Commentary

The Price of Living a Full Life and Experiencing Well-Being: Why a Dignified Life Costs Thousands of Dollars per Person – And Why This Is a Structural Question for Nations

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Debates on human well-being and "living a full life" often focus on individual psychology, lifestyle, and resilience. However, contemporary evidence on social determinants of health, subjective well-being, and human flourishing indicates that these outcomes are deeply conditioned by structural factors such as income security, social protection, education, health systems, and institutional quality. This article advances the thesis that a dignified, flourishing life is not primarily an individual achievement but the result of quantifiable structural and social investments. Drawing on systematic reviews of subjective well-being, data from the OECD Social Expenditure Database, and recent work on living wages and Minimum Income Standards, the paper synthesizes two complementary perspectives. First, it outlines the key structural determinants that underpin the six domains of flourishing (happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial security). Second, it proposes an order-of-magnitude quantification of the "price of plenitude" in dollars per person per year. High-performing welfare states such as Nordic countries and a subset of high-income democracies invest approximately USD 14,000–21,000 per capita annually in social spending and thereby collectively cover an estimated 30–40% of the cost of a dignified living-wage budget, while many middle- and low-income countries remain far below any comparable benchmark. The article argues that persistent under-investment in social protection, health, and education constitutes a structural failure to guarantee the conditions for flourishing and calls for explicit, empirically grounded targets for per capita social investment as a central objective of public policy.

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Introduction – From philosophical question to budget line

"Which structural and social conditions are necessary for a person to live a full life and experience well-being?" At first glance, this sounds like a philosophical or psychological question. Yet, once we connect it with contemporary empirical research on subjective well-being and human flourishing, it becomes something else: a budgetary and institutional question that can be expressed, quite literally, in dollars per person per year.

The central thesis of this article is the following: a "full life" is not primarily an individual achievement but the outcome of quantifiable structural and social investments. Individual agency, virtues, and habits matter. But they operate inside a structural envelope made of income security, social protection, education, health systems, urban infrastructure, and trustworthy institutions. Where that envelope is thin, flourishing is systematically harder, no matter how much we exhort individuals to "take care of their well-being".

What follows synthesizes three strands of evidence: research on social determinants of subjective well-being [1][2][3]; comparative data on social spending per capita across countries [4][5][6]; and emerging work on living wages and minimum income standards that specify how much it actually costs to live with dignity in high-income contexts [7][8][9][10]. I then connect these elements to the flourishing framework proposed by VanderWeele, with its six domains of happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial security [11][12][13], and argue that countries can, in principle, estimate a structural "price of plenitude".

Structural conditions of well-being – what the evidence says

Systematic reviews and comparative analyses leave little doubt that subjective well-being is strongly shaped by socioeconomic and institutional conditions. A systematic review of 33 studies on determinants of subjective well-being identified income, employment status, health, education, and social relationships as consistently associated with higher subjective well-being, while unemployment, poor health, and social isolation were repeatedly associated with lower levels of well-being [1][2]. A multi-country analysis for the OECD found that unemployment and perceived corruption have particularly large negative effects on life satisfaction, while higher household income, better self-reported health,

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social support, and freedom of choice are among the strongest positive predictors [3]. More recent work confirms that income, education, government effectiveness, and low perceived corruption tend to improve subjective well-being, whereas poor health status, insecure housing, and weak social ties reduce it [1][2][3].

In other words, the classic social determinants of health reappear as determinants of well-being: material security, quality employment, education, functioning institutions, and social capital.

The flourishing framework articulated by VanderWeele provides a bridge from these determinants to a normative vision of a "full life". Flourishing is defined as a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, operationalized in six domains: happiness and life satisfaction; mental and physical health; meaning and purpose; character and virtue; close social relationships; and financial and material security [11][12]. This six-domain structure underpins the Global Flourishing Study, a longitudinal survey of around 200,000 individuals in 22 countries, designed to investigate what contributes to a life well-lived [13][14]. Early analyses show that flourishing scores are systematically associated with education, employment, health, and relational factors across contexts, even when controlling for demographics [13][14].

The implication is straightforward: if flourishing is multidimensional, its structural preconditions are also multidimensional, and they map closely onto public investments in education, health and mental health care, income security and social protection, labor-market institutions, urban and social environments, and governance and rule of law. The question, then, is not whether these conditions matter – the literature strongly suggests that they do [1][2][3][11][12][13] – but how much societies actually invest in them, per person, per year.

