

WELL-BEING STATISTICS IN AFRICA:

Status and Implications for Policy Discussions

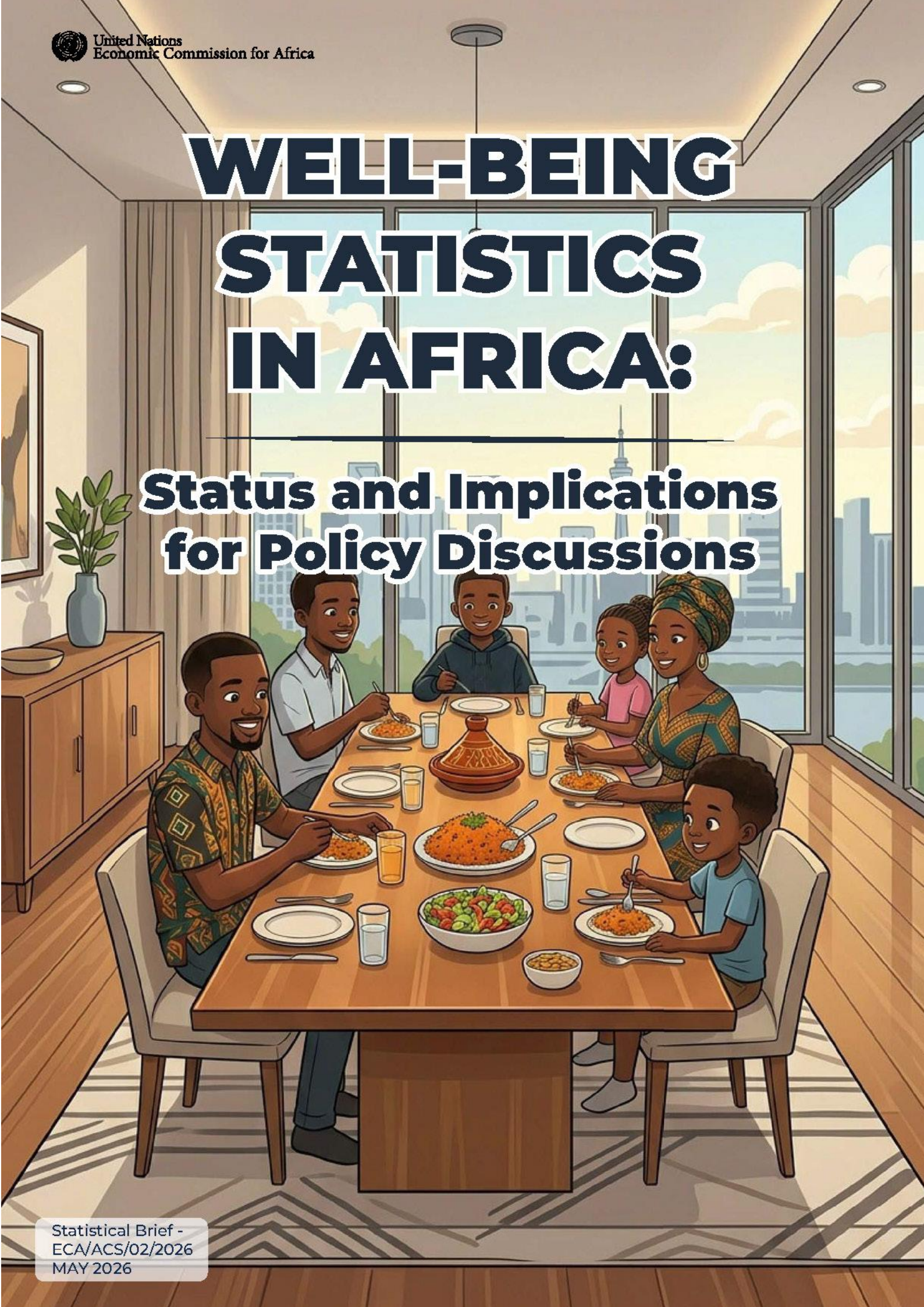


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About this Series

This edition of the Africa Beyond the Numbers series advocates better alignment and more coherent use of well-being measures in Africa. Well-being is measured through a wide range of approaches, including unitary and multidimensional perspectives, monetary and non-monetary indicators, intra-generational and inter-generational indices, environmental and inclusivity considerations, objective and subjective considerations, and the associated micro-meso-macro linkages. The measures, including monetary poverty, multidimensional poverty, the human development index, the happiness index, the better life index, the quality-of-life index, and per capita income, differ in concepts, methodologies, data sources, frequencies, comparability, and policy applications. As a result, they pose challenges for comparability and choice.

Although most African governments recognise the need to eradicate poverty and improve well-being, the choice of indicators for policy formulation, monitoring, or evaluation has been discretionary, partly because of limited appreciation of the transmission linkages within and between indicators, and the disparate production and dissemination of relevant statistics. This series presents the status of generating and disseminating six selected measures: monetary poverty, global and national multidimensional indices, Human Development Index, happiness index, and per capita income. It uncovers the disparities that have adversely impacted policy actions aimed at enhancing well-being. With the surge in emerging data sources, this series provides recommendations for strategies to bridge disparities across the six selected measures.

Africa Beyond the Numbers is part of the African Centre for Statistics' efforts to produce concise, policy-ready statistical products that communicate why the numbers matter, not just what they are. The aim is to present the status of the availability, production, and dissemination of relational development indicators to enhance policy uptake.

1. Introduction

The global discourse on well-being measures continues to shift beyond narrow monetary and unitary perspectives toward broader indicators of deprivation, human development, subjective well-being, and, more recently, the discussions of a “Beyond-GDP” metric. These efforts reflect a legitimate desire for a richer account of how people live, the deprivations they face, and whether development is improving their lives. This legitimacy aligns with both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018–2027), which call for relevant, high-quality, and comparable data and statistics.

The variety of well-being measures, specifically monetary poverty, national and global multidimensional poverty indices (MPI), human development index, per capita income, and happiness index, depending on their construction, either guide policy formulation, monitoring, or evaluation. However, the challenge of non-comparability and contextual variation has led practitioners to use them at their discretion. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) (2025) present a comparison of the percentage of persons living in poverty from the perspectives of the MPI and the monetary poverty benchmark of PPP \$3.00 a day. For three African countries and sub-Saharan Africa, the following are observed from the statistical tables of the report: First, referencing a survey year of 2021, Madagascar’s MPI Headcount ratio is 68.4 per cent and a corresponding statistic for monetary poverty is not available; second, the MPI Headcount ratio for Liberia is almost 20.0 percentage points higher than monetary poverty for the same.¹ referenced survey in 2019/2020; third, the MPI Headcount ratio for Zimbabwe is in excess of 20.0 percentage points lower than monetary poverty for the same referenced survey in 2019; and fourth, for sub-Saharan Africa the 2025 report publishes 48.1 per cent for MPI and 45.9 per cent for monetary poverty (see Figure 5). The differences in the directions of the gaps between MPI and monetary poverty corroborate the non-comparability of well-being statistics. It also underscores the need to be circumspect when making regional-level inferences.

