**Measuring Quality of Life - an idea whose time has come?**

**Agenda-setting dynamics in Britain and the European Union[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Introduction**

Measuring quality of life has recently risen rapidly up the political agenda in a range of political arenas. A shift in this direction in Britain was signalled most clearly by Prime Minister David Cameron’s announcement in November 2010 that well-being measures developed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) would be used for public policy purposes[[2]](#footnote-2). The ONS subsequently conducted a series of hearings and presented its findings in July 2011, with the first set of data made available to government in 2012. In the European Union (EU) context this shift was indicated by a Commission communication to the Council and European Parliament (EP) in 2009, *GDP and Beyond*, which sets out a roadmap with five key actions to improve the indicators for measuring progress. These initiatives, along with other national and international developments, signal discontent with GDP growth as the dominant measure of societal progress and suggest that in some respects at least, concern with measuring quality of life is an idea whose time has come.

This chapter seeks to explain how and why this issue has risen up the political agenda in Britain and the EU, drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with over 30 policy-makers and politicians in Britain, Belgium and Luxembourg between 2011 and 2013. In comparing agenda-setting dynamics in the two systems, the study draws on Kingdon’s (2011)[[3]](#footnote-3) multiple streams approach to agenda-setting. While developed in the context of US politics, this approach has increasingly been applied to other political systems and insights from these applications are drawn on also.

The chapter has six sections. Section one outlines the approach to comparing agenda-setting, distinguishing between Kingdon’s three ‘streams’ of activity - policies, politics and problems. Section two discusses the historical background to current political concerns with measuring quality of life, identifying two waves that have distinct characteristics. Section three turns to the case of Britain and section four to that of the EU. Section five provides a comparative analysis of developments in the UK and EU before the paper concludes.

**Comparing agenda-setting**

The agenda-setting literature asks two main questions: where do issues on the political agenda come from and under what conditions do actors succeed in getting those issues on the agenda? (Princen 2007) While the multiple streams approach has been applied beyond its US origins, comparative studies of agenda-setting remain relatively rare. Yet comparison allows not only for a more systematic exploration of the key variables in policy-making in different contexts (e.g., the relative importance of political parties, political systems or the role of interest groups) but also the potential for understanding the exclusion of ideas from the agenda or ‘non-decisions’ (Bachrach and Baratz 1962).

The application of agenda-setting models beyond national systems to the EU also offers a new dimension because of the EU’s distinct characteristics as a political system, specifically: the limited opportunity for direct public involvement, the absence of a Europe-wide media system and the tendency for interest groups and political parties to be organized more strongly at a national rather than European level (Baumgartner et al. 2006, 967). Moreover, the EU is a highly ‘compound’ polity in contrast to the more ‘simple’ polities of some of its member states, including the UK. In the former, ‘power, influence and voice are diffused through multiple levels and modes of governance’, while in the latter, ‘power, influence and voice are more concentrated in a single level and mode of governance’ (Schmidt 2003, 2). While compound polities tend towards consensus-building, decision-making in simple polities is more majoritarian. Thus while the former provides more access points for agenda-setting, the latter provides greater potential for swift decision-making (Table 1).

**Table 1.Key characteristics of EU and UK systems**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **EU** | **UK** |
| Power diffused across multiple levels and institutions | Power concentrated within national government |
| Tends towards consensual decision-making | Tends towards majoritarian decision-making |
| Weak public sphere | Strong public sphere |
| Weak interest group activity | Strong interest group activity |

Yet while the political systems of the EU and its member states can be characterised very differently and can be studied as distinct entities, the reality is often a close connection in their politics and processes that only a comparative exploration can reveal (Princen 2009, 157-8). This is certainly the case here.

***The multiple streams approach***

The multiple streams approach requires tracing policies over a substantial time period to reveal the dynamics at play. This allows greater understanding of ‘both the level of policy differences among nations and the dynamics over time that may alter these levels in future’ (Baumgartner et al. 2006, 968) and of the *nature of change*, whether characterised by incrementalism or punctuated equilibrium (Pralle 2006, 987). There are various ‘agendas’ to be aware of. The ‘decision’ agenda describes issues lined up for a decision, the ‘governmental’ agenda refers to issues receiving attention within government, and the ‘political agenda’ refers to issues that receive serious attention by politicians (Baumgartner et al. 2006; Kingdon 2011; Princen 2007).

