

The Perspective of Well-being in Project Evaluation and Its Connection with Human Security

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Introduction

Evaluation is the process of fact-finding and value determination. The aim of evaluating development projects is to assess the value generated by such projects and to ensure accountability by disclosing information to the public and partner governments, thereby supporting their understanding. Additionally, it serves the purpose of learning and improvement by applying lessons derived from evaluation results to future projects and cooperation policies. At JICA, the achievements of project objectives are evaluated from six perspectives—relevance, coherence, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, and efficiency—based on the evaluation criteria set by the OECD/DAC (Development Assistance Committee [DAC]).

In recent years, JICA has incorporated the perspectives of People's Well-being (PWB) and Leave No One Behind (LNOB) into project evaluation. PWB is a concept that captures various aspects of daily life, such as material well-being, relationships with family and friends, psychological and physical health, community connections, and physical safety, from the perspective of subjective well-being/life satisfaction. On the other hand, LNOB is a concept that seeks to empower and promote the social inclusion of people who are hindered from participating equitably in society. While project evaluation primarily focuses on the objective and quantitative verification of effects according to operational and effect indicators, PWB

and LNOB focus on the subjective and qualitative confirmation of effects.

This essay introduces project evaluations from the perspective of well-being, provides an overview of the development effects that projects have generated for PWB and LNOB, and considers the relationship with the concept of human security, which is JICA's mission.

1. Perspectives and Case Studies on the Evaluation of People's Well-being

Well-being refers to a state of comfort, health, and happiness, and it relates to various aspects of people's lives. In recent years, efforts to capture and measure the effects of public policy and corporate activities from the perspective of well-being have been advancing, and similar initiatives are increasing in the field of international cooperation. For example, the *World Happiness Report*, published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), the world's largest network related to the SDGs, quantifies the happiness of each country based on six key variables: (1) GDP per capita, (2) social support, (3) healthy life expectancy at birth, (4) freedom to make life choices, (5) generosity, and (6) perceptions of corruption (Helliwell et al. 2025). Additionally, the *Better Life Index* (BLI), developed by the OECD, attempts

The views expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official positions of either JICA or the JICA Ogata Research Institute.

to measure well-being based on eleven variables: (1) housing, (2) income and wealth, (3) work and job quality, (4) social connections, (5) knowledge and skills, (6) environmental quality, (7) civic engagement, (8) health, (9) subjective well-being, (10) safety, and (11) work-life balance (OECD. n.d.). Another widely recognized concept is Gross National Happiness (GNH), proposed by the government of Bhutan (JICA 2022a, 3–11). In Japan, many local governments are also working to gauge the happiness and well-being of residents and reflect this in their policies.

These initiatives have been driven by the acknowledgment that objective indicators such as GDP and income are insufficient to measure people's subjective happiness and life satisfaction. There is also a recognition that many existing indicators are inadequate for capturing subjective aspects.

When the DAC evaluation criteria were revised, JICA reviewed the revised criteria and, in 2020, introduced Human Well-being into project evaluation. The term Human Well-being was changed to People's Well-being in 2024 due to a change in terminology by the OECD and to support its application in project evaluation. Given that this concept relates to various domains and has boundaries that are difficult to define, JICA defines PWB as a state where people's lives, livelihoods, and dignity are protected and fulfilled. This state is measured comprehensively and multidimensionally across eleven individual domains: (1) income and assets, (2) housing, (3) health, (4) education, (5) environment, (6) social connections, (7) safety, (8) governance, (9) work, (10) leisure, and (11) culture¹ (JICA 2025b, 48–49). Originally, JICA used a Japanese translation of *koufuku* (幸福) for “happiness,”

which had a subjective connotation.² In recent years, however, it has shifted from “happiness” to “well-being” in order to emphasize the idea of integrating subjective and objective dimensions.

Among the six evaluation criteria mentioned earlier, PWB is assessed as an element of impact. The evaluation of impact focuses on the realization of indirect and long-term effects of projects, from both positive and negative perspectives. It includes evaluation items such as social systems and norms, human rights, gender equality, and environmental and social considerations. The perspective of PWB is included as one of these items.

The PWB evaluation is conducted through interview surveys with project beneficiaries by evaluators. The evaluators are external evaluators or local survey assistants contracted by JICA. In these interviews, changes in people's subjective well-being/life satisfaction before and after project implementation are confirmed. If changes are observed, the factors of change in each specific area and their relationships with the project are examined. Additionally, unforeseen positive or negative impacts are verified. In development projects, secondary effects may emerge during the planning phase that were not anticipated. The PWB evaluation aims to capture such secondary effects and long-term impacts in a multifaceted manner.

Next, this essay provides some examples of project evaluations that incorporate the PWB perspective. The examples were all conducted as external evaluations by third-party evaluators.

