

EARLY CHANGES EVERYTHING



IN COLLABORATION WITH



CONFERENCE STRENGTHENING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Wednesday 27th May 2026
Villa Arrigo, Naxxar



10:25 -10.45 | The Wellbeing INDEX project – Cost of Inaction

Prof. Marie Briguglio



The Malta Foundation
for the Wellbeing of Society
*Investing in children,
within families & communities*

1. Earlier...



The stimulus for action

Back in 2015: "All over the world, policy makers are still grappling with how to chart the progress of wellbeing. How can we compare it across different social groups? Can we compare it over time?"

Marie Louise Coleiro Preca



I	Indicators - 4 Dashboards, 200+ interactive charts Next: <i>Updated annually</i>
N	Networking - 1 research network, 22 stakeholders Next: <i>Extended by the “Wellbeing Pool”</i>
D	Data - from multiple sources curated in 1 place Next: <i>Updated annually</i>
E	Exploration - 4 studies, 6 policy briefs, book chapters Next: <i>Cost of inaction</i>
X	EXchange - 7 annually conferences, 6 info notes, 6 videos Numerous conferences, seminars, TV, radio, news, programmes, festivals, exhibitions, 60+ news articles Next: <i>National Wellbeing Conference, Course for public sector</i>

The data



WELLBEING

Overall **Life** satisfaction (0-10)
Personal **Relationship** satisfaction (0-10)
Present **Job** satisfaction (0-10)
Financial situation satisfaction (0-10)
Time use satisfaction (0-10)
Happy frequency (1-5)
Calm and peaceful frequency (1-5)
Downhearted and **depressed** frequenc(1-5)
Down in the dumps frequency (1-5)
Nervous and agitated frequency (1-5)
Lonely frequency (1-5)

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age (4 categories)
District (6 categories)
Sex (Male, Female)

LIFE CONDITIONS

Material and Social **Deprivation** (2 categories)
Equivalised **Income** (4 categories)
Employment (5 categories)
Education Level (4 categories)
Marital Status (4 categories)
Dependent **children** (4 categories)
Country of Birth (2 categories)
Perceived General **Health** (3 categories)
Dwelling problems (2 categories)
Environmental problems (2 categories)
Crime, violence, vandalism (2 categories)
Voluntary Work (2 categories)
Leisure (3 categories)
Receiving material or non-material **help**

Trust in others
Social exclusion
Not Sport.