The approach relates best to conditions of ambiguity, when there is more than one way of thinking about a particular issue (Zahariadis 2008). It identifies three separate processes or ‘streams’ - of problems, policies and politics - that develop largely in isolation from each other but which must ultimately come together for significant policy change to occur. *Problems* can rise up the political agenda through a high profile event or crisis (e.g., a rail crash) or through a shift in respected indicators (e.g., on climate change). *Policies* generally emerge away from the political spotlight through the exchanges of ‘experts’, such as academics, civil servants and think tanks. Ideas in this stream may ‘float around’ for years before finding their moment – often after a ‘softening up’ of policy-makers has taken place. While *political* processes such as elections, leadership changes and shifts in public opinion also shape the agenda. Thus, change in the policy stream tends to be evolutionary, while there is scope for more sudden changes in problems and politics – the idea of ‘punctured equilibrium’.

A key role in coupling these streams is played by *policy entrepreneurs* – individuals who ‘are willing to invest their resources in pushing their pet proposals or problems, are responsible not only for prompting important people to pay attention, but also for coupling solutions to problems and for coupling both problems and solutions to politics’ (Kingdon 2011, 20). The coupling of streams is most likely when a *policy window* is opened by events in either the politics or problem stream. During these windows, policy entrepreneurs try to ‘sell’ their view of the policy problem and solution to key decision-makers. Generally, the problem stream is the last to be connected, but this is important in providing legitimacy for action (Ackrill and Kay 2011, 77). Windows close if the problem is successfully addressed or if there is no suitable policy alternative available. Windows can also close through a change of personnel in key positions or if the events that opened the window become less important over time (Kingdon 2011, 169-70.).

**Well-being and quality of life**

While in some literatures the terms ‘well-being’ and ‘quality of life’ have specific meanings (for an overview, see Phillips 2006), in others they do not. In the EU context quality of life tends to be used more, while in the UK well-being is more common. This may be partly explained by the UK’s greater interest in subjective well-being indicators (below), although may simply be about shifting fashions in discourse: quality of life was more prominent in UK policy documents and discourse in the early 2000s than a decade later. Moreover, politicians and policy-makers in both the EU and UK tend to use the terms interchangeably, so this approach is taken here. Because of its importance to contemporary developments, the eight dimensions identified by the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission (below) are taken to comprise well-being/quality of life; material living standards (income, consumption and wealth); health; education; personal activities including work; political voice and governance; social connections and relationships; environment (present and future conditions); insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature’ (CMEPSP 2009, 14-55).

While the paper focuses on contemporary concerns with well-being/quality of life measurement, this is viewed as part of a second historical wave of concern with well-being (Bache and Reardon 2013). The *first wave* emerged in the context of post-war prosperity as the social costs of private affluence became evident. A ‘social indicators’ movement emerged across a number of affluent states that resonated at the highest political levels in some countries, not least the United States, where President Johnson famously spoke of the good society being ‘a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods’ (Johnson 1964.) However, while new surveys were developed, the movement ran out of steam as economic recession in the 1970s marginalised many of its claims. The *second wave* shares discontent with the limitations of GNP/GDP as a measure of progress and is given impetus by important academic critiques of the assumed relationship between increases in income and life satisfaction, fuelled by the work of Easterlin (1973; 1974). In different contexts it is also driven to different degrees by environmental concerns and a growing respect for indicators of subjective well-being (below).

In this second wave there are numerous initiatives relating to well-being measurement. For example, Measures of Australia’s Progress (MAP) brings together indicators from economic, environmental and social domains in seeking a more balanced assessment of national progress (Wall and Salvaris 2011, 8). Within the EU, France, Germany, Italy and Spain are among the member states to develop projects on new indicators of progress. Internationally, the OECD has been particularly active on the issue, monitoring and supporting national developments and developing its own Better Life Index (OECD 2011).