The differences in well-being measures can be traced to a multiplicity of factors, including conceptualization, scope, measurement, data sources, timing, and frequency. These differences risk escalating, as the community of statisticians and development practitioners, in the context of “Beyond-GDP,” invariably proposes consolidating these measures despite their inherent incompatibility. The “Beyond GDP” initiative proposes offering a broader economic, social, and environmental perspective on well-being, using per capita GDP and the multidimensional poverty index (MPI) as foundational indicators. The proposal to deploy a Well-being Adjusted GDP (WAGDP) indicator that includes the MPI and other inequality and

¹ The use of ‘same’ is premised on the presentation of the table in the report, but caution is required as the survey years are tagged to the data collection used for the MPI estimates, but in some instances, these are not the same for the monetary poverty estimates, where annual poverty rates have been computed.

environmental indicators would inherit the statistical limitations of MPI production, which primarily relies on infrequent, externally supported household surveys, such as the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). In the context of this escalating complexity, the brief addresses three objectives. First, it assesses the comparability of different well-being measures for the continent. Second, it uncovers intra- and inter-gaps in data and statistics on well-being measures, and third, it advocates for national and regional commitment to defining well-being measures for Africa.

While this brief does not explicitly discuss the emerging “Beyond GDP” agenda, given its recent launch in May 2026 (read the report [here](#)) and the fact that the framework is not yet fully operationalised, it is expected to contribute to and help shape intercontinental discussions on measuring well-being.

In the next sections, section two describes the data and methodology, followed by section three, which presents key findings on the status of well-being statistics in Africa. Sections four and five submit a diagnosis of the comparability of well-being measures and a preliminary guidance on the use of well-being measures, respectively. The last two sections offer a prompt for a discussion on the use of emerging data sources for well-being measurement in Africa and a conclusion.

2. Approach and Methodology

This section explains the key concepts and indicators used in the brief, as well as the data sources and methods used in the analyses.

Definition of Key Concepts

Poverty² refers to deprivation in basic living conditions. It includes monetary indicators, measured through income or consumption, as well as non-monetary and multidimensional indicators that capture deprivation in areas such as health, education, and living standards. Conceptually, both monetary and non-monetary deprivations fall under the broader concept of poverty.

The monetary poverty headcount ratio measures the share of the population living below a defined poverty line, usually an international or national poverty threshold. It is used to assess the extent of income or consumption deprivation. In June, 2025, the international poverty line was updated from \$2.15 to \$3.00 per person per day at purchasing power parity (PPP) (Hasell et al., 2025).

The World Bank, therefore, defines extreme poverty as living below the International Poverty Line of \$3.00 per day. (World Bank, 2026). In this brief, all analyses based on this indicator use the new \$3.00 poverty line.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is the product of the proportion of the population that is multidimensionally poor (incidence) and the intensity of multidimensional poverty. (UNDP & OPHI, 2025). Based on the Alkire-Foster counting method (Alkire & Foster, 2011), the global MPI measures the deprivations simultaneously experienced by people experiencing poverty, spanning 10 indicators across three equally weighted dimensions: Health, Education, and Living Standards. The UNDP and OPHI have jointly published Global MPI estimates for more than 100 countries since 2010. Many countries compute their own National MPI, tailored to country-specific contexts, using varying indicators and cut-offs relevant to the national context and designed to inform domestic policies.

Well-being refers to the overall quality of people's lives, encompassing material living standards, health, education, security, social inclusion, subjective life satisfaction, and environmental conditions. Because well-being is broad and multidimensional, no single indicator can fully measure it.

² In this brief, **poverty** is used as a measurement construct. The term is applied when an indicator is explicitly defined and constructed as a poverty measure. This distinction is to avoid conflating broader well-being indicators with poverty measures, particularly when indices such as the HDI capture development outcomes but are not, in themselves, measures of poverty.

Well-being indicators are statistics that provide partial insight into one or more dimensions of well-being. In this brief, HDI, per capita income, and the happiness index are treated as well-being indicators and not complete measures of well-being.

Welfare³ refers to individuals' material and economic conditions, focusing on their ability to meet basic needs through income, consumption, and access to essential services. According to Sen (1983), welfare encompasses a person's capability to achieve valuable "functionings" and to exercise real freedoms in leading the kind of life they have reason to value

Human Development Index is a composite measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. (UNDP, 2024).

The happiness index measures subjective well-being based on individuals' self-assessments of their lives, typically on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 represents the worst possible life and 10 the best. (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2017). Unlike monetary or multidimensional poverty measures, it captures perceived well-being rather than objective deprivation.

Per capita income measures average economic prosperity, or income per person, in a country. It is often used as a broad proxy for economic welfare and development.

Data Sources and Methods

This brief adopts a multi-source, multi-indicator approach to examine the availability, production, dissemination, and comparability of selected poverty- and well-being measures across Africa. The analysis draws on data from the official custodians of global and national well-being statistics. The data used in this brief were obtained from the following sources:

- World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform, where the data are based on primary household surveys obtained from government statistical agencies and World Bank country departments.
- UNDP and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI): Global multidimensional poverty data
- UNDP's Human Development Report
- Sustainable Development Solutions Network, A Global initiative for the United Nations
- National Statistical Offices (NSOs), which are the primary producers of household surveys, censuses, and administrative data.

³ In this brief, we have used the term welfare to refer to unidimensional, resource-based measures of material living standards at the household or individual level, typically measured through income, consumption, or monetary poverty indicators. It captures the economic capacity of households to meet basic needs. By contrast, well-being is used to capture a broader, multidimensional context. It also includes subjective dimensions, such as life satisfaction, perceptions, and overall quality of life.

The brief combines these data with descriptive and comparative analytical methods. Ranking techniques compare regional and national estimates on selected indicators. At the same time, graphical analysis (including dumbbell plots and bar graphs) illustrates differences, trends, and gaps across countries and indicators. Structured tables also provide a comprehensive evaluation of poverty and well-being in Africa.

Coverage

The analysis covers African countries for which data were available across the selected well-being measures. The monetary poverty data spanning 1980-2024 were available for 51 countries. No data points were available for Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia over the reference period. The UNDP and OPHI's Global MPI covers 49 African countries, with the first available estimates ranging from 2010 to 2020 and the latest available estimates ranging from 2018 to 2025. Countries with missing observations for specific measures were excluded from indicator-specific analyses and visuals.