AND Eurostat, Gallup, UNDP, NSO, ISCWEB

2. Emerging evidence...

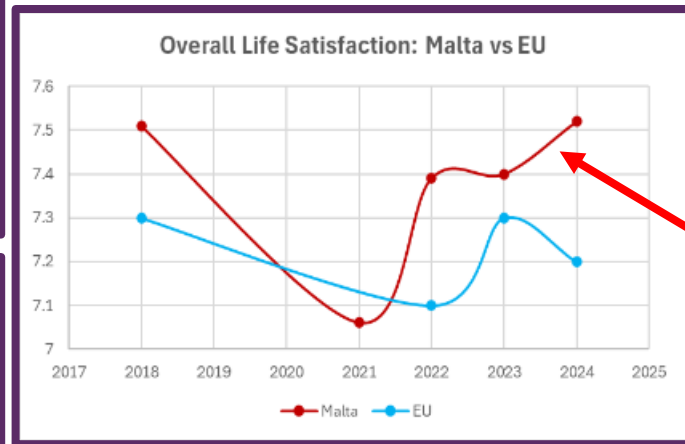
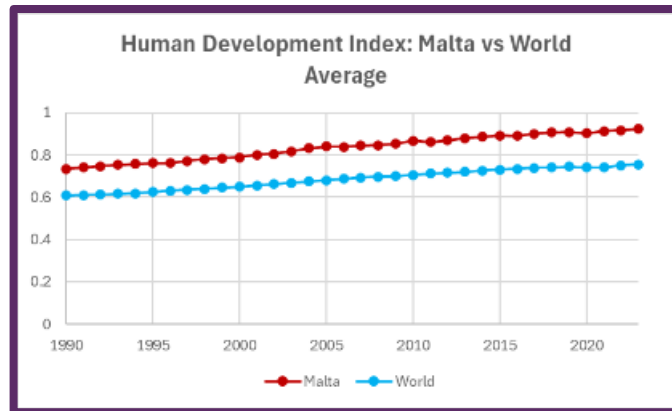
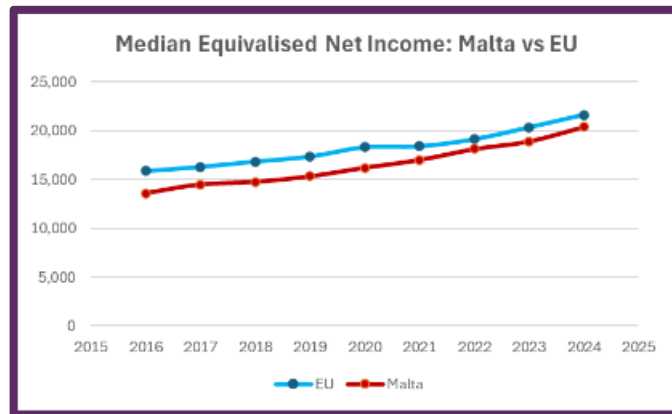


Upward vibes



Increasing over time:

- Foreigners
- Tourism
- Population Density
- Males
- Single people
- Separated people
- Education levels
- Years of life
- Traffic
- Built areas
- **Equivalised income**
- **Human development**
- **Life satisfaction-ish**



UNDP, Eurostat, Wellbeing INDEX

Doing well does vs *feeling* well!

Objective wellbeing

Vs Subjective wellbeing

And Satisfaction - cognitive evaluation of life

Vs Day-to-day emotions

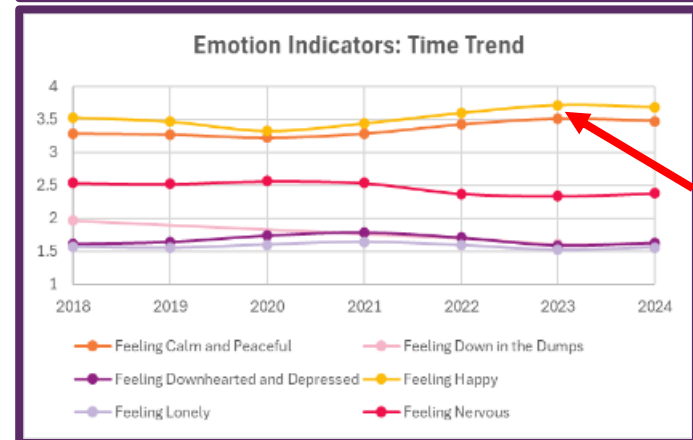
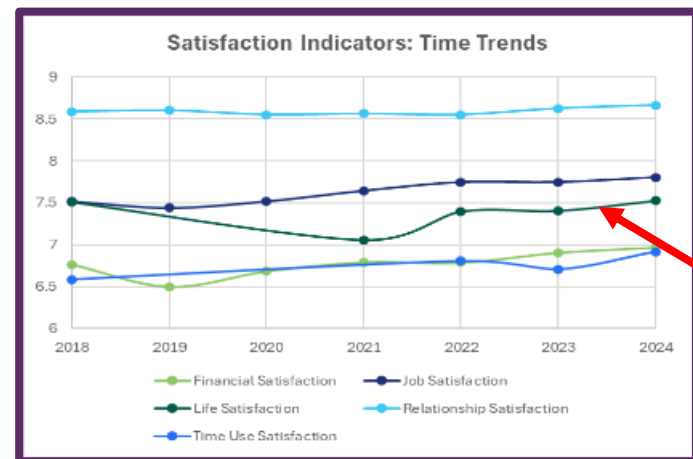
E.g. in 2024 satisfaction improved, emotions worsened

In general, in Malta, non-maltese, Gozitan, high social trust and volunteers have higher Life Satisfaction, happiness, low nervousness. The ill, the poor and those with low social interaction score systematically worse.