The Commission of the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress or ‘Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission’[[4]](#footnote-4), as it is better known, has been important in giving impetus to these developments. The Commission was established in February 2008 by French President Sarkozy with the brief to:

‘identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, including the problems with its measurement; to consider what additional information might be required for the production of more relevant indicators of social progress; to assess the feasibility of alternative measurement tools, and to discuss how to present the statistical information in an appropriate way (CMEPSP 2009, Executive Summary)’.

The Commission’s final report of September 2009 produced a number of recommendations on how progress should be measured, aimed at stimulating both debate and specific responses in national and international contexts. These recommendations were influential on both UK and EU developments (interviews with the author, 2011) and it is to the first of these cases we now turn.

**The UK**

Events in the UK gathered momentum following David Cameron’s announcement in November 2010 (above). The ONS subsequently conducted a series of hearings[[5]](#footnote-5) and presented its findings in July 2011. In the meantime it signalled its commitment to measuring individual life satisfaction and happiness as part of national well-being by including four questions on subjective well-being in its largest household survey from April 2011[[6]](#footnote-6). This activity signalled a significant step forward in government interest in the issue, although interest can be traced back to early days of the previous Labour government.

***The politics stream***

*The Labour Government (1997-2010)*

The Labour government under Tony Blair (1997-2007) was the first to show a significant interest in quality of life as a policy goal. A key document signalling Labour’s interest in the issue was produced by Blair’s Strategy Unit, which argued that ‘there is a case for state intervention to boost life satisfaction due mainly to evidence of direct impacts on life satisfaction of government activities, together with strong evidence of the dependence of individuals’ well-being on the actions of others’ (Donovan and Halpern 2002)[[7]](#footnote-7). It prompted a number of government departments to commission reports on related issues, particularly the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), whose interest was in well-being and sustainable development (Marks et al. 2006).

 Under Prime Minister Brown (2007-10), the Strategy Unit (2008, 173) report *Realising Britain’s Potential Future Strategic Challenges for Britain* recognised public interest in quality of life issues, noting that ‘four in five Britons believe that the Government’s prime objective should be the greatest happiness rather than the greatest wealth’. It suggested that while politics would continue to focus on ‘bread and butter’ issues, it would also ‘increasingly address issues that are likely to affect citizens’ well-being and environmental concerns’ more directly than previously (Strategy Unit 2008, 184).

 While most government activity remained unaffected by these reports and statements, some government departments made explicit commitments to promoting well-being and this was reflected in the appointment of staff dedicated to this purpose. It was also during this period that the ONS began development well-being measures to be used in national surveys (Jeffries 2008). One direct policy response to the well-being agenda - and specifically to the work of prominent ‘happiness’ scholar Richard Layard - was the expansion of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) provision through the National Health Service. Also in the health field, the system of Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs) was established in 1999 to guide decisions on the allocation of funds to particular medical interventions (see Phillips 2009). Beyond health, local authorities were given the power to promote well-being through the Local Government Act 2000, although this power was not used extensively (Department for Communities and Local Government 2008).

 Towards the end of Labour’s period in office, new initiatives referring to quality of life or well-being were being introduced, including a civic health study that would provide a quality of life ‘score card’ for every part of England. After leaving office, the ‘politics of well-being’ has become a feature of Labour’s internal policy review (Civil Society 2013).

*The Coalition Government (2010-present)*

Before the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government came to power in May 2010, both parties separately indicated interest in the idea of well-being as a guide to public policy. In 2006, shortly after becoming leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron spoke of the need for government to recognise that there is ‘more to life than money’ and that it was ‘time we focused not just on GDP, but on GWB – General Well-Being’ (Cameron 2006). He subsequently established a Quality of Life Policy Group as part of his party’s internal policy review. This group concluded that ‘we are now confident enough of the dynamics of life satisfaction to start subjecting many areas of government policy to much more vigorous well-being tests’ (Gummer and Goldsmith 2007, 57). There was a distinctly environmental tone to the Group’s take on the ‘Easterlin paradox’ (Easterlin 1973; 1974): ‘If less materially intensive lifestyles are shown to benefit the individual as well as the planet, the prospect of well-being could come a powerful tool for motivating lighter, less resource-intensive lifestyles [for the present generation]’ (Gummer and Goldsmith 2007, 44).