1.1. Varanasi, India: Ganga Action Plan Project (Yen Loan)³

This project aimed to improve wastewater treatment capacity and sanitation conditions in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, northern India, by constructing and rehabilitating sewage treatment facilities, constructing sanitation facilities such as community toilets, and implementing sanitation improvement activities such as public awareness programs, thereby contributing to the improvement of water quality in the

¹ Both of the individual domains of the OECD's BLI and JICA's PWB are comprised of eleven areas, and their content largely overlaps. However, a key difference is that the BLI includes developed countries in its scope. In contrast, the PWB extracts elements applicable to developing countries, excluding those limited to developed countries. Additionally, the PWB emphasizes elements specific to the culture and history of the target countries and regions. In the “culture” domain, it measures items such as “respect for cultural norms” and “acquisition of mother tongue” (the BLI does not have a “culture” domain). Furthermore, the BLI includes “civic engagement” as a domain but not “governance,” whereas the PWB does not include “civic engagement.” Instead, it incorporates “participation in decision-making by residents” within the “governance” domain (JICA 2025b, 25–27).

² Up to the 2022 Annual Evaluation Report of Projects (JICA 2022b), the term “*people's happiness*” was used; from that point onward, “*people's well-being*” has been adopted.

³ https://www2.jica.go.jp/en/evaluation/pdf/2022_ID-P164_4_f.pdf



Bathing Ghats along the Ganges River, renovated by the Ganga Action Plan Project (Varanasi, India)

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Ganges River and sanitation conditions for citizens, pilgrims, and tourists. The evaluation quantitatively assessed the project's contribution to improving sewage treatment capacity based on operational and effect indicators, such as the population served by sewage treatment, sewage treatment volume, and facility utilization rate. Additionally, interview surveys were conducted to qualitatively understand the impact of public toilet and laundry facility development and public health awareness activities on improving sanitation and raising awareness among residents and government officials.

In the detailed analysis of PWB, three slum communities where public toilets were constructed (15 households each, totaling 45 households) were surveyed on seven items: (1) income and assets, (2) housing, (3) education, (4) environment, (5) social capital, (6) governance, and (7) employment. Among these, the analysis of social capital includes connections with the community and family, free will, respect for cultural norms of behavior (including rituals and beliefs), the Ganges River and faith, while the analysis of governance includes the level of trust in the local government, participation in political

decision-making, and discrimination and exclusion, such as gender discrimination and racism.

Results showed that 73% of respondents reported improved life satisfaction compared to five years before the project started. Improvements in the environment and sanitation led to health benefits such as "less vulnerable to seasonal diseases," "fewer endemic diseases," and "fewer mosquito bites." Psychologically and mentally, respondents noted "a better community environment made people feel more comfortable in their homes," "positive impacts on mental health and well-being," and community areas became cleaner and better maintained, nurturing a sense of pride and belonging." The sewage system improvement meant that "unpleasant smells and health hazards were alleviated" and "the area became more accessible during the rainy season." The improved environment along the river became "a place where the community frequents and spends quality time," "families prefer to visit," "the area provides tranquility and relaxation," and "a release from the noise and pollution of the city." The reduction in Ganges River pollution restored faith-related

practices such as bathing and religious ceremonies, resulting in “the increased level of religious belief” and “the improved well-being of the individuals and the community.”

1.2. Project for Construction of Sekong Bridge on NR16B in the Southern Region of Laos (grant aid)⁴

This project aimed to resolve the missing link of National Road 16B, which is an international trunk road, by constructing the Sekong Bridge in southern Laos. To confirm qualitative changes in traffic after the project, interview surveys were conducted with residents in six areas on the east bank of the Sekong River. Results showed effects including reduced travel time, year-round use, nighttime travel, and increased frequency of visits to Sekong town.

In the detailed analysis of PWB, interviews with residents confirmed changes in life satisfaction compared to the time of the Sekong Bridge opening and changes in items related to life satisfaction. The items included (1) household income/assets, (2) income inequality, (3) availability of housing, (4) quality of housing, (5) health, (6) education, (7) negative impacts on the natural environment, (8) access to the natural environment, (9) connection with community, (10) connection with family, (11) helping other people, (12) safety, (13) violence, (14) level of trust in the government, (15) participation in political decision-making, (16) free choice of what to do in life, (17) discrimination and exclusion, (18) availability of employment, (19) job satisfaction, (20) work-life balance, (21) enough rest, (22) proficiency in the mother language, and (23) respect for cultural norms of behavior.

Compared to five years before the Sekong Bridge opened, 90% of respondents reported satisfaction with their lives. Particularly high responses were noted with regard to household income/assets, availability of employment, and level of trust in the government. In household income/assets, road improvements led to “an increase in visits by middlemen who purchase crops,” “easier transportation of crops to the market in Sekong town,” and “selling meals and general merchandise to drivers.” In terms of availability of employment, “sales of coffee and cassava increased, new plantations

were started, or the area of plantations increased,” and “stores were opened to sell products to drivers, resulting in job creation.” Regarding trust in government, respondents felt “the government was interested in the development of the region.”

Additionally, the survey confirmed impacts not typically anticipated in bridge projects, such as “the creation of trust in the government through the construction of the bridge, which contributed to life satisfaction” and the “improvement of housing quality due to easier access to building materials.”

1.3. Vietnam: Phan Ri - Phan Thiet Irrigation Project (Yen Loan, technical cooperation)⁵

This project aimed at developing irrigation and drainage facilities, developing rural infrastructure, and strengthening agricultural extension services with the goal of expanding agricultural production in Bac Binh District, Binh Thuan Province, southeastern Vietnam.