Despite upward trends, absolute numbers show:

- Frequently feel nervous increased from 64,178 to 66,231
- Frequent downhearted depressed from 19,944 to 20,998
- Frequent feeling Lonely from 13,110 to 20,029
- Rarely feeling calm from 67,703 to 71,389
- Rarely feeling happy from 29,820 to 32,431

Data Source: NSO;
Wellbeing INDEX
Analysis



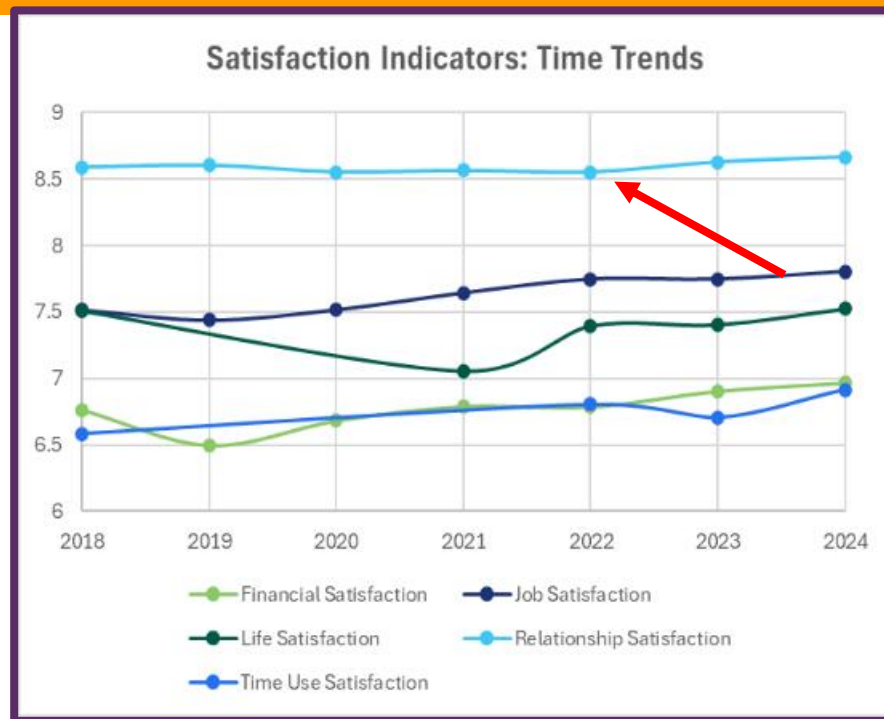
Relationships are solid



In Malta, highest average satisfaction is in the domain of personal relationships.

Especially high among those with high levels of trust in others but (again) low among those with bad health, material deprivation, social exclusion.

People who “Get-together with family or friends at least once a month” do considerably better on all indicators of satisfaction and emotion than those who do not.