When Cameron signalled his intention to take the issue seriously in government, he suggested the programme of work would:

‘open up a national debate about what really matters, not just in government but amongst people who influence our lives: in the media; in business; the people who develop the products we use, who build the towns we live in…And second, this information will help government work out, with evidence, the best ways of trying to help improve people’s well-being.’

Interviewees for this research were absolutely clear that Cameron’s intervention was crucial to the profile of the issue and its place on the agenda. Relatively few other Conservatives were seen as interested in the issue although two who were – Oliver Letwin and David Willets – were influential thinkers within the party and took high profile positions within the government. Cameron’s position on the issue was seen as influenced by his advisor Steve Hilton, considered by many as a ‘blue skies’ thinker. David Halpern was also seen as a key contributor in policy circles, having co-authored the influential 2002 report produced as part of Blair’s Strategy Unit and acting as a policy advisor to both Labour and Coalition governments on related issues.

 Within the Liberal Democrat Party, the MP Jo Swinson led an All Party Group on Well-being Economics from 2009 before taking a role in government as a Junior Equalities Minister in 2012. Swinson was also involved in a Liberal Democrat quality of life working group established that produced a policy paper that was ultimately approved by the party’s conference in 2011. The paper aimed to put quality of life ‘right in the heart of the government machine’ (Swinson 2011, 18).

 At various points there have been signals from the civil service that the agenda is to be taken seriously. In July 2011, Cabinet Secretary Gus O’Donnell stated that:

'I think the future will be that we use well-being ideas, we use all the stuff that is coming out of the behavioural work, to actually modernise our ways of doing policy analysis and getting better evidence, and coming up in the end … with better measures leading to better policies, leading to better lives’.

In line with this aspiration, the Treasury updated its Green Book guidance to government departments relating to the valuation of non-market goods in public policies. Specifically, it added Subjective Well-being measures to the established market-based approaches of Stated and Revealed Preference. The former approach was explicitly identified as ‘under development’, but the guidance suggested that it ‘may soon be developed to the point where it can provide a reliable and accepted complement to the market-based approaches’ and, in the meantime, ‘will be important in ensuring that the full range of impacts of proposed policies are considered, and may provide added information about the relative value of non-market goods compared with each other, if not yet with market goods’ (HM Treasury 2011, 58).

 In written evidence submitted to the Environmental Audit Select Committee Hearing on Well-being in 2013, the government continued to describe these indicators as ‘experimental statistics’ that were still in development, and suggested that it was too early for major decisions to be ‘heavily influenced’ by well-being research: this would be a long-term process. In the meantime, the government was ‘putting in place the foundations and most departments are using wellbeing data where it is relevant and adds value to their work’ (Cabinet Office 2013).

***The policy stream***

Developments in the UK policy stream fit well with the emphasis on evolution outlined in the multiple streams approach and the process of ‘softening up’ that is often necessary for ideas to be heard. The work of individuals such as David Halpern, Richard Layard, Andrew Oswald and Paul Dolan, who operate at the interface of academia and policy-making, has been a constant presence during the period before and after the change of government in 2010. Similarly, the new economics foundation (nef) think tank has long been important in generating and disseminating ideas on well-being. However, while Kingdon’s work emphasised national networks as important, this research revealed close connections between officials, academics, think-tanks and other actors that spanned national boundaries.

As with the EU case (below), momentum in the UK was connected to the OECD and, in particular, to its former Chief Statistician, Enrico Giovannini. Giovannini was identified by interviewees as someone with a strong personal commitment to the issue and with a convincing grasp of the details. He played a key role in developing the OECD’s agenda, which pre-dated the activities of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission and those of the EU. Indeed, the Paris-based OECD was seen as influential on the French administration on this issue and on President Sarkozy specifically, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Stiglitz-Sen Commission. Giovannini was also involved in key EU conferences on this topic, chaired one of the three working groups of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission, and maintained an ongoing influence within the networks, subsequently as head of Italy’s national statistical institute.

