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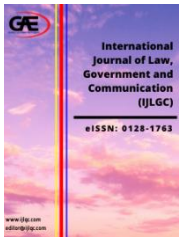

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ASSESSING PUBLIC WELL-BEING THROUGH COMMUNITY WELLNESS INDICES: CONCEPTUALIZATION, DIMENSIONS AND MEASUREMENT

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Abstract:

There is an increasing adoption of wellness index by policymakers and governments worldwide in assessing the effectiveness and impact of public programs and interventions. Indices serve as valuable tools for tracking progress, identifying disparities, and informing policy decisions. However, despite their widespread use, existing frameworks exhibit conceptual and methodological limitations that require further examination. This study presents a review of literature on community wellness indices, focusing on their conceptualization, dimensions, and measurement approaches. It critically evaluates existing indices, highlighting their strengths, weaknesses, and applicability in diverse socio-cultural contexts. Key findings reveal persistent gaps in integrating subjective and objective measures, issues of validity and reliability, and the challenge of contextualizing indices to specific communities. The review addresses a critical research gap by synthesizing existing knowledge on wellness indices while identifying areas for methodological improvement. The findings provide insights for policymakers and researchers aiming to develop more comprehensive, culturally relevant, and empirically robust wellness indices to enhance public well-being assessment and social policy implementation.

Keywords:

Community Programs, Community Wellness, Happiness Index, Measurement Approaches, Program Evaluation

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Introduction

Community wellness and well-being are deep-rooted determinants influencing a nation's level of harmony and economic sustainability, among others (Gallup, 2016; Helliwell et al., 2020). They also provide the needed mileage in enhancing governments' ability to implement policies effectively and achieve long-term goals. Measuring community wellness is not without its challenges. Most evaluation initiatives assessing the impact and effectiveness of intervention programs lack longitudinal elements (Cotrim & Da Silva Gomes, 2024). This restriction limits the ability to effectively evaluate programs, particularly in terms of their capacity to create a lasting impact on the intended communities over time (Cotrim & Da Silva Gomes, 2024; Powell et al., 2024).

There is an increasing use of community-centred indices to measure various facets and dimensions of public wellness. The initiative to develop community wellness index in measuring public receptiveness and acceptance towards public programs is a step towards the right direction. Indices are instrumental in providing longitudinal data and enable progress to be tracked and measured over time, identify persistent gaps and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (Gallup, 2016; Stiglitz et al., 2018). For instance, Human Development Index (HDI) metrics, which encompass education, income, and health, have guided resource allocation in low-income countries by highlighting disparities (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Additionally, indices foster transparency and accountability by offering publicly accessible data, thus enabling citizens and stakeholders to engage in policy discourse (Helliwell et al., 2020). The predictive capacity of indices also allows for proactive planning, ensuring that interventions are aligned with evolving societal needs (Davern et al., 2019; Gallup, 2016).

This paper presents the review of literature of studies and frameworks related to community wellness, highlighting their significance in addressing various dimensions of well-being. The aim is to critically examine existing frameworks and methodologies for measuring community wellness, identifying key dimensions, challenges, and gaps to inform future index development. Hence, the discussion in this paper begins by reviewing wellness as a concept. It then delves into the conceptualization and measurement of wellness, emphasizing multidimensional indices and their role in capturing both individual and community well-being. Additionally, the review discusses the validity and reliability of indices, alongside the challenges and gaps in current methodologies.

Theoretical Framework

In order to strengthen the analytical rigor and interpretive validity of this review, several theoretical frameworks governed the evaluation of existing wellness and well-being indices. The Theory of Measurement and Construct Validity (Messick, 1995) was adopted to ensure that each index reviewed was assessed in terms of its conceptual clarity, dimensional integrity, and empirical robustness. This allowed the review to examine whether the indicators selected in each index truly represent the intended construct of wellness or well-being. Complementing this, the Integrative Model of Public Wellbeing (Forgeard et al., 2011; Dodge et al., 2012) served as a consistent evaluative lens, offering a holistic understanding of well-being that includes subjective, objective, and social dimensions. Lastly, a Critical Realist Approach (Danermark et al., 2002) supported the review in identifying not only what indices measure, but also the socio-political and contextual conditions that shape how these indices are constructed, implemented, and interpreted. Together, these frameworks provide a rigorous

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foundation for evaluating the theoretical, methodological, and contextual validity of wellness and well-being indices.