Data Source: NSO;
Wellbeing INDEX
Analysis

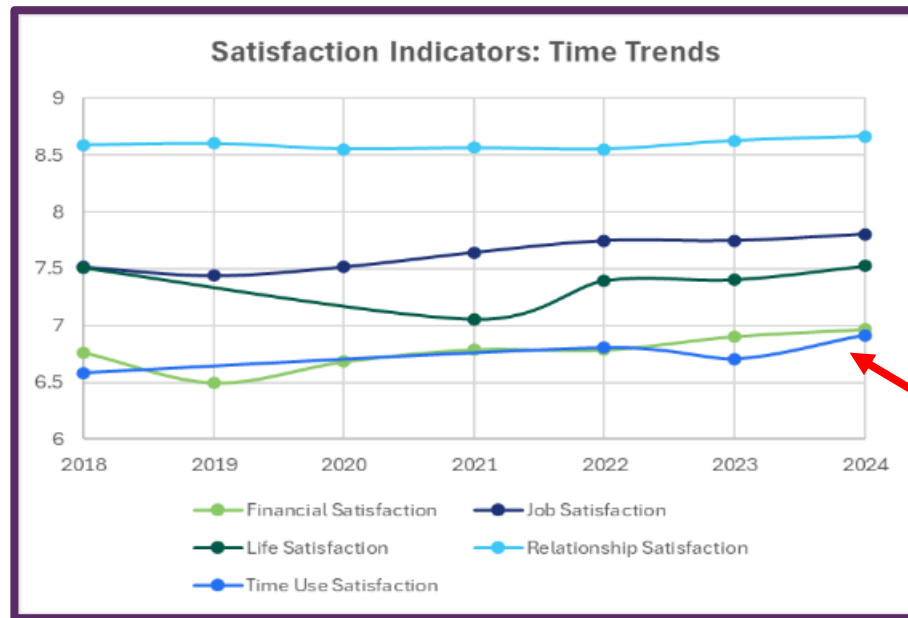
Time is tight



Lowest domain satisfaction is time use.

Poorest scores among single Parents and households with 2 adults and 2 children. Highest scores occur among retired, young, elderly, low levels of education, unemployed.

Time use satisfaction, engagement in leisure and material deprivation also linked.



Data Source: NSO;
Wellbeing INDEX
Analysis

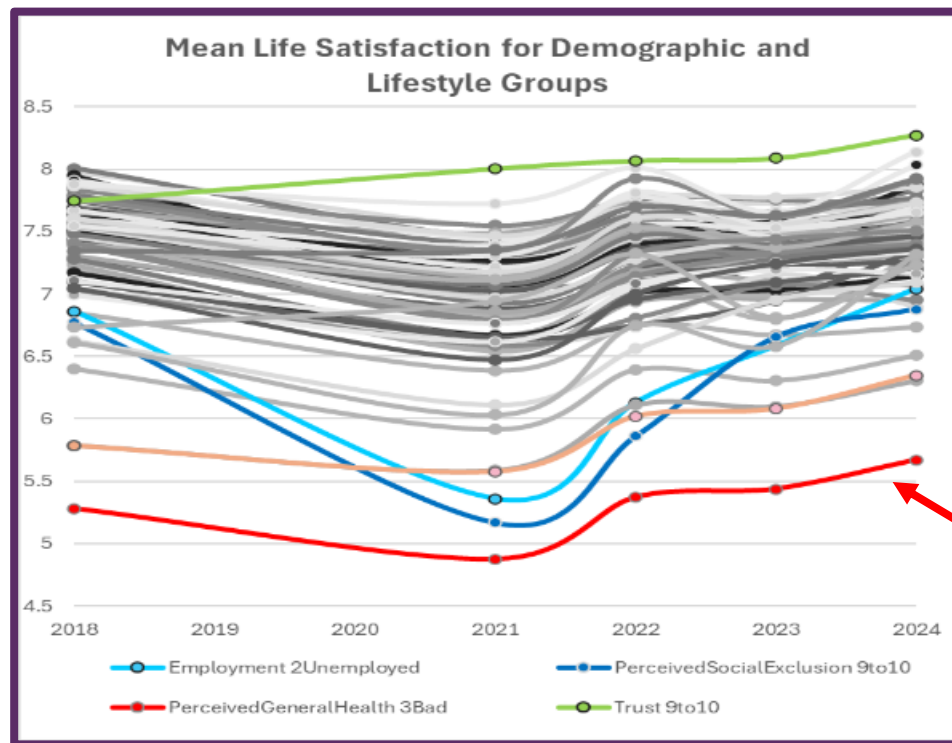
Poor health hits hard



There are 18,000+ who report bad health (living at home), asking “How is your health in general?”

