

D3.3 Towards a consensus on measuring transition performances within a Sustainable Human Development paradigm

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1. Introduction

“Living well and within planetary boundaries” is not simply an academic proposal or the heartfelt wish of climate activists, but also the EU’s long-term vision, outlined in the 7th Environment Action Programme (EAP). A most timely vision, as the negative impacts of transgressing planetary boundaries are alarming, with heat waves, droughts and collapsing ecosystems (IPCC 2023) impacting the wellbeing of human beings and other species across the globe. The political guidelines of the new European Commission reaffirm that “We must and will stay the course on the goals set out in the European Green Deal” (von der Leyen, 2024, p. 8) and uphold the commitment to achieving climate neutrality by 2050.

Many aspects of *living well* are already embedded in European and global monitoring frameworks, starting primarily from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations. The efforts for ensuring social foundations for our societies while respecting planetary boundaries are lagging behind, despite ambitious goals and some clear signs of progress.¹ In this regard, the Sustainable Human Development (SHD)² paradigm represented (UNDP, 1990) and still represents (UNDP, 2022a; Biggeri et al., 2023) an integrated development perspective giving a clear direction to transition processes, embracing the social, economic and ecological dimensions. It can be a timely vision of a *good life for all* that does not cause harm and increase Human Security (UNDP, 2022b). In other words, SHD is also a paradigm to rethink the economy towards wellbeing from the perspective of people’s capabilities to live long/healthy and creative lives and respect planetary boundaries.

Nevertheless, along with an appropriate development vision, there is also a need for a coherent and timely measurement framework that can support the transition process.

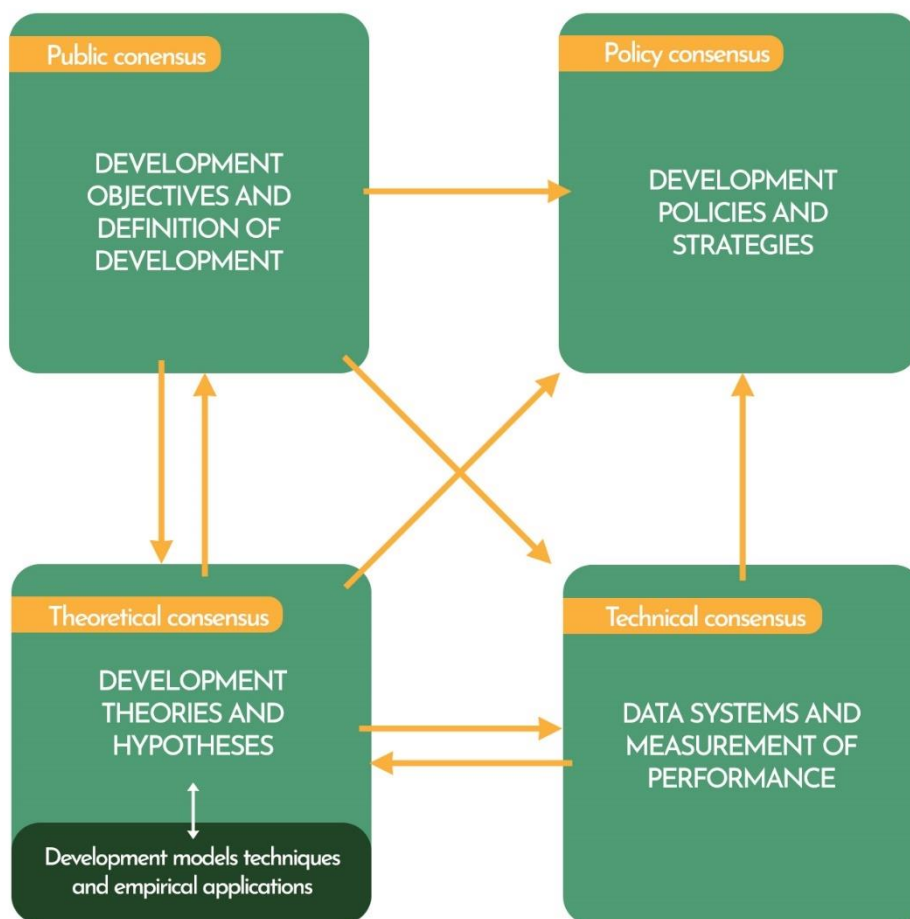
To enhance a SHD vision, the SPES project aims to provide a political economy interpretation of the beyond-GDP movement when measuring development, societal progress and human wellbeing. This interpretation forms the theoretical foundation for developing principles and guidelines for a new measurement system, then the technical elements and choices in the design of appropriate composite indicators and dashboards, as well as the foundation for the following policy measures. At the same time, it highlights that theoretical and technical capacities are a necessary but not sufficient condition for this change of vision, goal and narrative, which is conditioned, if not dictated, by the political will and by the interactions among all societal actors.

This is also illustrated in Figure 1, which - following Thorbecke (2006) - highlights that shifts in the development doctrine are rooted in the key interconnections between the definition and objectives of development, the assessment of development performance, and the formulation and execution of related policies, all of which are shaped by various theories and hypotheses.

¹ See e.g. the Report on the 8th Environment Action Programme Mid-Term Review (2024). Available at: https://environment.ec.europa.eu/publications/documents-mid-term-review-8th-environment-action-programme-eap_en. Last access date: 30th Jan 2025.

² Despite the first Human Development Report does not explicitly use the adjective “sustainable”, it clearly stresses the importance of paying attention to the natural environment. This becomes even more central and explicit across the series of HDRs published over the years (see, for instance, UNDP 2011 and UNDP 2020, among many others). Referring to “Sustainable Human Development” is meant to highlight that sustainability is a core element of the paradigm since its early definition.

Figure 1. Key interrelationships between theory, measurement and policy within the context of development definition and objectives



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Biggeri et al. (2023, p. 7)

This equally applies to the beyond-GDP debate and movement, where four elements – concepts, models, measurement, and policies – need to be integrated to enhance a shared development vision. For this reason, this working paper pays attention to and advances arguments and proposals with regard to four main areas of consensus:

- **Theoretical consensus**, in terms of alignment between different schools of thought that are all contributing to better measure and value what counts for the wellbeing of the people and of the planet.
- **Technical consensus**, in terms of advances and improvements in the technical design of composite indicators and dashboards;

- **Policy consensus**, in terms of effective uptake of a new measurement system by policy actors to make policy-making processes fully embedded into appropriate evidence on development, societal progress and wellbeing.
- **Public consensus**, through engagement and scrutiny of all citizens and all societal actors.

Indeed, given the increasing global push to the beyond-GDP debate and the proliferation of several prominent alternatives, these four consensuses appear essential to foster the alignment among different proposals by developing a clear, coherent and meaningful measurement system. This should involve the constellation of actors active in this process to make sure that a real shared change in the way we measure development, societal progress and human wellbeing is theoretically grounded, technically robust and feasible, and able to influence policy-making processes.

All of the above together may give rise to a virtuous circle supporting the effective consolidation and institutionalization of a new development narrative. In what follows, we provide an overview of the SPES project outcomes structured around the role of the composite indicators in measuring transition performances, building on the increasing convergence in the beyond-GDP debate. In broader terms, our effort here is meant to contribute to a new theoretical, technical, policy and public consensus in the field of Sustainable Human Development. First, we describe the context of measurement frameworks and policies in the field, with a strong emphasis on EU initiatives. Further, we present our proposed theoretical framework (Section 2), and our findings on the measuring transition towards a sustainable human wellbeing and development through composite indicators (Section 3). Finally, we provide recommendations (Section 4) and our thoughts on the way forward (Section 5).



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