine major determinants that can be given high priority in political discussions, political manifestos, and policy making to improve SWB in a specific country in SSA and elsewhere. Although the aim of this article is not to explain how each variable interact with SWB, it is undeniably pertinent to highlight about few variables whose effects on SWB is

interesting. One of these variables is income. While the literature emphasizes that the relationship between income and SWB is complex, scholars like [1, 19] show that income is one of the most important correlates of SWB, but not the only one in poor and rich countries. Coefficients of absolute income are positive across countries, but they are not significant. Interestingly, a higher income has a strong effect in low income countries than in high income countries. Surprisingly, an increase in income does not lead to an increase in SWB. Some studies demonstrate that SWB tends to diminish gradually with high income [23]. This implies that, although income is important, interventions to improve SWB in low income countries, particularly SSA should focus at a minimum income level that enables societies to meet their basic needs. This is mainly because income is a determinant but appears to be not one of the major SWB determinants.

Generally, with large samples in a survey, literature shows strong and significant relationship between many socio-economic SWB determinants. For example, [19] reports negative and significant coefficients for male and age on SWB in developed and developing countries. Other studies including [21] show that SWB stabilizes at an old age particularly in cross-sectional studies, but does not strongly declines as objective life conditions deteriorate. The literature takes this as an age-SWB paradox.

In developed countries including Norway, decreasing trend in SWB emerges in later life especially above 80 years of age. The trend may be different in SSA where life expectancy is low compared to developed countries. Furthermore, a study conducted by [23] in Lithuania in Northern Europe concludes that age should not be considered as an important determinant of SWB as its effect is explained by differences of health and financial satisfaction levels. Yet, some authors argue that old people are more satisfied with SWB while others argue the opposite. Based on age-SWB paradox and the controversy portrayed in the literature, the age-SWB relationship informs that policy interventions to improve SWB in SSA should particularly take an equity perspective focusing more at improving health of the population, more so, among the old age above 60 years men and women. This is a critical age in the sub-continent where health starts to deteriorate and therefore may affect SWB negatively. Poor health among infants and under-five children can also negatively affect SWB of the parents.

Literature also shows that education has a positive effect on SWB across countries suggesting that policy interventions should emphasize at improving education particularly complete elimination of illiteracy at all levels in SSA. This in turn can improve SWB. The article by [6] that covers 170 countries including 52 African countries also underlines the importance of education for Africa's multidimensional development. Similarly, being married has positive effect on SWB across countries with stronger effect in rich countries though not significant. In addition, being single, that is being divorced, or widow has a negative and strong coefficient though not significant [19]. This implies that one of the key areas to focus for improving women's SWB particularly in

SSA where gender inequality is more prominent is having policy interventions that deal with female headed households (FHH) including widows and divorced.

It is clear that the relationship between employment and SWB is mixed. This shows positive effect in low income countries and negative effect in high income countries suggesting that employment should be one of the key issues to improve SWB in low income countries including SSA. The social capital variables have all positive effect on SWB across countries although coefficient for trust in low income countries is not significant. Thus, SSA being one of the low income countries in the world should emphasize at improving social capital variables for better SWB. Generally, social capital has stronger effect on SWB in high income countries [19], possibly because of well developed trust, honesty, freedom of choice and reciprocity. It is also pertinent to note that, while information on religion-SWB relationship is scanty in SSA, religion is not a best determinant of SWB in developed countries [23]. This implies that more research is required in order to ascertain this relationship in SSA.

Importantly, there is a methodological issue that has to be considered in determining major determinants of SWB. This is because some variables that explain SWB have strong relationship with others. For instance, education is strongly related to income, age is related to health; employment is related to income, and so on. With this, true determinant of general life satisfaction is, for example, health condition but not age [23]. Therefore, it is critical to control variables that might be the true determinants of both life satisfaction and tested determinants. [23] emphasize that in order to decide which variables should be used for controlling, a correlation matrix of determinants should be run and with this, all significant relations should be taken as control variables. The same study suggests testing the following effects to determine factors that largely explain SWB:

- Age should be controlled when testing the impact of education, marital status, health condition, satisfaction with income, presence of children and employment status on general life satisfaction.
- The impact of age on general satisfaction should be test when controlling for health condition and financial satisfaction.
- Education should be controlled when testing the impact of satisfaction with income and employment on general life satisfaction.
- The impact of education should be tested when controlling for employment and satisfaction with income.

When controlling other variables, [23] concludes that the most important factors that explain SWB in Northern Europe are: satisfaction with health and satisfaction with financial situation. Clearly, the most satisfied individuals tend to be employed, well educated, socially tied, married, having children, and involved in community. Another interesting result in the Northern Europe is that age, which is considered by many studies as an important determinant of SWB does not have a significant impact when health and financial

satisfaction are controlled. Neither younger nor elder population is more satisfied with their life in general if their financial situation and health condition are equal. Thus, ageing of a society does not have any effect on general level of SWB if social and healthcare systems are effective.

Scholars like [14] highlight universal strong determinants of SWB including wealth, health, and education. In addition, [16] argues that self-esteem is a good predictor of SWB in capitalist nations like the US, but not in countries, which historically were under socialism mode of production. Historical mode of production is not a micro-level, but macro-level determinant of SWB. Furthermore, [16] observes that wealth is a predictor of SWB among poor nations but not in rich countries. Femininity is a positive predictor of SWB only across rich nations. Similarly, personal freedom in capitalist nations can raise SWB. It should be noted that [16] deals with national level not individual level determinants of SWB.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

- The concept of SWB is multidimensional. As such there is no universal definition for it. Most studies that have attempted to define the concept are from developed countries. While, most of the conceptualizations from developed countries seem to consider multidimensionality of SWB, developing countries also need to think about what exist in literature regarding definition of SWB. The concept can be interpreted differently based on the context and culture because it is discursively constructed. Therefore, researchers in SSA should come up with a comprehensive definition informed by the region's context and culture.
- Secondly, literature is very clear about measurement of SWB. What is interesting is a shift from measuring the concept using 'objective one dimension perspective' to using 'subjective multidimensional perspective'. The later is comprehensive and appropriate measure of SWB that researchers in SSA are encouraged to consider. It appears that the major method to collect data for studying SWB is a survey method. This is a quantitative approach. However, I recommend that qualitative approach can also be employed by researchers in SSA in order to involve research participants in the analysis of the concept. Mixed methods can also be used by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, but this should be done sequentially starting with qualitative followed by quantitative or vice versa, depending on one's objectives of conducting sequential approach.
- There is a wide range of micro-level determinants of SWB. They include socio-economic, demographic, personality and genetic, among others. Yet, the major determinants vary by context and culture. They may also vary based on historical background of a region or a country in terms of political and mode of production the region or country has undergone in the past. Although micro-level determinants are many, it does not mean that

they should be studied all of them in a single study. What informs the researcher to select variables to examine include culture, context, historical background and what transpires in empirical studies as to what are the major micro-level determinants of SWB in SSA.

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