These record almost 2 points lower on the life satisfaction scale (-1.85) and low frequency of positive emotions e.g. happiness (3.09) and calm (2.95).

No sign of recovery in wellbeing post covid, and with little variance.



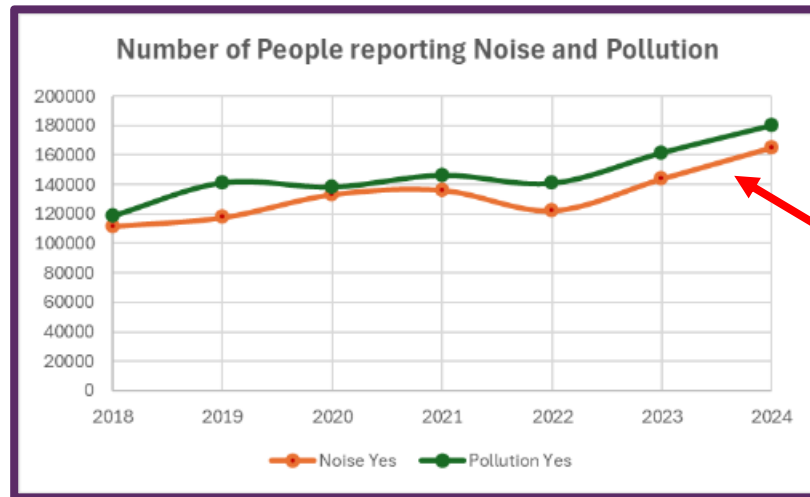
Data Source: NSO;
Wellbeing INDEX
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There's no mute button



In latest figures, the proportion of people exposed to noise and pollution has increased further to 34.6% of the population (164,656) exposed to noise, and 37.8% (180,332) exposed to pollution.

Indoors, the number of persons (aged 16 years and older) who reported having leaking roofs and damp walls increased to 40,652 (8.5% of the population) from 32,771 (7.1% of the population).



Data Source: NSO;
Wellbeing INDEX
Analysis

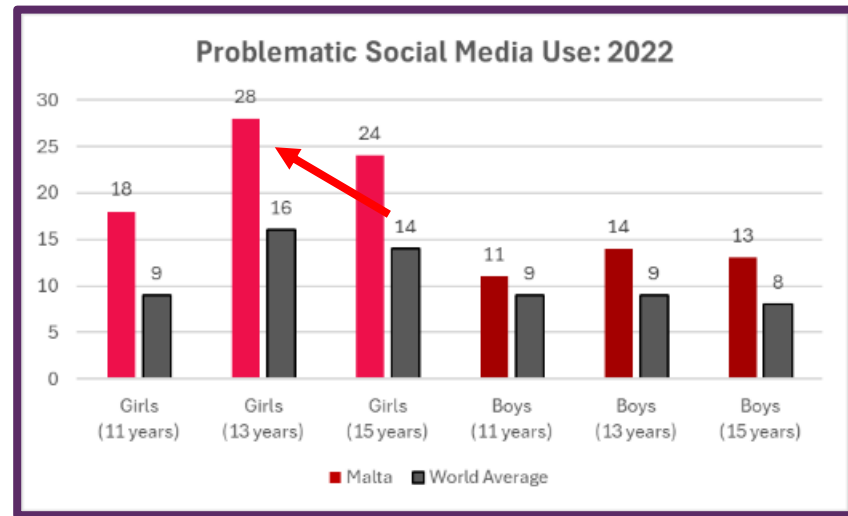
Socials are stressful



Almost all (94.5%) of 16-24-year-olds in Malta used social media (Eurostat).

Malta has a higher prevalence of PSMU than the World across genders, age groups and time.