Statistical Markers

- 2.1.1 **Data Recency/Latest Estimate and/or Publication Year** identifies the latest available reference year for a given indicator relative to the date of this publication.
- 2.1.2 **Earliest/First Estimate and/or Publication Year** captures the first available observation for a particular indicator.
- 2.1.3 **Data Range** refers to the span between the earliest and latest available surveys or censuses used to generate an indicator.
- 2.1.4 **Number of Data Points** represents the total count of available data collection exercises for a country within the specified period.
- 2.1.5 **Periodicity** is the regularity with which data are collected or updated. It indicates whether indicators are produced annually, periodically, irregularly, or through one-off surveys.
- 2.1.6 **Inter-Survey Period is the time gap, measured in years**, between two consecutive observations of a given well-being indicator within a country. It is used to assess the potential effects of intended and unintended factors during the inter-survey period.
- 2.1.7 **Publication Year and Survey Year refer to** the alignment or variance between the Year of a survey or the reference date for the estimate and the year of publication, which may constrain either generalisation or comparability of indicators.

3. Key Findings on the Status of Well-being Statistics in Africa

This section presents key findings on well-being statistics in Africa. It covers two broad statistical markers, namely, comparability of data recency, ranges, and periodicities, and consistency in statistical narratives.

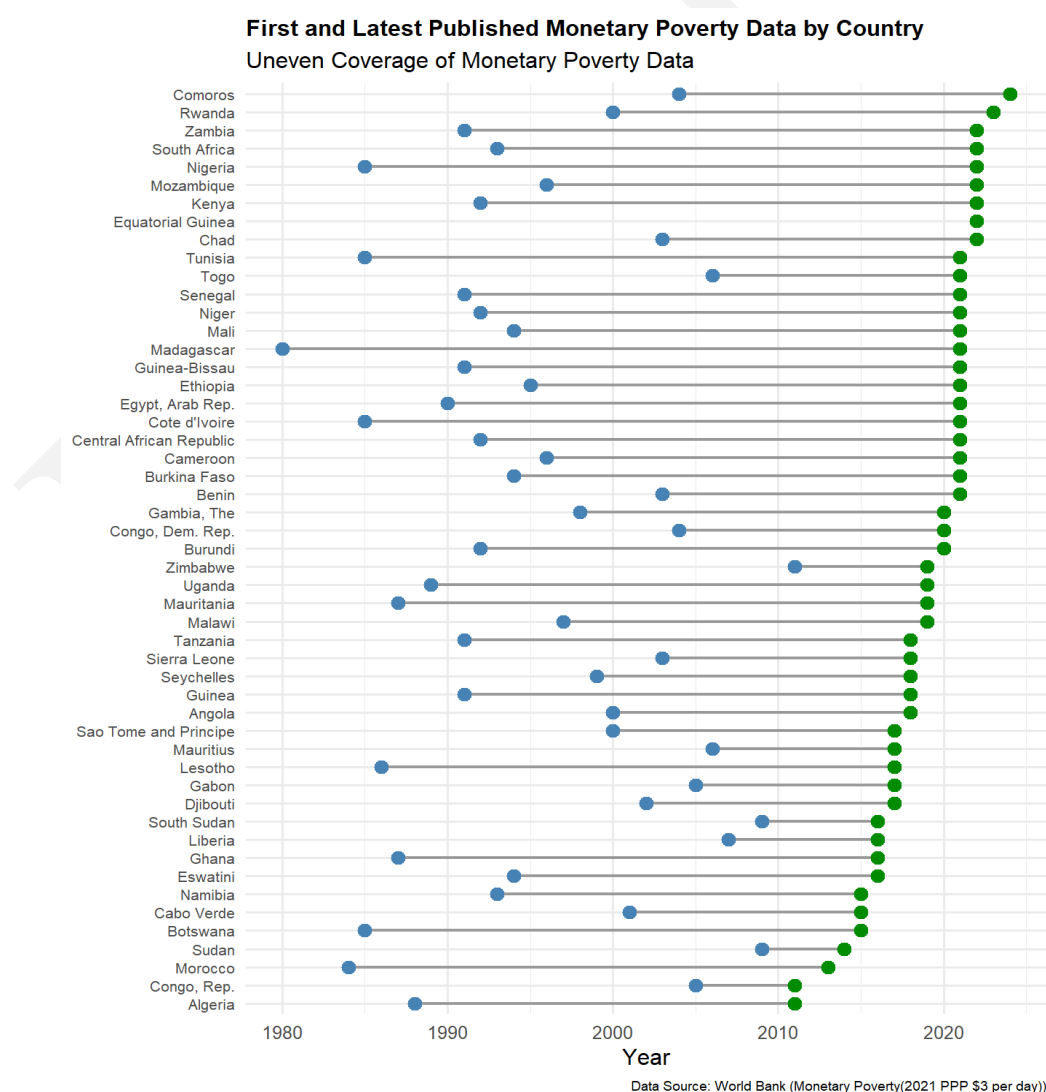
Differences in Data Recency, Latest Year and Ranges

Monetary poverty production varies significantly across Africa: the first estimates span 1980 - 2022, while the latest available statistics range from 2011 to 2024, with the following specificities:

- Madagascar reported the earliest in 1980, while Equatorial Guinea's first estimate was in 2022;
- Algeria and the Congo Republic's latest available statistics date back to 2011, and Comoros most recent estimate was in 2024.

Equatorial Guinea has only one estimate for monetary poverty.