 Other actors also illustrate the flow of ideas across boundaries. Nef worked with the European Commission’s statistical directorate (Eurostat) on developing indicators at EU level, while working simultaneously with the ONS and the OECD. It also had a role in the Conservative Party’s Quality of Life review group and provides the Secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Well-being Economics. The ONS provides a further illustration of cross-national network activity. It provides the UK’s formal link to the EU’s statistical system, which leads to ongoing information flows both ways. The ONS also includes representation from Eurostat on its Well-beings Measure Advisory Group and Eurostat interviewees (2011) reported that they were closely monitoring the ONS’s experiments with subjective well-being questions in national surveys with a view to drawing lessons for EU surveys (more on this below). More broadly, the ONS also includes members of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission on its Advisory group.

 The academic contribution to the well-being agenda has been widely acknowledged. Economists have arguably led the way, but other disciplines have also been well represented in relevant networks. Some indication of the breadth of academic contributions is given by the academic membership of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission and of the ONS advisory group[[8]](#footnote-8). While economists were prominent on the former, this included specialisms such as feminist economics and welfare economics and economists whose interests span other fields (international affairs, social organization, environment, behavioural science, and philosophy). In addition were non-economists with a background in corporate responsibility, psychology and public policy. The ONS advisory group is also led by economists with a range of specialisms, as well as academics from the fields of epidemiology and health, social policy, clinical psychology and psychology. The extent of the overlapping nature of these networks is well illustrated by the seven academics who have served on both the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission and the ONS advisory group.

***The problem stream***

In Kingdon’s terms, it is hard to identify a single ‘crisis or high profile event’ promoting the measurement of well-being in the UK, although both the global economic crisis and the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission are an important part of the context. More telling here though is the ‘shift in respected indicators’ aspect of Kingdon’s argument. A shift has taken place in both the academic and statistical communities in relation to the reliability of subjective well-being data and also in relation to long-standing assumptions about the relationship between income and life satisfaction. Alongside this is the accumulation of evidence on the nature and cause of environmental problems and their effects on quality of life, present and future. However, while David Cameron has embraced the agenda and there has been a response within the civil service, it is important not to overstate its effects and much scepticism remains.

Much of the press reaction to Cameron’s 2010 speech was critical, not least on the right of the spectrum. Moreover, many influential political actors on the right, left and centre of British politics remain wedded to the idea of economic growth as the benchmark of national progress. Indeed, it is the lack of growth that is generally seen as the problem, not the idea of pursuing it. In this context it is become more difficult for Cameron and others to take a high profile position on well-being as an overarching policy goal. So the developments that continue do so away from the political and media spotlight in the realm of administrators and statisticians.

**The EU**

Rhetorically at least, concern with quality of life in the EU is as old as the EU itself: Article 2 of the Treaty of Rome describes one of the tasks of the EU as ‘the raising of the standard of living and quality of life’. However, only in the past decade has there been a focus on developing indicators that might be used to guide policy. The EU agency Eurofound took the first steps in this direction in 2003 with a small scale survey on quality of life, which has since been repeated. More significant though was the EU Commission’s 2009 communication to the Council and EP called *GDP and Beyond (below)*, signalling a broader agenda for the issue. This communication provides a ‘roadmap’ of the actions needed to improve EU indicators to provide a more balanced measure of progress than reliance on GDP, namely: complementing GDP with environmental and social indicators; near real-time information for decision-making; more accurate reporting on distribution and inequalities; developing a European Sustainable Development Scoreboard; and extending national accounts to environmental and social issues.

***The politics stream***

Since the early 1990s the EU Commission has sought to position itself and the EU more generally as leading the global agenda on environmental and related issues. A key moment in the history of the *GDP and Beyond* communication was a conference in 1995 co-organised by the EU institutions and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). While the conference did not significantly advance the quality of life agenda at the time, it provided an important reference point for future developments. Indeed, some of those involved in the 1995 conference were also involved in relaunching the initiative with the encouragement of the new Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas (2004-10). The platform for this relaunch was the 2007 conference ‘Beyond GDP’, which was organised jointly by EU institutions, the Club of Rome, the OECD and the WWF. It was attended by over 650 representatives from a range of public, private and voluntary organisations. While DG Environment drove forward this event, the Commissioner for Economic Affairs (Almunia) was engaged early in the process, which secured the active cooperation of Eurostat. The conference sought to identify the relevant measures of progress and to consider how they might be taken up in public debate and inform policy-making. The *GDP and Beyond* Communication of 2009 was a direct outcome of the conference.