Malta ranks 9th in the world for psychological complaints from problematic social media use (PSMU) and 1st for PSMU in 13-year old girls among 43 countries in 2022 (1 in 4), increasing since 2018 (HBSC. This has a strong association with live evaluation and psychological complaints (WHR)



Data Source: HBSC

(1) regularly failing to think of anything else but social media; (2) regularly feeling dissatisfied because wanting to spend more time on social media; (3) often feeling bad when not being able to use social media; (4) failing to spend less time on social media; (5) neglecting other activities like hobbies or sport, hiding time spent online; (6) regularly having arguments with others because of social media use; (7) regularly lying to parents or friends about the time spent on social media; (8) often using social media to escape from negative feelings; (9) having serious conflict with parents or siblings because of social media use.

Some children have issues

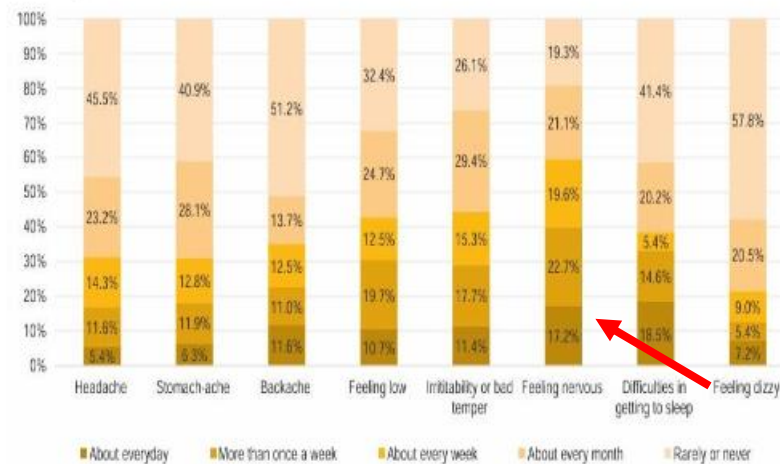
Latest ISCWB (Cefai et al 2024): Most children (7-15) report high wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Issues: Family decision-making, frequent socializing, academic pressure, peer bullying (1 in 5), insufficient space for play/socializing, neighborhood pollution, physical health issues, and negative affect (boredom, sadness, stress, loneliness, anxiety; 17% self-harm).

Distinctions: Older children are less satisfied, use more social media, and play less sport. Boys experience more bullying; adolescent girls report more negative feelings/moods. Lower wellbeing is associated with lower socio-economic status, migrant background, and disability.

Suggestions: Increase exercise, reduce device time, implement school interventions/anti-bullying programs, provide spaces, and involve children in decision-making.

11 to 15-year-olds



Data Source: Cefai et al 2023

3. Early changes everything (?)



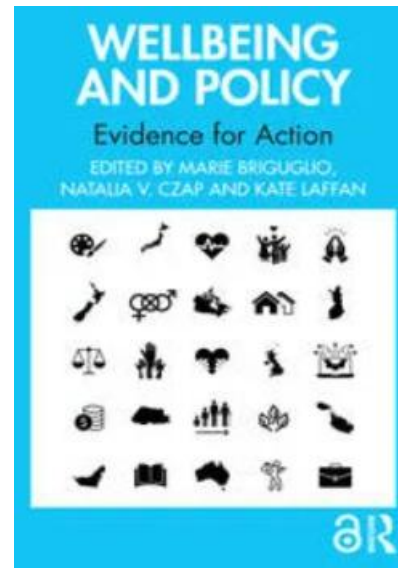
Why wellbeing?



Wellbeing emerging as the ultimate policy goal in many countries: The true goal for a society (and government) should be the wellbeing of the people..

Higher wellbeing is associated with

- improved education, employment, and social outcomes (Layard & De Neve, 2023)
- better earnings and health (Cohen et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2015; De Neve & Oswald, 2012),
- higher productivity – through absenteeism and presenteeism, healthy life years (Anand et al., 2012; World Health Organisation, 2013),
- fewer addictions and crime (McDaid & Park, 2022)



So now what?