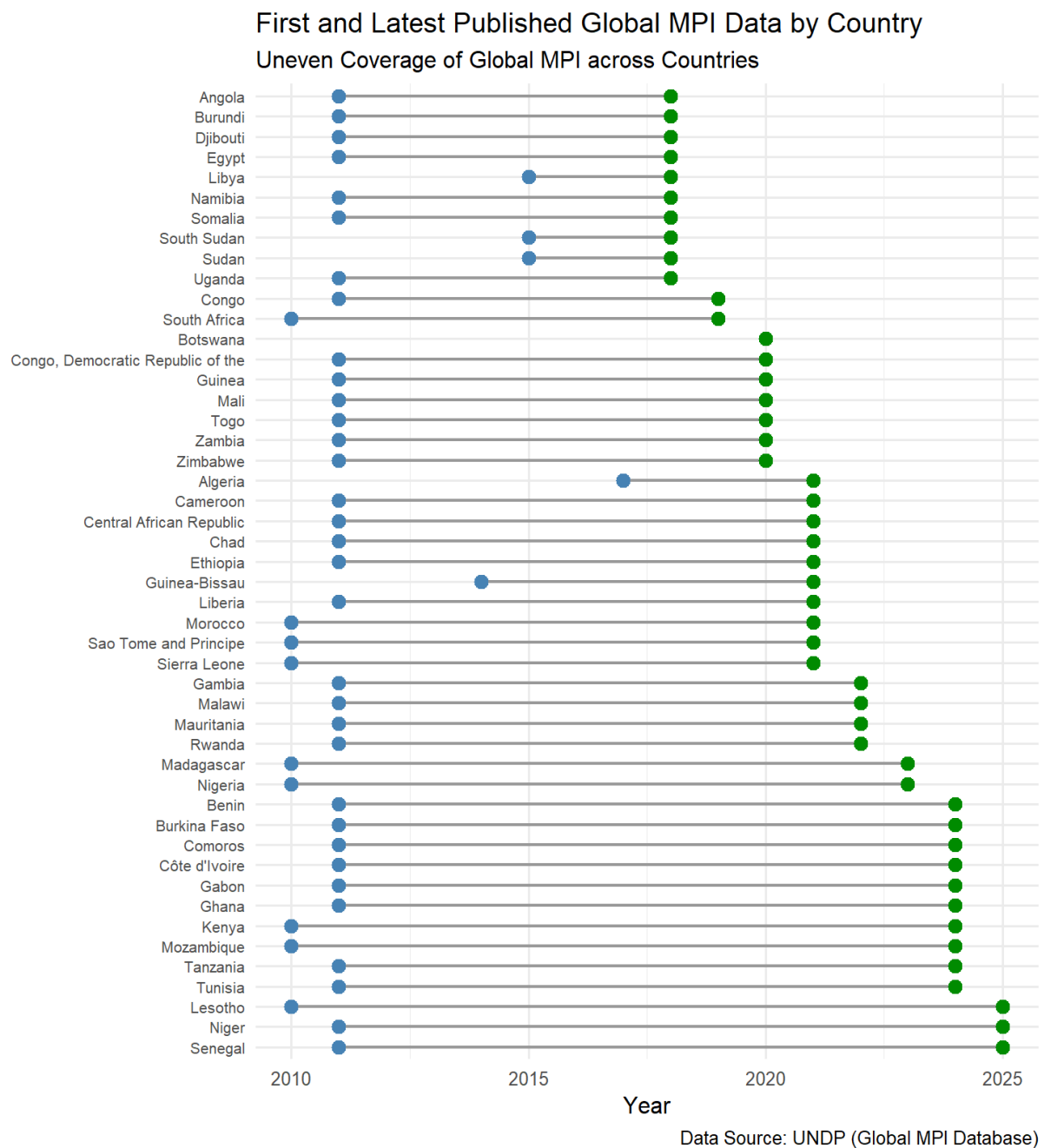
Figure 1: Data Recency, Latest Year and Ranges for Monetary Poverty Across African Countries



The first published Global MPI statistics for African countries range from 2010 to 2020, while the latest available data cover 2018 to 2025.

The data recency range for Global MPI across African countries is 7 years (2018 – 2025), with 10 countries reporting a recent survey year of 2018.

Figure 2: Data Recency, Latest Year and Ranges for Global MPI Across African Countries

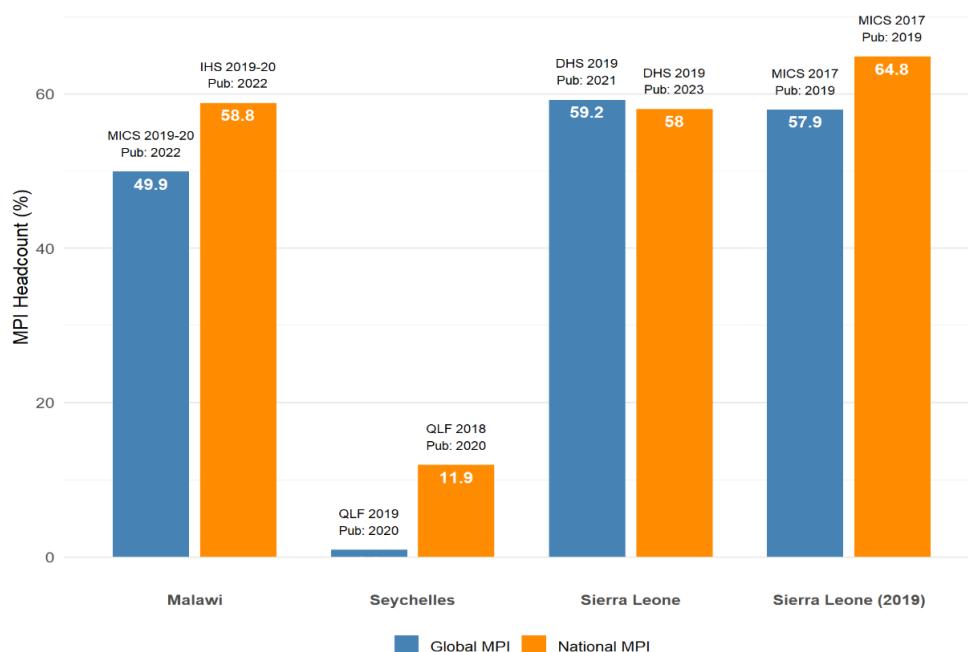


Differences in National and Global Estimates

The sources of differences between Global and National MPI headcount ratios vary and are complex to comprehend, given the following observations:

- i. In 2019, Global-MPI and National-MPI headcount ratios for Sierra Leone differ by 7 per cent due to variations in dimensions, indicators, weighting structures, and deprivation thresholds.
- ii. Using the same DHS 2019 survey, Sierra Leone's National MPI, published in 2023, recorded a headcount ratio of 58.0 per cent, compared with 59.2 per cent for the Global MPI published in 2021, a difference of 1.2 percentage points.
- iii. In 2020, Seychelles recorded 11 percentage-point difference between the Global-MPI and National-MPI headcount ratio, with differences in survey years
- iv. In Malawi, Global- MPI and National-MPI headcount ratios differed by close to nine (9) percentage points, with differences in surveys (MICS and IHS), but the same year for data collection and publication.

Figure 3: Difference in National MPI and Global MPI Estimates:



Source: National Statistical Offices and UNDP/OPHI.
Note: Survey type/year and publication year (Pub) are shown above each bar.

Differences between the National MPI headcount ratio and the Global MPI headcount ratio extend beyond variations in dimensions, indicators, weighting structures, and deprivation cut-offs. Divergences may also arise from other methodological and statistical factors, including differences in publication years, surveys and survey years.