Wellness: Defining the Concept

Wellness and well-being are multidimensional constructs that have been extensively studied across disciplines, encompassing physical (Fraisl et al., 2023; Gallup, 2016; Menne et al., 2020), psychological (Helliwell et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2000; Ura et al., 2012), social (Porter et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2024; Prilleltensky, 2020), and environmental domains (Davern et al, 2019). At the individual level, wellness is frequently defined as an active process of becoming aware of and making choices toward a healthy and fulfilling life (Myers et al., 2000). This definition emphasizes personal agency and balance among various life dimensions, including physical health, mental health, social relationships, and environmental harmony. Well-being, while closely related, extends to the subjective experience of life satisfaction, happiness, and fulfilment (Diener et al., 2018). Both constructs emphasize the interplay of external conditions and individual capacities, such as resilience and adaptability.

Community wellness is also one of the global agenda of the United Nations manifested as Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) aims to 'ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.' SDG 3 seeks to address a range of health-related challenges by setting targets that need to be accomplished by 2030 (Fraisl et al., 2023). The targets focus on maternal and child health, combating substance abuse, controlling communicable and non-communicable diseases and improving environmental health. One of the means of achieving these is through the establishment of resilient healthcare systems that provide high-quality care for all (Menne et al., 2020; Weeks et al., 2023).

Studies focusing on the development of indices for individual wellness and well-being consistently measure multiple dimensions. For instance, Dodge et al. (2012) conceptualized well-being as a dynamic state where individuals strive to achieve equilibrium between challenges and resources. This model identifies variables such as emotional stability, perceived control, and social connectedness. Similarly, the World Health Organization's (2014) definition of well-being highlights physical health, psychological resilience, and the capacity for meaningful relationships.

Indices such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) integrate mental health variables like optimism, self-acceptance, and positive relationships (Tennant et al., 2015). In contrast, the Gallup Well-Being Index assesses dimensions including purpose, social connections, financial stability, and community involvement (Gallup, 2016). These indices reveal significant variations in conceptualizing wellness and well-being, reflecting differences in disciplinary perspectives and methodological priorities. For example, WEMWBS prioritizes mental and emotional health, while Gallup's approach incorporates material and community factors.

When the focus shifts from individuals to groups or communities, the concept of wellness and well-being expands to include collective dynamics. The development of indices to measure aspects of community wellness, well-being, happiness, and quality of life has gained significant attention in recent years. These indices aim to quantify subjective and objective aspects of human and social development, providing insights into the quality of life at local, national, and international levels. Community well-being encompasses shared values, social capital, and

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collective resources that promote the flourishing of a group (Prilleltensky, 2012). This level of analysis often includes dimensions such as social cohesion, environmental sustainability, and equitable access to resources. Unlike individual-level frameworks, community well-being emphasizes systemic factors and interdependencies, making it inherently more complex (Zakaria et al., 2024).

Conceptualizations and Dimensions

The first objective of the review is to ascertain the core dimensions consistently identified across global wellness indices, and how they are conceptualized. Key dimensions of wellness indices identified from the literature reviewed prominently encompass physical, psychological, social, economic, environmental and governance domains.