 The deliberations of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission provided an important backdrop to these EU developments. Moreover, while many actors were involved in both initiatives, there was also a degree of institutional competition evident, with the Commission’s communication deliberately launched one week before the launch of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report. At the launch of the Commission communication though, a number of speakers referred to the importance of this other initiative. Art de Gues, Deputy Secretary General of the OECD, highlighted the comment by Stiglitz that after the financial crisis ‘there is no going back to business as usual’. And, of particular interest for the analytical framework employed here, Enrico Giovannini, then President of the Italian national Statistical Office (ISTAT) spoke of a ‘political window of opportunity’ in the post-crisis recovery period to construct a new political narrative for politicians concerned to ask themselves ‘what can I sell to citizens if I cannot for a while sell high GDP growth rates?’.

 Once the issue had been put on the agenda by DG Environment and Eurostat, other Commission directorates began to engage, with DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and DG Health and Consumer Affairs being the first to do so. Subsequently the Commission established an Inter-departmental Co-ordination Group involving 14 other directorates and four agencies, co-chaired by Eurostat and DG Environment.

 *GDP and Beyond* has secured high level support within the Commission. President Barroso endorsed the initiative at the 2007 conference and Environment Commissioner Potočnik (2011, 6-7) made the case for ‘social and environmental statistics and indicators on the same level with economic statistics, concerning scope, details and timeliness’. Economic and Monetary Affairs Commissioner Olli Rehn also endorsed the initiative. The EP voted in support of the initiative in 2011 and both the Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions endorsed the initiative, with the latter proposing that the structural funds should be allocated according to environmental and social indicators as well as regional GDP.

 Within national governments President Sarkozy’s took a particularly high profile stance on the issue, particularly in the wake of the financial crisis:

‘for years, people said that finance was a formidable creator of wealth, only to discover one day that it accumulated so many risks that the world almost plunged into chaos. The crisis doesn't only make us free to imagine other models, another future, another world. It obliges us to do so’ (Sarkozy 2009).

In April 2010 President Sarkozy and German Chancellor Merkel presented a joint declaration stating that ‘the two countries would push the European Union to adopt proposals for the calculation of economic growth based on work by the Stiglitz Commission’ (RFI 2010).

 Overall, Eurostat (2009, 4) identified ‘a clear political will to radically reassess the way progress is measured’. Interviewees for this research suggested one small but significant step that facilitated wider political support was the change of name of the initiative from *Beyond GDP* in 2007 to *GDP and Beyond* by 2009: the latter implying measures to complement rather than replace GDP.

***The policy stream***

The EU policy stream is necessarily transnational with dense interactions between statistical bodies within the EU and beyond. Within the EU, the European Statistical System (ESS) is comprised of Eurostat and national statistical offices. A Sponsorship Group was established by Eurostat for its work on *GDP and Beyond*, which involves representatives of national offices as well as the OECD. In turn, Eurostat officials are also involved in OECD deliberations and those within national statistical systems. Generally, interviewees for this research emphasised the interconnectedness of these processes and the regular exchange of ideas and practice. As noted above, a number of organisations and actors are involved in transnational networks that overlap national and EU initiatives. In short, there is an intense flow of ideas and information across borders within and beyond the EU, involving a range of actors.

***The problem stream***

While the EU has a coalition of actors from across the institutions and other organisations advocating the adoption of wider measures to complement GDP, this does not amount to a successful coupling of the problem stream. For example, different Commission DGs have different conceptualisations of the ‘problem’ – e.g., environmental, social, health – and different interests to promote. The issue in the EU is closely connected to environmental concerns, which follows on from the leadership given to the issue by DG Environment, and is reflected to a large extent in the five actions proposed by *GDP and Beyond*.

**Comparative analysis**

In the opening sections, a number of systemic variables were identified as potentially relevant to this comparative analysis (Table 1). In addition, it was suggested that in practice the systems of the EU and its member states are closely inter-twined. These themes are examined here within the framework of the multiple streams approach.