Differences in Data Periodicities and Number of Data Points

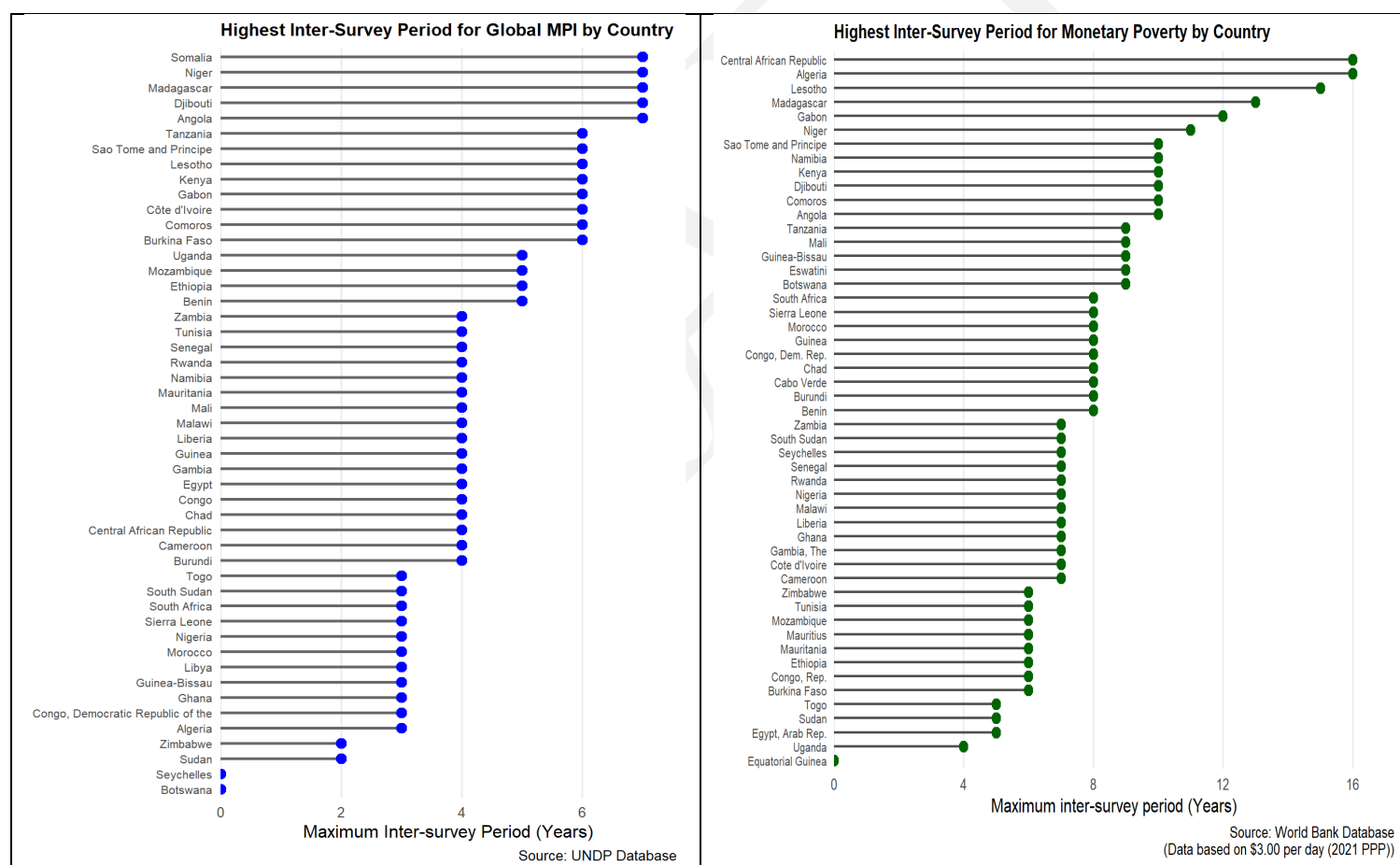
On average, African countries have an inter-survey period of about 4 years for Global MPI and 6 years for monetary poverty, with 17 countries recording more than the regional average for MPI and 12 countries recording 10 or more years for monetary poverty.

For monetary poverty, Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia have no data points over the period 1980 - 2024, while Equatorial Guinea has only one, against an African average of five.

For Global MPI, Seychelles and Botswana have only one data point over 2010 - 2025

Country coverage is not fully aligned: Global MPI covers 49 African countries compared with 51 in the monetary poverty analysis.