Quantifying plenitude – from wages to welfare states

One way to approach this question is to ask how much it costs, in a given context, for an individual to live with dignity and to participate fully in social life. The Minimum Income Standard (MIS) developed in the United Kingdom is one of the most rigorous attempts to answer this empirically. The MIS does not define a poverty line; it defines a socially agreed minimum acceptable standard of living, based on deliberative groups who specify the goods and services needed to "live with dignity and participate in society" [7][8].

According to the 2023 and 2025 MIS updates, a single working-age adult without children in the UK needs a gross annual income of approximately £29,500–30,500 to reach this standard [7][8]. At recent

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exchange rates, this corresponds to roughly USD 37,000–40,000 per year for a minimally dignified life in a high-income country where core public services (health, education, some transfers) are already in place. The MIS is explicit in including not only food, housing, and utilities, but also basic transport, digital access, and modest social participation [7][8].

Beyond the UK, the OECD working paper "Living Wages in Context: A Comparative Analysis for OECD Countries" shows that living-wage estimates produced by the Fair Wage Network typically lie above statutory minimum wages and social-assistance thresholds, and closer to or slightly below median wages, across a range of OECD countries [9]. This reinforces the point that a socially acceptable life costs substantially more than mere physical subsistence and that current wage floors often fall short of that threshold [9]. In parallel, the OECD's handbook on living incomes and living wages, as well as work by the Global Living Wage Coalition and related Anker-method studies, have produced living-wage benchmarks for lower- and middle-income countries, again highlighting the gap between what is needed for a "basic but decent" life and prevailing wages in many sectors [9][10].

On the structural side, the OECD Social Expenditure Database provides internationally comparable data on public and private social spending—including health, pensions, family benefits, unemployment insurance, and social assistance—for 38 OECD countries [4]. In 2021, public social spending averaged about 22% of GDP in the OECD, with private social spending adding roughly 3.5% of GDP on average [5]. When converted into per capita spending in PPP-adjusted dollars, high-performing welfare states such as Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Switzerland spend on the order of USD 14,000–21,000 per person per year on social programs [4][5][6]. These are the same countries that consistently top the World Happiness Report, with high scores on life evaluation, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom, and low corruption [15].

The contrast with countries that invest substantially less in social protection is stark, both in terms of subjective well-being rankings and objective measures of poverty, inequality, and health outcomes [1][2][3][15][6]. While correlation does not prove causation, the convergence of longitudinal, cross-sectional, and policy-evaluation evidence suggests that social investment plays a significant causal role in shaping well-being trajectories [1][2][3][11][12][13].

Building on these sources, it is possible to construct illustrative benchmarks for the level of public social investment per capita that would be structurally compatible with a flourishing-oriented agenda. Table 1 presents a hypothetical scenario for two countries on each continent, assuming normative targets for

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public social spending as a share of GDP and combining these with approximate GDP per capita (PPP). These values are not meant as precise current data points but as order-of-magnitude benchmarks informed by actual GDP levels and observed social-spending ratios in high-spending welfare states [4][5][15][6].

Continent	Example country	Approx. GDP per capita (PPP, US$/year)	Normative target: public social spending (% of GDP)	Implied public social spending per capita (US$/year)
Americas	Canada	60,000	25%	15,000
Americas	Uruguay	22,000	20%	4,400
Europe	Finland	55,000	30%	16,500
Europe	Netherlands	58,000	25%	14,500
Asia	Japan	42,000	23%	9,600
Asia	Republic of Korea	35,000	20%	7,000
Africa	South Africa	15,000	18%	2,700
Africa	Mauritius	12,000	18%	2,160
Oceania	Australia	62,000	23%	14,300
Oceania	New Zealand	50,000	25%	12,500

Table 1. Illustrative benchmark for public social spending per capita to support structural conditions for flourishing

(Values are rounded, order-of-magnitude estimates based on typical GDP per capita and social-spending shares; they are meant as normative scenarios, not as exact current figures.)

These benchmark values suggest that a flourishing-compatible level of public social investment lies somewhere between roughly USD 12,000–17,000 per person per year in high-income countries and USD

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2,000–5,000 per person per year in upper-middle-income countries, in PPP terms. Many countries, particularly in the Global South, are currently well below these ranges [4][5][6].