In the UK *politics stream*, a period of hesitant governmental interest in the issue took a sudden step forward with the change of government in 2010. Here, the Prime Minister’s personal interest in the issue was decisive: while there was little evidence of wide support for this agenda within government, the importance of the Prime Minister within the British system sent a strong signal to civil servants that this agenda demanded a response. Thus, while the issue has subsequently fallen from media glare, developments continue at civil service level. The contrast here with the EU politics stream is stark – no such step forward has taken place and the nature of the system makes any shift highly unlikely. While some national leaders have a keen interest in the issue, as do some politicians within the EP, the institutional fragmentation of the EU means that no individual actor can move the agenda forward so quickly. Thus, while there are many access points in the EU, there are also many veto points. So, getting something onto the EU’s agenda may be relatively easy: getting it high on the agenda is another matter and requires building consensus within and across the key institutions. Of course, the concentration of power in the UK executive and, particularly in this case, the Prime Minister’s Office, means that a step forward might be more easily reversed under a successor Prime Minister with different views.

 In the *policy stream*, the main observation here is the importance of territorially overlapping policy networks. While some actors and organisations operate exclusively in one political arena or the other, a number of important actors operate in both. Similarly, the flow of ideas is across the two systems, albeit with a slightly different emphasis on the domains of well-being. In the UK, the emphasis on life satisfaction and happiness is stronger and there has already been a direct policy effect of Richard Layard’s work in this field. In the EU, this theme is present in debates, but is not part of the *GDP and Beyond* roadmap. Thus, although both UK and EU developments have a strong environmental dimension, it is proportionally stronger in the latter case because of the absence of life satisfaction indicators. However, it should be noted that in 2013 Eurostat included questions on subjective well-being in an EU-SILC[[9]](#footnote-9) ad-hoc module, drawing directly on the survey experiences of the UK and other member states. More generally, the overlapping networks have inevitably led to the same shift in respected indicators that has occurred in both arenas and which is crucial to the issue receiving attention in both contexts.

In terms of the *problem stream*, the UK and EU positions are very similar. Each has a coalition of actors promoting the use of measures to complement GDP, but in neither case is there an effective coupling of the problem stream with politics and policy. Though there may be a general sense among publics that ‘society is not taking us to a better place’ (interviewee 2011), it is not clear that this points to a specific problem either within or across systems. For some the problem may be about subjective well-being, for others it might be environmental or social. Moreover, in the context of the economic crisis, the political focus is primarily on addressing the problem of low growth. In this sense, well-being has all the hallmarks of a ‘wicked problem’ that is hard to define, hard to address by recourse to scientific methods alone and ultimately requires the exercise of political judgement (Bache, Reardon and Anand 2013). As the authors of the seminal work on this topic put it: ‘The formulation of a wicked problem *is* the problem! The process of formulating the problem and of conceiving a solution (or re-solution) are identical, since every specification of the problem is a specification of the direction in which a treatment is considered’ (Rittel and Webber 1973, 161).

In theoretical terms it is the responsibility of policy entrepreneurs to connect the three streams. The discussion above has alluded to a number of actors who have played a pivotal role in advancing the agenda within the overlapping networks. There is also acknowledgement (*pace* Giovannini) that the post-financial crisis period provides a ‘window of opportunity’ to persuade politicians to embrace well-being indicators as ones they might improve while the prospects for improving key economic indicators remains limited. If the economic crisis has opened a *problem window* across systems, the change of government and the intervention of David Cameron opened a *political window* in the UK, which appears likely to remain open until at least the next UK general election (probably in 2015). To date though, policy entrepreneurs have not been able to effectively couple the streams and this is clearly no small task: while there have been significant advances in the policy stream, there remain significant issues to address that may be essential to an effective coupling. For example, politicians would want simple ways of communicating progress on well-being – perhaps a single indicator – while statisticians generally counsel against this approach, suggesting it would necessarily misrepresent complex data. Further, while there may be confidence in knowledge of how to measure well-being, there is less confidence in the knowledge of how different policy options might improve well-being. Politically, there is cautiousness around these issues that is not helped by these under-developed policy aspects. In short, there remains a role for policy entrepreneurs to play in framing the issue more effectively but there is also need for further development within the individual streams themselves to provide policy entrepreneurs with the tools necessary to do this.