Figure 4: Data Gaps in Well-being Measures in Africa

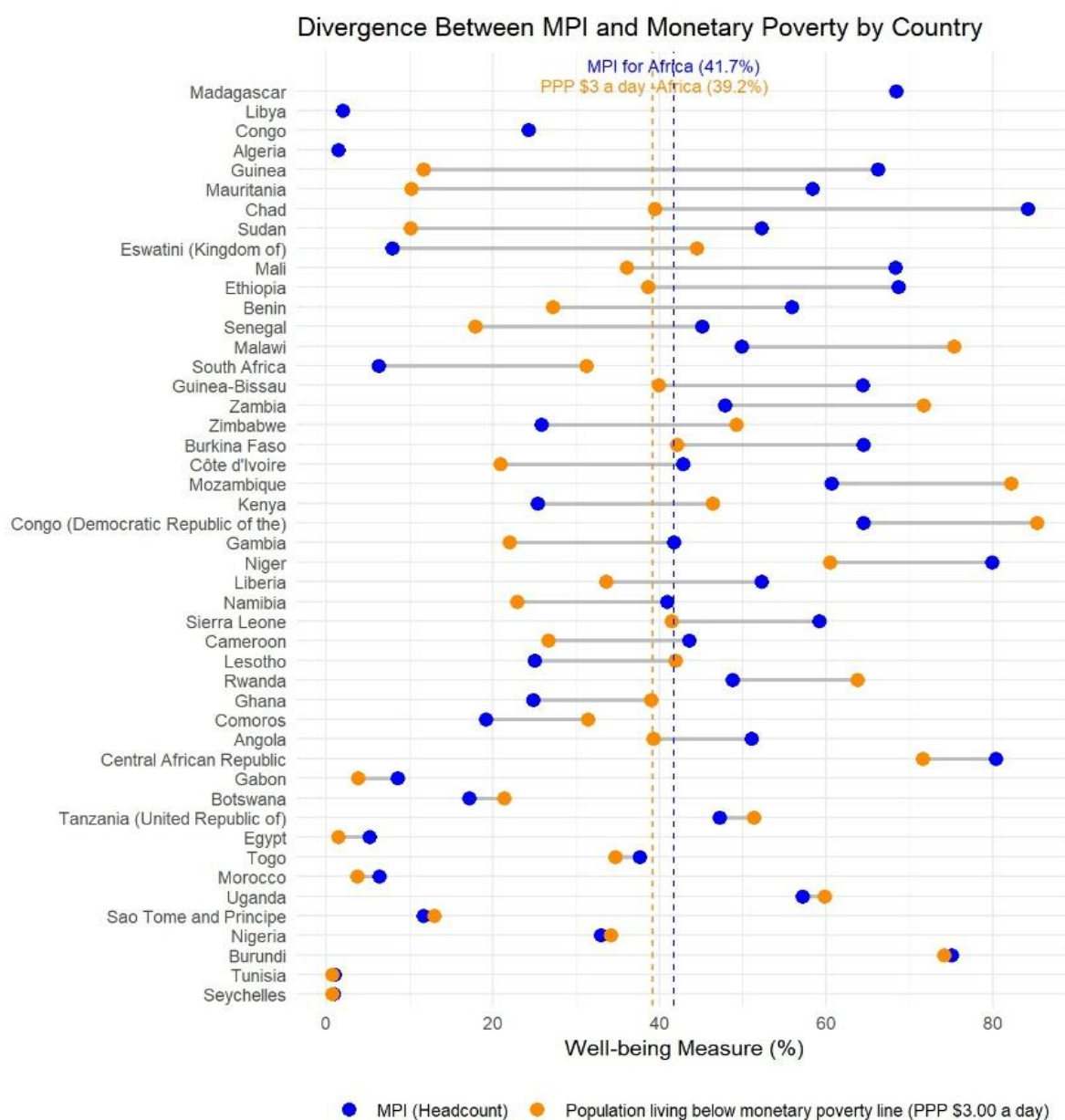


Divergence between Well-being Measures

For comparable years, monetary poverty is observably higher than the MPI headcount ratio in 17 African countries, while the reverse is true for 13 economies.

The largest difference between monetary poverty and MPI headcount ratio in Africa (Guinea: 54.5 percentage points) is more than 20 times the regional gap (2.5 percentage points).

Figure 5: Divergence between MPI and Monetary Poverty



Source: UNDP & OPHI (2025)

Differences in Country Rankings Across Well-being Measures

Across five measures of well-being (Monetary Poverty, Global Multidimensional Poverty, Human Development Index, Happiness Index, and GDP per Capita), 36 countries rank in the top 20, with positions varying by measure.

Five countries, namely: Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Angola, and Eswatini, ranked in the top 20 of GDP per Capita in Africa, are not ranked in terms of monetary poverty.

Table 1: Top 20 African Countries Across Selected Poverty and Well-Being Measures

GDP_Per_Capita_2024	HDI_2023	Monetary_Poverty_2024	Happiness_Index_2024	Global_MPI_Headcount (%)	Average Rank (Rank & No. of Measures)
Seychelles	Seychelles	Algeria	Mauritius	Seychelles	Mauritius (2 & 4)
Mauritius	Mauritius	Mauritius	Libya	Tunisia	Seychelles (2 & 4)
Libya	Algeria	Tunisia	Algeria	Algeria	Algeria (4 & 5)
Botswana	Egypt, Arab Rep.	Seychelles	South Africa	Libya	Libya (5 & 5)
Gabon	Tunisia	Egypt, Arab Rep.	Mozambique	Egypt, Arab Rep.	Gabon (7 & 5)
South Africa	South Africa	Morocco	Gabon	Morocco	Tunisia (8 & 5)
Equatorial Guinea	Gabon	Libya	Cote d'Ivoire	Eswatini	Morocco (10 & 5)
Algeria	Botswana	Gabon	Congo, Rep.	Gabon	South Africa (10 & 4)
Cabo Verde	Libya	Guinea	Guinea	São Tomé and Príncipe	Equatorial Guinea (10 & 3)
Egypt, Arab Rep.	Morocco	Mauritania	Namibia	Botswana	Cabo Verde (11 & 3)
Namibia	Eswatini	Cabo Verde	Cameroon	Comoros	Egypt, Arab Rep. (11 & 5)
Tunisia	Equatorial Guinea	Equatorial Guinea	Nigeria	Lesotho	Namibia (15 & 5)
Eswatini	Cabo Verde	São Tomé and Príncipe	Senegal	Zimbabwe	Botswana (15 & 5)
Morocco	Namibia	Senegal	Niger	Congo, Rep.	Sao Tome and Principe (16 & 4)
Djibouti	Congo, Rep.	Cote d'Ivoire	Morocco	Ghana	Côte d'Ivoire (17 & 5)
Angola	São Tomé and Príncipe	Gambia, The	Tunisia	Kenya	Eswatini ((20 & 5)
Cote d'Ivoire	Ghana	Botswana	Mauritania	Nigeria	Congo, Rep. (20 & 5)
Nigeria	Kenya	Djibouti	Kenya	Togo	Ghana (21 & 5)
Ghana	Angola	Namibia	Uganda	Namibia	Senegal (21 & 5)
Kenya	Comoros	Eritrea	Gambia, The	Gambia, The	Cameroon (21 & 5)

Note: Each indicator column lists the top 20 countries for that indicator. The average-rank column is calculated separately using all available country rankings across the five indicators. “No. of measures” indicates the number of indicators for which a country has available data.

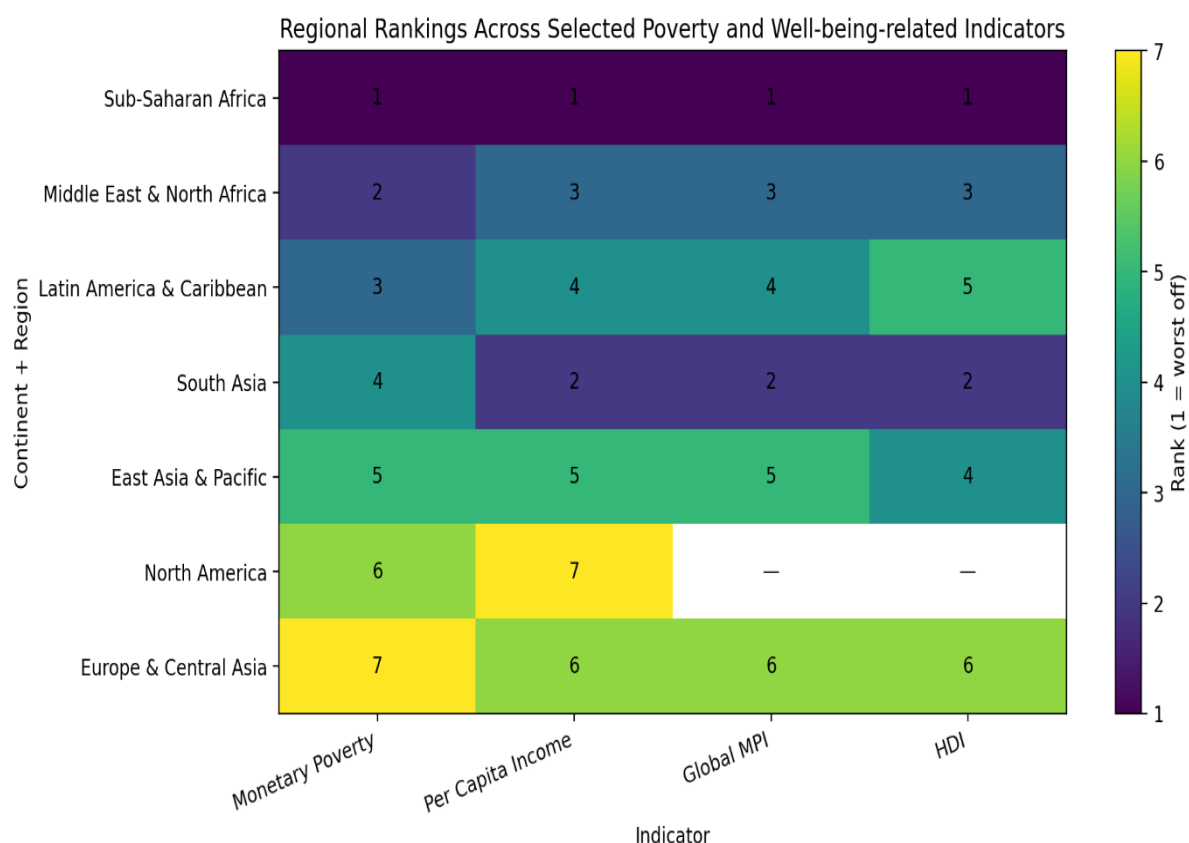
The green shade represents countries that appeared in the top 20 for all indicators.