Physical Health Dimension

The physical health dimension, as explored in the review, commonly focus on the integration of objective health measures and accessibility indicators. Central to these indices is the recognition of physical health as foundational to overall wellness and quality of life. These include physical health outcomes, healthcare accessibility, environmental health factors and physical wellness facilities (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2016; Porter et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2020). Life expectancy, morbidity and mortality rates, prevalence of diseases and general health assessments are indicators for physical health outcomes (Fraisl et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2020). Healthcare accessibility is another critical focus, encompassing access to primary and secondary healthcare service, affordability of medical care and healthcare coverage (Eurostat, 2021; GBD 2019 Healthcare Access and Quality Collaborators, 2022). Although environment is an aspect focused specifically by a number of wellness indices, environmental health also serves as a dimension in physical health-based indices. Air and water quality, exposure to pollutants, sanitation and the availability of green spaces are common indicators for environmental health dimension (Bandarchik et al., 2016; Bentley et al., 2020; Bleys, 2008).

Several prominent wellness and well-being indices exemplify this approach. The Healthcare Access and Quality (HAQ) Index evaluates amenable mortality for 32 diseases and conditions. Used across 204 countries and territories, the HAQ Index provides critical data for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019 with findings concerning healthcare accessibility and quality (GBD 2019 Healthcare Access and Quality Collaborators, 2022). Additionally, the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) Study conceptualizes physical health through comprehensive metrics such as Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) and Healthy Life Expectancy (HALE). The impact of morbidity and mortality on population serves as common focus in these indices (Murray et al., 2020). Moreover, the Healthy Life Years (HLY) indicator further extends this by measuring disability-free life expectancy, capturing both longevity and functional health status (Eurostat, 2021). In addition, the Social Progress Index (SPI) includes health and wellness as one of its foundational components, involving indicators such as life expectancy, under-five mortality, and access to essential healthcare services (Porter et al., 2021). These indices are complemented by general health status indicators used globally, which track health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, maternal and infant mortality, and immunization coverage (World Health Organization, 2020). Lastly, frameworks such as Positive Health Indicators integrate physiological and biomedical parameters such as circulatory efficiency, respiratory function, and neuroendocrine balance. These indicators

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represent a broad spectrum of physical health aspects, including those related to physical wellness and general health assessments (Huber et al., 2011).

Psychological Dimension

Subjective well-being, emotional stability, mental resilience and perceived life satisfaction are common focus areas in psychologically-based wellness indices. Several indices place these constructs at the center of their frameworks. The World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5), for instance, captures core elements of mood, vitality, and interest in daily life (World Health Organization, 2024). The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) expands on this by assessing emotional, psychological, and social well-being, in doing so highlighting the interdependence between positive affect and personal functioning (Keyes, 2002). Similarly, the PERMA-Profiler measures five pillars of psychological well-being (e.g. positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment), allowing for multidimensional view of psychological health. Consisting of 23 items measuring the PERMA model components, additional items were integrated to assess negative emotion, health and loneliness (Butler & Kern, 2016).

Emotional stability and mental resilience are also central to psychologically-focused indices, encompassing stress management, coping strategies, and adaptability in response to life's challenges. They usually reflect an understanding of psychological wellness as dynamic and contextually responsive (Cella et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2002). Furthermore, life satisfaction and social connectedness are also highlighted. The indices emphasize the interconnectedness of personal well-being with supportive interpersonal relationships and community cohesion (Ashworth et al., 2004). The Patient Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS)-Emotional Distress Measures, for example, assesses various aspects of emotional distress, including depression, anxiety, and anger (Cella et al, 2010). The Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWB), developed by Ryff (1989), on the other hand, captures wellness through dimensions such as autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth. Additionally, tools like the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation–Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) and PSYCHLOPS are widely used in mental health settings. They predominantly monitor psychological distress and patient-defined outcomes and track changes over time (Evans et al., 2002; Ashworth et al., 2004).