Wellbeing policy requires (*interalia*) less focus on income (GDP) and stronger focus on health, relationships, nature, giving, purpose, learning..

Documentation of interventions worldwide reports interventions for various:

Cohorts: Young, Old, Educated, Region..

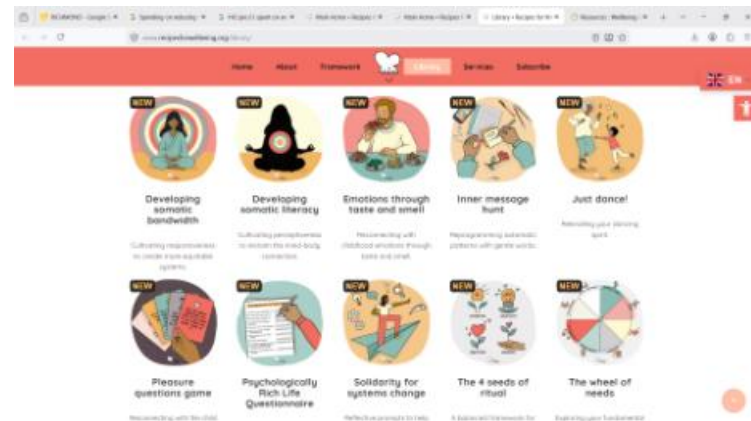
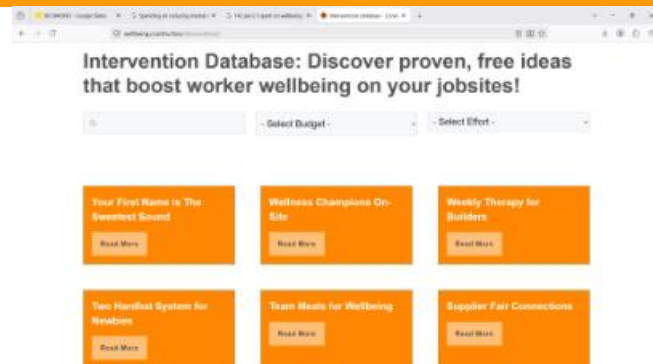
Outcomes: life satisfaction, positive emotions, meaning, flourishing, beyond mental health...

Inputs: Project, Therapy, Education, Policy, Legislation...

Sectors: Sport, school, art, health...

Funding: Government, Private sector, NGOs, self-funded...

Scope and Duration...



Not doing costs money



Using time trends, RCTs, Cost-benefit analysis, cost-effectiveness analysis, and measuring in terms of Euro, GDP equivalent, WELLBY's, Ratios or QALYs we can have a sense of what inaction costs us in terms of

foregone productivity (e.g. European Economic Area: Cost of depression and anxiety disorders Euro 136.3 billion (2007 prices) mainly productivity losses (Andlin-Sobocki et al., 2005).

lower cost of medical care (e.g. UK: RCT on psychological therapies for women at high risk of post-natal depression lower cost than care (Morrell et al., 2009))

lower expenditure (e.g. Happier Lives Institute: Psychotherapy 5-6 times more effect than cash transfers in Africa)

E.g. of Quantified Social ROI:

£142 per £1 spent on wellbeing in schools

£64 per £1 spent on more police

£15 per £1 spent on R&D

£3 per £1 spent on road building

Frayman et al 2024

But why early?

“Prevention better than cure” *E.g. Wellander et al. (2016) Sweden, school based preventive programme pays for itself within two years through cost savings alone.*

Emotional health at age 16 predicts adult life satisfaction more strongly than professional work qualifications (Marquez et al., 2024).