Red shows countries that appeared in the top 20 for only one of the five indicators

Except for sub-Saharan Africa, the rankings of the other regions vary across the four well-being measures, with South Asia changing the most, moving from fourth in monetary poverty to second in the other three measures of well-being.

To situate Africa within the broader global pattern, the analysis also compares regional rankings across selected well-being-related measures.

Figure 6: Regional Ranking Across Selected Well-Being Measures from Worst to Best



Note: Lower ranks indicate worse performance. Missing entries mean the region was not captured in that dataset.

4. A Diagnosis of the Comparability of Well-being Measures

African governments recognize the importance of indicators in tracking and improving well-being. However, the choice of statistics for policy development, monitoring, and evaluation has often been discretionary. This is partly due to a limited understanding of the links between indicators and the consistent production and dissemination of well-being statistics.

This brief presents a diagnosis that provides a structured way to organize, interpret, and relate selected well-being measures. The six selected indicators are organized across five analytical dimensions: how each is defined, measured, sourced, its data periodicity, and its intended policy purposes.

Understanding the Definition and Purpose of Well-being Measures

All six indicators serve a common objective: to provide either a broad or a nuanced insight into poverty, deprivation, welfare, or well-being, though they do so from different perspectives. They are primarily intended to share policy relevance and to support the design of well-being policies.

Monetary poverty and per capita income are grounded in income and consumption approaches. Their orientation is largely economic, focusing on the ability to command goods and services through income or consumption expenditure. In contrast, the Global MPI and National MPI use a deprivation-based approach, measuring simultaneous disadvantages across multiple dimensions of life, such as health, education, and living standards. The HDI emphasises human capabilities and opportunities, while the Happiness Index (HI) reflects expectation- and perception-based approaches to well-being, incorporating subjective assessments of life satisfaction and social conditions.

The relationships among these indicators reveal non-uniformity in their measurement. Monetary poverty shows relatively strong associations with all indicators except the Happiness Index, as all four are directly or indirectly related to material living standards. However, its relationship with the Happiness Index is considerably weaker. Similarly, per capita income is conceptually nested within HDI because income constitutes one of the three dimensions of human development. The strongest statistical relationship appears between the Global MPI and the National MPI, since both are derived from similar deprivation-based methodologies and rely on related household survey data. Nevertheless, national MPIs retain the flexibility to incorporate country-specific priorities, making them more policy-responsive but internationally non-comparable.

Table 2: Synthesis of the Conceptualization, Definition, Purpose and Approaches of Well-being Measures

Measure	Orientation	Purpose	Scope	Relationship across indicators	International Comparability	Dimensionality	Subject-ive	Weighting	Aggregation
Monetary Poverty (MP)	Income/ Consumption	Evaluation	Unitary	Strong relationship with PCI, G-MPI, N-MPI, HDI. Weak relationship with HI	Yes	1	No	N/A	Poverty line
Per Capita Income (PCI)	Income	Functioning ⁴	Unitary	Nested in HDI	Yes	1	No	N/A	Mean
Global MPI (G-MPI)	Deprivation	Policy design and monitoring	Multidimensional	Near perfect relationship with N-MPI	Yes	3	No	Equal	Alkire Foster method
National MPI (N-MPI)	Deprivation	Policy design and monitoring	Multidimensional	Agility based on policy orientation	No	Varies	Rare	Contextual	Alkire Foster method
Human Development Index (HDI)	Capability	Policy design and monitoring	Multidimensional	Conceptual similarity with G-MPI and N-MPI	Yes	3	No	Equal	Geometric
Happiness Index (HI)	Expectation	Evaluation	Multidimensional	Confounded relationship with other five well-being measures	Yes	6	Yes	Regression-based	Mean score

⁴ The purpose of PCI is termed *functioning* as it captures the enabling condition (economic resource/income) for achieving broader well-being outcomes

Conceptualizations

Conceptually, Table 2 highlights the transition from a narrow monetary understanding of poverty toward broader multidimensional and human-centred perspectives.

Traditional measures (monetary poverty and per capita income) are unitary measures premised on a single economic variable (income, expenditure, or consumption). The assumption is that improved living standards come from greater purchasing power.

In contrast, measures of multidimensional perspectives such as the Global MPI, National MPI, and the HDI recognize that well-being extends beyond income deprivation to include deficits in education, health, housing, and broader human capabilities.

The happiness index, also multidimensional, captures how people evaluate their lives within social, institutional, and cultural contexts.

The conceptual diversity across these indicators explains why countries may perform differently depending on the measure. A country may record relatively high per capita income because of strong economic output while simultaneously showing weak multidimensional well-being outcomes due to unequal distribution, poor social services or exclusion. Similarly, countries experiencing political instability or economic hardship may still report relatively strong happiness outcomes because subjective well-being responds differently to social and cultural realities than objective economic indicators. This divergence shows that the indicators are context-dependent constructs that reflect different normative assumptions about well-being.

Differences in Data Sources

Another key aspect of understanding well-being relates to the data sources used to construct each indicator. Monetary poverty and multidimensional poverty measures are largely derived from household surveys such as LSMS, DHS, MICS and population censuses, which are often conducted at irregular intervals and may depend on external funding and technical support. In contrast, per capita income is based on national accounts and macroeconomic production statistics rather than household-level welfare data. The HDI combines administrative, national accounts and international statistical data, while the Happiness Index relies mainly on perception-based surveys such as the Gallup World Poll. Since these indicators originate from different statistical systems, survey instruments and reference populations, they are not directly comparable without careful interpretation.

Data Time Periods and Periodicity

Differences in reference years and survey periods further complicate the comparability.