Social Dimension

Wellness indices that emphasize social dimensions conceptualize community well-being through an integrative framework. They involve social cohesion, community connectedness, interpersonal relationships, trust, civic participation, and social equity (Ura et al., 2021). Social cohesion is often measured through shared values, sense of belonging and collective identity. These align with the role of unified cultural narratives and mutual respect in measuring community interactions (Lindner, 2020; Porter et al., 2021). For example, the World Social Capital Monitor measures intangible social assets such as helpfulness, and willingness to contribute to public goods (Lindner, 2020). Similarly, the Social Progress Index (SPI) focuses on social and environmental outcomes independent of economic indicators. It includes dimensions such as inclusiveness, personal freedom, access to basic knowledge, and tolerance, all of which reflect the capacity of societies to foster social well-being (Porter et al., 2021). Additionally, indices such as Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the Community Well-Being Index (CWBI) specifically embed social connectedness as indicator. This allows

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for interpersonal relationships and support system in sustaining psychological health and community resilience to be measured (Indigenous Services Canada, 2021; Ura et al., 2012).

Trust emerges as another key dimension within indices like the OECD Better Life Index, Gallup World Poll and the Social Well-Being Index (SWBI). They reflect confidence in institutions, perceived fairness, and reciprocal community relations in stabilizing social interactions and promoting collective well-being (Curti et al., 2015; Gallup, 2016; OECD, 2019). In addition, social equity dimensions address inclusivity, diversity acceptance, and equitable access to resources and opportunities, are embedded within indices. They acknowledge the necessity of addressing systemic disparities to achieve genuine and enduring social wellness (Porter et al., 2021). The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) reinforces this approach through its domain of 'Community Vitality', which measures aspects like safety, community belonging, and social engagement. The aim is to assess how connected and supportive a society is (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2016).

Economic Dimension

Economic dimensions within wellness indices are predominantly conceptualized through economic stability, income security, employment opportunities, economic equity, and resource availability (Greco et al., 2019; Osberg & Sharpe, 2002). These indices demonstrates that economic stability is foundational in wellness indices, assessed through metrics such as income per capita, poverty rates, and income distribution (Talberth et al., 2007). The Index of Economic Well-Being (IEWB), for instance, incorporates effective per capita consumption, wealth accumulation, economic equality, and economic security. This multidimensional construct offers a more comprehensive understanding of economic well-being than traditional GDP-focused metrics (Osberg & Sharpe, 2002). Similarly, the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) adjusts personal consumption to reflect environmental degradation and income distribution (Bleys, 2008). The Human Development Index (HDI) also emphasizes the critical importance of financial security and equitable economic structures as determinants of overall community well-being (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). The Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), on the other hand, modifies personal consumption by including or deducting for factors such as income inequality, environmental degradation, and unpaid labour like volunteer and household work (Talberth et al., 2007).

Employment opportunities are also a central focus, commonly measured through employment rates, quality of work environments, and job satisfaction. The Multidimensional Well-being Index (MWI) incorporates these indicators alongside economic participation, income sufficiency, and access to labour markets (Greco et al., 2019). Finally, resource availability remains a key concern in many indices. The Human Well-Being Index (HWBI), for instance, incorporates economic metrics related to income, housing, and access to public services, integrating them with other well-being components to reflect the holistic contribution of economic access to quality of life (Summers et al., 2012).

Environmental Dimension

The review also reveals environmental quality as a critical dimension, assessed through metrics such as air and water quality, sanitation standards, pollution exposure, and waste management efficiency (U.S. Environment Protection Agency, 2023). The Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW), for example, incorporates economic indicators by adjusting personal consumption for environmental degradation and resource depletion. This helps to highlight the

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long-term implications of ecological damage on community sustainability (Bleys, 2008). Contemporary indices further reinforce this perspective through more targeted and data-rich approaches. the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) ranks countries based on environmental health and ecosystem vitality using data on air quality, biodiversity, and climate change mitigation. This approach presents a global standard for tracking environmental outcomes (Environmental Performance Index, 2024). Similarly, the Environmental Quality Index (EQI) provides a localized assessment by combining environmental exposures across domains such as air, water, land, and the built environment (U.S. Environment Protection Agency, 2023).