Plasticity - development in the brain

Possible to reap benefits across the life course



Heckman, James J. (2008). "Schools, Skills and Synapses," Economic Inquiry, 46(3): 289-324

The Heckman Curve demonstrates that the highest economic and social benefits (ROI of 13%) come from early skill development: health, graduation, lower crime, more capable workforce...

That said...



Wellbeing INDEX

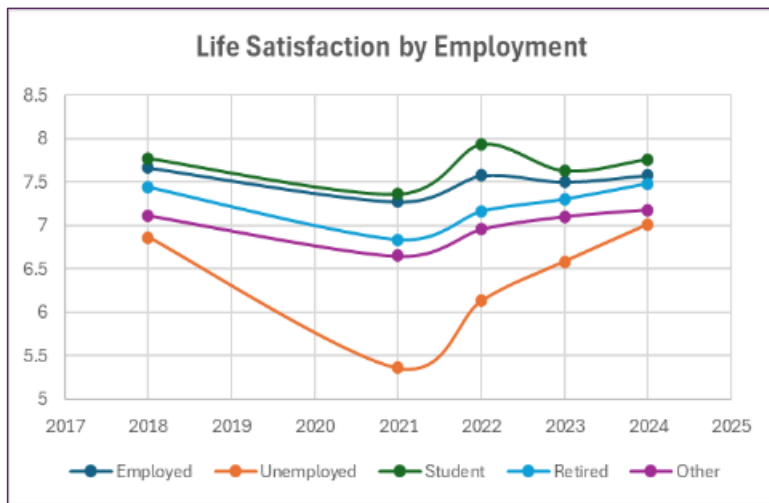
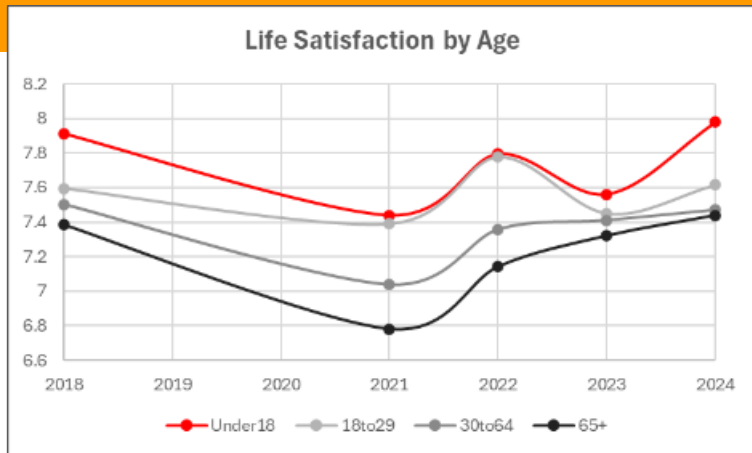
Bang for the buck?

Young people doing better than most.

Plenty of interventions already.

The ill have by far the lowest wellbeing - not necessarily children or young adults.

The elderly have fewer life years left.



4. Recap



Key points, no fluff



1. Malta has wellbeing fine-grain data and a flourishing research ecosystem
2. Several conditions for wellbeing are improving such as higher education, health, and income, relationships.
3. Some conditions are worsening like population density, pollution, noise, leisure time availability.
4. In general we have been *doing* better but not necessarily feeling better (high nervousness).
5. Some demographic sectors (people) deserve special focus: the ill, lonely, poor.
6. For young people, schools, spaces, social media are key issues.
7. Intervention options are many and varied but not always documented and assessed.
8. Earlier intervention pays-off but is not necessarily the most pressing.
9. The wellbeing INDEX project will continue to furnish data, research and document interventions evidence.
10. We invite you to write to us wellbeingindex@um.edu.mt

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L-Università
ta' Malta

Thank You

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Thanks



Natalia Mangion, Joel Azzopardi (UM), Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, Andrea Catania, Lorella Gatt, Em Falzon Sollars (MFWS), Etienne Caruana, Josianne Galea, Leanne Vassallo (NSO), NeuralAI.