Income-based indicators such as per capita income are typically produced annually. They therefore appear more current and complete than survey-based indicators. However, their

regularity reflects the structure of national accounts systems and does not necessarily indicate that household welfare is being measured annually.

Monetary poverty and multidimensional poverty estimates, however, depend heavily on the timing of household surveys. Many MPI estimates rely on surveys conducted in different periods, for example, between 2013 – 2018 or 2019 – 2024. An MPI estimate based on an earlier survey may capture conditions that differ substantially from those reflected in a more recent estimate.

The HDI is also updated annually, but may rely on data from different years, including modelled or internationally harmonised estimates. Similarly, the happiness index is produced annually from survey data but often reflects average perceptions over time.

Policy Orientation of Well-being Statistics

A critical aspect of the use and dissemination of well-being statistics is the policy orientation embedded in each indicator's purpose. Well-being measures serve distinct but complementary roles in monitoring, evaluation and policy design, and misapplication can result in weak or misaligned policy responses. Monetary poverty and per capita income are primarily outcome-oriented indicators: monetary poverty is useful for evaluating changes in welfare outcomes and tracking progress toward poverty-reduction targets, while per capita income serves mainly as a crude macro-micro transition tool that reflects economic performance and resource availability. However, both provide limited guidance for policy design because they do not identify the specific deprivations or overlapping constraints that households face. In contrast, multidimensional measures, particularly National MPIs and the Global MPI, provide stronger operational value for policy design by identifying the dimensions and patterns of deprivation requiring intervention, thereby supporting targeting, prioritization, and resource allocation. The HDI and Happiness Index, meanwhile, are better suited to broad monitoring, international comparison, and policy reflection than to detailed intervention planning or programme evaluation.

5. Preliminary Guidance on the Engagement with Well-being Measures

National Statistical Offices (NSOs) should leverage the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS) on **‘preventing the misuse of statistics’** and the growing attention to the tenets of Data Stewardship to guide the use of different well-being measures. In this regard, metadata publication and engagement should extend beyond traditional, siloed publication of measure- or survey-specific documentation to reflect the comparative nuances in using different well-being measures.

The evidence presented in this brief suggests that well-being measures should be interpreted with caution, particularly when used for cross-country comparisons, regional narratives, and policy prioritization. Although regional aggregates provide useful broad summaries, they can mask significant heterogeneity across countries and may therefore yield statistically misleading interpretations when applied without context.

The conceptual objective and policy orientation should first guide the choice of indicator. Indicators such as per capita income are better suited to monitoring macroeconomic performance and resource availability. In contrast, monetary poverty is better suited to evaluating changes in poverty outcomes relative to defined thresholds. Multidimensional measures are more useful for policy design and targeting because they identify overlapping deprivations across sectors. At the same time, the HDI and Happiness Index are better suited to broad strategic assessment and international comparison than to operational targeting or programme evaluation.

The challenge is therefore not to simplify the measurement landscape by choosing one indicator, but to discipline its interpretation. This will require policymakers to actively participate in choosing the well-being indicator. African countries need a stronger framework for deciding which indicator is appropriate for which purpose. It needs regular collective engagement at the highest political level, integration and interoperability of household and institutional data systems, rescoped metadata, transparent communication of methodological changes, and country-led narratives that connect data to policy action. Only then will well-being statistics move from isolated figures to practical tools for designing, monitoring, and evaluating the transformations that African countries seek.

African countries should institutionalize the regular production and dissemination of well-being statistics within national statistical systems and align them with planning, budgeting, and reporting cycles. While household surveys remain essential, governments should also invest in emerging data sources to improve timeliness and fill data gaps, supported by clear standards on quality, privacy and ethical use.

Finally, national statistical offices should be supported to lead country-specific data narratives that explain how different well-being measures interconnect, disconnect, and should be interpreted. This would move African countries from being passive recipients of externally framed rankings to active interpreters of their own development evidence. Such country-led storytelling is central to the Africa Beyond the Numbers vision.

6. Potential of Emerging Data for Well-being Statistics

While surveys remain foundational, their limitations, especially high cost, long periodicity, and data gaps, necessitate the search for complementary data sources. Emerging data sources can support more frequent, granular, and cost-effective measurement, but they should uphold the integrity of official statistics and complement rather than replace traditional statistical systems.

Administrative Data

Periodic and cost-efficient administrative data generated through routine government operations, such as beneficiary databases of social protection registries, tax records, income declarations, civil registration systems, education and health service utilization data, and labour market records, offer a unique complementary approach to assessing well-being. However, their use requires, among other considerations, aligning the scope of administrative data with the philosophical and conceptual reasoning for well-being measurement; adjustments to ensure representativeness; legislation on data sharing; interoperability of systems across agencies; and protection of personal data.

Geospatial and Satellite Data

Geospatial resources, including satellite imagery and geo-coordinates, offer a compelling opportunity to use a variety of proxies such as night-time light intensity, building densities and types, human and vehicular mobilities, and dynamics of economic activities to assess well-being. Departures from traditional well-being measures, including income, consumption expenditure, multiple deprivations of basic needs, and subjective well-being, require scientific assessment and standardisation.

Call Detail Records (Mobile Phone Data)

High mobile phone penetration and attendant digital finance adoption in Africa present an unprecedented opportunity for public-private partnerships to transform using near-real-time, high-frequency data. The potential of Call Detail Records (CDRs) to capture different expenditure patterns, mobilities, financial behaviours, and networks has been well established (World Bank 2018). Issues of privacy, ethical considerations, initial cost outlay and sharing mechanisms, representativeness, sustainability, and the role of government remain critical to harnessing the potential of CDRs.

Ultimately, emerging data sources offer opportunities to strengthen well-being statistics in Africa. Their greatest value lies in complementing household surveys, filling information gaps between survey rounds, improving spatial granularity, and supporting timely policy response. They should not be treated as substitutes for robust, nationally owned statistical systems.

7. Conclusion and Way Forward

Indicators such as monetary poverty, per capita income, global MPI, national MPI, HDI, and happiness indicators all contribute importantly to understanding well-being in Africa. However, they differ in philosophical orientation, conceptualisation, data sourcing and handling, measurement, and policy relevance. These differences underpin the observed variation in regional and country-level incidence, intensity, and rankings of well-being measures, leading to broader challenges for the coherence and comparability of well-being statistics across the continent. Treating them interchangeably, therefore, obscures reality rather than clarifying it.

The evidence from this brief indicates that estimates, especially regional aggregates, should be interpreted cautiously, and that comparative analysis should move beyond the discretionary choice of which measure to use towards a policy-driven selection of indicators for African development priorities.

This brief concludes with a call for stronger national and regional commitment to developing coherent well-being measures in Africa. Strengthening methodological transparency, improving survey periodicity, and enhancing metadata practices will be critical for improving the quality and policy usefulness of well-being statistics in Africa.

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