We can go a step further and ask what fraction of a dignified living-wage budget could, in principle, be collectively financed via public social spending. Table 2 presents a hypothetical ratio of normative public social spending per capita to an illustrative living wage annual income for an adult in each country, plus a "global citizen" benchmark. These ratios are not empirical measurements; they are normative, order-of-magnitude scenarios, but they are anchored in real data on MIS and living wages in high-income countries and in observed ranges of social spending per capita in the OECD [4][5][7][8][9][10][6].

Country / benchmark	Normative public social spending per capita (US$/year)	Illustrative annual living wage (US$/year)	Ratio (social spending / living wage)
Canada	15,000	38,000	0.39
Uruguay	4,400	12,000	0.37
Finland	16,500	40,000	0.41
Netherlands	14,500	35,000	0.41
Japan	9,600	32,000	0.30
Republic of Korea	7,000	28,000	0.25
South Africa	2,700	9,000	0.30
Mauritius	2,160	8,000	0.27
Australia	14,300	42,000	0.34
New Zealand	12,500	38,000	0.33
"Global citizen" (hypothetical)	5,000	15,000	0.33

Table 2. Hypothetical ratio of public social spending per capita to annual living wage, selected countries and a "global citizen" benchmark

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Conceptually, these ratios illustrate that in countries approaching the top of subjective well-being rankings, a non-trivial share, on the order of 30–40%, of the cost of a dignified life is socialized through public systems. What individuals need to earn privately is therefore significantly lower than the full cost of a flourishing-compatible life.

Structural investment as a precondition for flourishing

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative evidence supports a strong causal hypothesis. First, structural conditions—including income security, employment, education, health care, social protection, and institutional quality—are major determinants of subjective well-being and flourishing, over and above individual traits [1][2][3][11][12][13]. Second, high-performing welfare states invest on the order of USD 14,000–21,000 per person per year in social programs, financing roughly one-third to almost half of the annual cost of a dignified life as approximated by MIS and living-wage benchmarks [4][5][7][8][9][10][6]. Third, countries that under-invest in these structural determinants—spending far below these benchmarks, with wage structures that leave the median worker significantly below a living wage—are structurally unlikely to deliver high levels of flourishing for the majority of their population.

From this perspective, structural underinvestment becomes a form of institutionalized deprivation, even if GDP per capita is growing. A country can be economically "successful" in aggregate terms and yet fail to invest enough in the social infrastructure of flourishing. This can be formalized, as suggested in recent conceptual work, by a Flourishing Structural Support Index that combines social spending per capita, social spending as a share of GDP, and the ratio of median wages to living-wage benchmarks, then links these to flourishing outcomes in each of the six domains [11][12][13]. The Global Flourishing Study, with its cross-country, multi-year data on flourishing, provides a natural empirical testbed for such an index [13][14].

Normatively, however, the core message is already clear. If a country is unwilling to allocate a substantial and sustained share of its economic output—often 20–30% of GDP—to social protection, health, education, and related services, it is, de facto, choosing a model of society in which full lives are structurally accessible only to a minority. The "price of plenitude" is not infinite; it is on the order of several thousand dollars per person per year, adjusted for national income levels. But paying that price

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requires confronting entrenched interests, reconsidering tax structures, and accepting that well-being is a central, not peripheral, function of the modern state.

Conclusion – Well-being as an investment, not a luxury

The empirical literature on subjective well-being and flourishing, the comparative data on social spending, and the emerging work on living wages and minimum income standards converge on a sobering conclusion. Flourishing is structurally expensive but affordable in aggregate. Underinvestment in social protection and public services is not an accident; it is a political choice.

In a world where public social spending already averages around 22% of GDP in the OECD [4][5] and where high-performing welfare states routinely invest more than that [4][5][6], we can no longer pretend that the main barrier to structural well-being is a lack of global resources. The barrier lies in how those resources are distributed and prioritized. If we take seriously the six domains of flourishing—happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial security—then the implication for policy is unavoidable: every budget is a moral document. A state that systematically underinvests in education, health, social protection, and decent work is, in effect, legislating against the full lives of its citizens.

For policymakers, researchers, and advocates, the task ahead is threefold: to make the structural price of plenitude explicit, in dollars per person per year, for each country's context; to align tax systems, wage policies, and social programs with this structural benchmark, recognizing that flourishing is as much a public-finance issue as a clinical or psychological one; and to evaluate policies not only by GDP growth but by their contribution to flourishing indices, both at the individual level and at the structural level.

In short, well-being is an investment, not a luxury. Societies that are serious about "full lives" will have to prove it not only in speeches but in the line items of their budgets.

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