Other indices further expand this environmental perspective. The Living Planet Index (LPI) monitors trends in biodiversity, particularly vertebrate populations, offering a global indicator of ecosystem health (Zoological Society of London & World Wide Fund for Nature, 2022). The Happy Planet Index (HPI) merges ecological footprint data with well-being and life expectancy to evaluate how efficiently nations convert natural resources into fulfilling lives, promoting the idea of sustainable happiness (Bandarchik et al., 2016). Natural resource management also emerges as a significant focus within these indices with the need to safeguard forests, water systems, and mineral resources through sustainable use policies (Bleys, 2008; U.S. Environment Protection Agency, 2023). The availability of green and recreational spaces is increasingly recognized as a tangible indicator of environmental wellness (Bentley et al., 2020; Yee et al., 2020).

Governance Dimension

Governance is another significant dimension. Effective governance plays an overarching role in shaping and enabling environment for community well-being. Often so, aspects such as citizens' rights, needs and voices are acknowledged and acted upon (López-Feldman et al., 2022). The indices are conceptualized through the lens of institutional effectiveness, public trust, participatory governance, transparency, accountability and equity in policy implementation (Decancq & Lugo, 2018)`. Several indices have embedded these principles into their design. The Multidimensional Wellbeing Index for Peru (MWI-P) explicitly includes citizenship and governance as one of its core dimensions (López-Feldman et al., 2022). This dimension assesses political participation, civic engagement, and institutional trust, demonstrating how governance quality directly influences perceived and actual well-being. Similarly, the composite well-being index consisting of both subjective and objective indicators, with governance components focusing on public satisfaction with service delivery and institutional responsiveness (Decancq & Lugo, 2018).

Transparency and accountability are measured through the degree of institutional openness and the extent to which the institutions take accountability for their actions. These are translated through access to public information, anti-corruption mechanisms and clarity in decision-making processes (Greco et al., 2019). The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) systematically capture these aspects through dimensions such as control of corruption, regulatory quality and voice and accountability. Such inclusion offers a global benchmark for evaluating governance effectiveness and its influence on well-being (Kaufmann et al., 2021). The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by Transparency International complements this by specifically ranking countries based on perceived levels of public sector corruption, thus serving as a proxy for institutional transparency and accountability (Transparency International, 2023).

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Additionally, public trust and confidence in institutions reflect the legitimacy and credibility of governance systems. The World Justice Project Rule of Law Index offers valuable insights into this dimension by evaluating countries based on factors such as open government, absence of corruption and constraints on government powers. These indicators are essential to cultivating institutional trust and promoting democratic integrity (World Justice Project, 2023). Citizen participation, another key governance-related dimension, is often emphasized in relation to inclusive decision-making, freedom of expression, and civic engagement. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) captures this through its participation, rights and inclusion category, which measures the extent to which citizens are empowered to engage meaningfully in public affairs (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023).

Multidimensional Focus and Measures

While wellness indices are often analysed in terms of specific dimensions, it is important to acknowledge that many established indices do not confine themselves to a single domain. Instead, they adopt a multidimensional framework that integrates multiple aspects of well-being. One prominent index is the Community Well-Being Index (CWBI), developed to capture dimensions such as economic stability, social cohesion, health, education, and environmental quality (Indigenous Services Canada, 2021). Studies such as those by Prilleltensky et al. (2020) highlight the multidimensional nature of these indices, emphasizing the integration of subjective well-being measures (e.g., happiness surveys) with objective data (e.g., health statistics). Similarly, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index includes cultural preservation, good governance, and ecological diversity, alongside individual happiness measures (Ura et al., 2012).

Comparisons between these indices reveal critical differences in the prioritization of variables. For instance, while the CWBI emphasizes measurable social and economic indicators, the GNH Index integrates spiritual and cultural dimensions, reflecting Bhutan's unique cultural context. Another example is the OECD Better Life Index, which allows for public weighting of dimensions, offering a customizable approach to assessing well-being at societal levels (OECD, 2019).