 In terms of the *nature of change*, the policy stream has moved incrementally in both the EU and the UK. While Kingdon suggests both the politics and problem streams can suddenly move forward, this has only occurred in the UK politics stream. Moreover, it is not obvious how the EU politics stream might suddenly move forward, nor the problem stream in either case: while the notion of punctuated equilibrium in some respects captures the political effect of Cameron’s intervention in the UK, the term ‘punctuated evolution’ might be a better description, given the incremental change that is ongoing in the policy stream. In the EU context, there is gradual policy evolution within the statistical community that has yet to be punctuated in the same way politically.

If the nature of the institutional arrangements and the decision-making cultures of the two systems have had marked effects on developments to date, the same cannot be said about the contrasting characteristics of the public spheres and interest groups activities. In the absence of a developed European public sphere, there has inevitably been more system-wide public debate on this issue in the UK. However, most of this debate has been very recent and connected to Cameron’s 2010 announcement: until then, developments in this field took place largely in the absence of debate, save for the occasional article in one of the more liberal broadsheet newspapers. Moreover, it is hard to see any difference that recent public debate on the issue has made on developments in the UK compared to the EU. Similarly, interest group activity has been limited in both arenas[[10]](#footnote-10), but where it has occurred, has been at least as visible at EU level as at UK level[[11]](#footnote-11). Generally, this issue has risen up the agenda through the overlapping policy networks comprised mainly of officials, statisticians and academics, at one remove from public view and from most interest group activity. However, both the media response to Cameron’s announcement and the attendance of numerous interest groups at the launch of the subsequent ONS report demonstrated that this situation can change rapidly.

**Conclusions**

This paper has revealed institutional and ideational biases that shape both the dynamics of the quality of life issue in different contexts and that produce different emphases in policy content. In the UK context, the intervention of the Prime Minister has provided political momentum that has not occurred in the EU context and it is difficult to see how any single individual might play a similar role given the greater dispersion of power in the EU system. While the issue has fallen from the media spotlight in the UK, policy developments continue at the level of civil servants and statisticians. In the EU, statisticians have pushed forward their work on well-being to include subjective well-being questions in their surveys for the first time in 2013 without the same level of political support as in the UK. Comparatively though, thinking through the policy implications of wellbeing as a government goal is more advanced in the UK as a result of Cameron’s support. In Kingdon’s terms, well-being is on the governmental agenda in the UK, ‘receiving attention within government’; while in the EU it is only on the *decision agenda*, defined as ‘lined up for a decision’.

 In terms of the policy streams there are still important issues to be addressed in the overlapping networks. These relate to the most appropriate indicators to be used – particularly ‘headline’ indicators that might attract the interest of the public and thus politicians – and also to the need for better understanding of the impact of different policy interventions on well-being. Above all though, defining more persuasively the nature of the problem that well-being measurement and policy might address remains the outstanding challenge.

 While to some extent there may be a window of opportunity in both the UK and EU, there is some way to go in both cases before this might lead to significant policy impacts. Scientific advances have brought new confidence to the agenda but, as with all ‘wicked problems’, this is an issue that will ultimately rely on political judgement and practical action. Only then will we genuinely be able to speak of quality of life as an idea whose time has come.

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1. Sections of this chapter draw on Bache (2013) and Bache and Reardon (2013). I am grateful to Louise Reardon for allowing me to draw on some of our joint work here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Beyond monitoring progress, such indicators might also be used for informing policy design and for policy appraisal (Dolan, Layard and Metcalfe 2011, 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While the most recent (fourth) edition is used here, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* was first published in 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Commission was and led Nobel Prize winning economists Joseph Stiglitz (Chair) and Amartya Sen (Advisor) and co-ordinated by French economist Jean Paul Fitoussi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In total, ONS held 175 events, involving around 7,250 people. In total the debate generated 34,000 responses (ONS 2011, 2) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The four questions included in the Integrated Household Survey (IHS) were: Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? Each is measured on a scale from 0 to 10. These questions will be asked of around 200,000 adults (aged 16 and over) each year (ONS 2011, p.17). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Strategy Unit Report was explicitly *not* a statement of government policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Notwithstanding the potential for political, locational and other biases of Paris and London. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Statistics on Income and Living Conditions [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. With the exception of nef, which, as a self-styled ‘think and do tank’ can be taken as part interest group. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The obvious examples here are nef and WWF – the latter arguably more visible in EU developments. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)