

## Beyond GDP: an international seminar to discuss the future of well-being policies in Europe

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In industrial societies, a crisis of well-being is becoming increasingly visible across different areas of social life. In many countries, there is a decline in subjective well-being and mental health, especially among younger people, while signs of deep discomfort are growing and raising questions about the ability of public policies to respond adequately to people's needs. This social dimension is accompanied by environmental, economic and relational pressures that are deeply transforming the European context. The European Environment Agency continues to warn about climate risks that are already critical for Europe today, with effects on health, energy security, water resources, infrastructure and production systems. Added to this is a less visible but equally decisive dimension: according to the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, 13% of people in the European Union say they feel lonely often or always, while 35% feel lonely at least sometimes.

It is precisely in response to these transformations that several research groups have been focusing their work on new ways of thinking about and guiding public policies.

**On Tuesday 14th April, from 3.30 pm, STATEC Research hosted the online seminar "A guide for well-being policy: Discussing WISER's Green Book", as part of the series Measuring Progress: STATEC Well-being Seminar Series. The meeting brought together Stefano Bartolini, University of Siena; Martijn Burger, EHERO University of Rotterdam; Simone D'Alessandro, University of Pisa; Javier Martinez, University of Twente; Francesco Sarracino, STATEC Research. Discussed by: Lars Mortensen, European Environmental Agency; Frank Van Oort, Erasmus University Rotterdam.**

The seminar started from a question that is becoming more and more central in the European public debate: how can we build policies that truly improve people's quality of life, going beyond GDP as the only point of reference? The Green Book of the European WISER project aims precisely to translate the most advanced interdisciplinary research into a concrete public policy agenda, able to combine well-being, social and environmental sustainability, productivity and social cohesion.

A central part of the discussion was devoted to the role of social relations as a lever to activate virtuous circles and promote social and environmental economies in which people can live better.

*"As emerges from the Green Book we are working on, which is currently being drafted and prepared for publication, policies aimed at strengthening social capital—such as improving the quality of public services, promoting spaces for social interaction, and reducing working hours—can help make well-being less dependent on growth in consumption and income. By strengthening relationships, trust, and participation, these policies enable forms of need satisfaction that do not rely exclusively on the market. In this way, it becomes possible to improve quality of life while simultaneously reducing environmental pressures and*

*social inequalities.”*

**Simone D’Alessandro, Professor of Economics, University of Pisa**

*“At the core of our project is the development of sociability, the decline of which represents a major crisis of our time—one need only consider loneliness, now a widespread problem in developed countries. This crisis is deeply intertwined with other contemporary crises, such as those of well-being and mental health, on which the lack of human relationships has a very negative impact. Or, for example, the environmental crisis because the loneliest and unhappiest people tend to consume more due to the consolatory function of consumption in alleviating distress—a sort of compensation. To counter the crisis of sociability and well-being, we propose in the Green Book of the WISER project a series of reforms, ranging from urban planning to education to changes in the way we work. Furthermore, greater sociability makes economic systems more competitive, given the vast evidence showing that happier people are more productive.”*

**Stefano Bartolini, professor of Political Economy and Happiness Economics, University of Siena**

*“We must redesign cities for well-being, paying particular attention to open urban forms and the neighborhood scale since “inclusive public spaces and blue-green infrastructures as places to pause, recover, and be around others can enhance mental, physical and social well-being”. The importance of the neighborhood scale as well as the prioritisation of policies to benefit disadvantaged groups is evidenced from the publications led by the postdoctoral researcher Julia Foellmer (Foellmer, J., Janeka, P., Beumer, L., Bočkarjova, M., Miranda Sara, L., Anthonj, C., & Martinez, J. (2025).*

*Disadvantaged groups perspectives on the built and natural environment. European Union).*

[https://www.wiserhorizons.eu/fileadmin/files\\_to\\_download/DELIVERABLES/D4.1\\_Disadvantaged\\_groups\\_perspectives\\_on\\_the\\_built\\_and\\_natural\\_environment\\_29092025\\_r.pdf](https://www.wiserhorizons.eu/fileadmin/files_to_download/DELIVERABLES/D4.1_Disadvantaged_groups_perspectives_on_the_built_and_natural_environment_29092025_r.pdf)

*Foellmer, J., Beumer, L., Martinez, J., Janeka, P., & Anthonj, C. (2026). The role of urban blue spaces in promoting perceived well-being and self-reported health.*

[https://www.wiserhorizons.eu/fileadmin/files\\_to\\_download/DELIVERABLES/D4.2\\_The\\_role\\_of\\_urban\\_blue\\_spaces\\_in\\_promoting\\_perceived\\_well-being\\_and\\_self-reported\\_health\\_28012026\\_r\\_2\\_.pdf](https://www.wiserhorizons.eu/fileadmin/files_to_download/DELIVERABLES/D4.2_The_role_of_urban_blue_spaces_in_promoting_perceived_well-being_and_self-reported_health_28012026_r_2_.pdf)

**Javier Martínez, associate professor of Urban Quality of Life and Inequalities, University of Twente**

*“By creating the conditions to rebuild the social structure, we would improve the effectiveness of public policy and our ability to protect the environment, and we would reduce the importance of social comparisons, allowing people to lead more fulfilling lives. In other words, instead of investing huge resources in an attempt to sustain economic growth, while then spending much of what we produce to repair the damage it causes, it would be better to adopt policies that directly improve well-being. This would start a virtuous cycle in which happiness-oriented policies would enable us to live in socially and environmentally sustainable economies.”*

**Francesco Sarracino, Senior economist, STATEC Research**

The initiative was aimed at researchers, policymakers, professionals and stakeholders interested in contributing to the development of more sustainable and inclusive well-being policies in Europe. During the seminar, the guidelines of the WISER project, their implications for European policies and some practical tools useful for steering decision-making towards objectives of well-being, sustainability and cohesion were presented.

**For more information about the WISER project**


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