Happiness indices, such as the World Happiness Report, focus on subjective measures like life satisfaction, positive emotions, and perceived social support (Helliwell et al., 2020). In contrast, quality of life indices like the Human Development Index (HDI) include more objective metrics like income, education, and life expectancy (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Additionally, Happiness and Well-Being Index (HWBI), uses a participatory approach to include community voices in defining happiness indicators (Happiness Alliance, 2022). Furthermore, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index (GNH) (Ura et al., 2018) emphasizes cultural preservation and spiritual well-being as unique indicators, contrasting with the more universal dimensions of other indices. This localized approach emphasizes the need for cultural sensitivity in index development.

Ensuring Validity and Reliability in Indices Development

The second review objective involves examining the strategies adopted in ensuring validity and reliability in the development of wellness and well-being indices. The review reveals rigorous steps undertaken to enhance validity and reliability of the indices. One such example is the HDI which incorporates robust statistical techniques, including normalization of indicators and aggregation methods, to ensure comparability across nations (United Nations

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Development Programme, 2021). To validate these indices, pilot studies and cross-country analyses are conducted to test the applicability of selected metrics. Reliability is enhanced through the use of consistent data sources, such as UNESCO and World Bank databases, which maintain high standards of data integrity (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Another example is the Social Progress Index (SPI), which undertakes iterative revisions based on stakeholder feedback and expert consultations to address limitations and emerging trends. Challenges, such as accounting for cultural and contextual differences, are mitigated by including country-specific adaptations and sensitivity analyses (Porter et al., 2021).

The use of primary and secondary data is pivotal in developing robust indices. Primary data, collected through surveys and direct community engagement, ensures relevance and contextual specificity but often faces challenges like respondent bias and high collection costs (Biemer, 2021). Secondary data, derived from existing databases and reports, provides historical continuity and cost efficiency but may lack granularity and timeliness (Porter et al., 2021). For instance, the HDI combines primary data from household surveys with secondary data from global databases, addressing gaps in either source by triangulating findings. To mitigate shortcomings, indices employ data harmonization techniques, such as aligning disparate data formats, and validation protocols, like cross-referencing sources to ensure accuracy (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). These measures enhance the reliability and utility of indices, allowing policymakers to derive actionable insights into community well-being.

Gaps, Issues and Challenges

The third objective of the review is to ascertain the challenges and emerging approaches within the development of wellness and well-being indices. A key challenge in developing these indices lies in balancing subjective perceptions with measurable indicators. For example, the Well-Being Index (WBI) developed for urban populations in Australia incorporates community trust, accessibility to services, and environmental satisfaction (Gallup, 2016). Researchers such as Davern et al. (2019) critique the reliance on self-reported data, arguing for the inclusion of longitudinal studies to enhance reliability.

Critical gaps persist in the conceptualization and application of the indices developed. For instance, many indices, such as the CWBI, heavily rely on quantitative indicators that may not fully capture subjective experiences of well-being (Bache & Reardon, 2016). Conversely, qualitative approaches, such as focus groups used in the development of Bhutan's GNH Index, may lack comparability and scalability (Ura et al., 2012). Moreover, indices like the OECD Better Life Index demonstrate flexibility but may introduce biases due to subjective weighting by participants (Stiglitz et al., 2018).

In recent studies, a growing trend emphasizes integrating subjective and objective measures. For instance, the Happiness and Well-Being Framework combines economic indicators with subjective life evaluations, bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative dimensions (Happiness Alliance, 2022; Helliwell et al., 2020). This integrative approach highlights the importance of understanding community-level dynamics as extensions of individual well-being, while addressing systemic issues such as inequality and governance.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review reveals the multidimensional nature of community wellness, which integrates economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The exploration of existing indices and frameworks reveals significant advancements in measuring individual and community well-being, yet highlights persistent gaps in capturing subjective experiences and contextual specificities. The review also emphasizes the importance of aligning wellness initiatives with local values and priorities, as seen in programs like those in Malacca, which balance economic empowerment with cultural preservation. These insights establish the critical need for a Community Wellness Index that is both comprehensive and context-sensitive, capable of providing actionable data to inform policy and program development. By addressing the challenges of validity, reliability, and cultural relevance, this index has the potential to serve as a transformative tool for fostering holistic community development and well-being.

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