In the detailed analysis of PWB, group interviews were conducted with 20 beneficiaries in each commune. The items included (1) housing, (2) health, (3) social connections, (4) safety, (5) governance, (6) employment, and (7) culture. Among these, culture indicates respect for the cultural norms of ethnic minorities.

In terms of residence, impacts achieved through stable water supply were prominent, such as “before, the project farmers conducted rain-fed agriculture, but no longer have to worry about water after the project,” “three crops in a year [were] realized, and agricultural income has increased, thus improv[ing] the quality of life,” “[the issue of] water shortage was resolved and built a bathroom inside a house, which enabled the whole family to take showers in the house,” “no longer worrying about water at all, and able to use it freely anytime,” and “farmland is irrigated with water and crops are cultivated even in the dry season, so fires no longer occur.” In terms of health, impacts were seen in physical and mental health, such as “able to rest in the shade during farm work, making it easier to manage health” and “[we] no longer worry about water, and I no longer feel anxious.” In terms of social connections, “before the project, [I seldom] greeted other

⁴ https://www2.jica.go.jp/en/evaluation/pdf/2022_1460030_4_f.pdf

⁵ https://www2.jica.go.jp/en/evaluation/pdf/2023_201500341_4_f.pdf

farmers due to [there being only] one crop cycle; but after the project, [there are] increased face-to-face opportunities during farm work, becoming more sociable and strengthening unity among farmers.” In terms of governance, respondents noted “increased trust in the government for developing important basic infrastructure.”

1.4. Tamil Nadu, India: Biodiversity Conservation and Greening Project (Yen Loan)⁶

This project aimed to conserve biodiversity by strengthening the management of protected areas, planting trees outside of forest areas, improving livelihoods, and enhancing the operational capacity of the forest department, thereby contributing to environmental conservation and harmonious socioeconomic development. The evaluation confirmed qualitative effects in three areas: (1) environmental conservation, (2) livelihood improvement, and (3) enhancing social and economic capacities of women. In particular, the detailed analysis of PWB focused on the role and growth process of female leaders in community organizations, utilizing PWB as a method to follow human stories.

In the interviews with 18 beneficiaries, all reported improved subjective well-being. Unexpected effects were confirmed, such as the joy stemming from local people gradually understanding the importance of sea turtle conservation and the satisfaction derived from exercising leadership abilities and becoming important figures in their communities.

2. Perspective and Case Studies on Evaluation of Leave No One Behind

While PWB focuses on subjective well-being/life satisfaction, LNOB emphasizes the empowerment and social inclusion of people who are hindered from fair social participation. Like PWB, LNOB was introduced as an evaluation perspective in 2020, following the revision of DAC evaluation criteria.

JICA has long been supporting socially vulnerable groups. Traditionally, such groups were identified based on their attribute categories, such as the poor, persons with

disabilities, indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, the elderly, women, children, refugees, returnees, and those living in remote areas. However, the notion of “people at high risk of being left behind” varies depending on the specific context, as not all women, for example, are always socially vulnerable. Therefore, in LNOB the beneficiaries are defined as “people who are hindered from fair social participation” not only based on attribute categories but also considering factors such as gender, age, disability, illness, economic status, political orientation, ethnicity, religion, origin, language, place of residence (rural areas, slums, remote areas, islands, differences in jurisdiction or municipalities), gender identity, and discrimination (JICA 2021b, 3).

LNOB is integrated into the evaluation perspective across all six evaluation items. In terms of relevance, it assesses whether appropriate solutions and risk-avoidance measures were taken for beneficiaries who were supposed to benefit from the project but did not, or those negatively impacted by the project. In coherence, it examines whether the inclusiveness and fairness of the project align with international agreements, the partner country’s systems, and the policies of the Japanese government, as well as whether coordination with other JICA projects and other organizations was achieved. In effectiveness, it evaluates whether the planned effects were delivered to people hindered from fair social participation. In impact, it considers whether there are prospects for long-term, indirect, secondary, and potential effects on such people. In sustainability, it assesses whether the administrative services and systems established by the project will continue to prevent people from being left behind in fair social participation. In efficiency, it measures whether the project was achieved within the planned budget and timeframe (JICA 2025b, 45–46).

Case studies of project evaluation from the LNOB perspective are presented in the following sections.

2.1. Nepal: Project on Rehabilitation and Recovery from the Nepal Earthquake (technical cooperation)⁷

This project targeted the Kathmandu Valley, Gorkha

⁶ https://www2.jica.go.jp/en/evaluation/pdf/2023_ID-P214_4_f.pdf

⁷ https://www2.jica.go.jp/en/evaluation/pdf/2022_1501961_4_f.pdf

District, and Sindhupalchok District, which were affected by the earthquake with its epicenter approximately 80 kilometers northwest of Kathmandu in April 2015. It aimed to promote recovery and reconstruction and contribute to the formation of a more disaster-resilient land and society in the target areas through (1) the development of a Kathmandu Valley Resilience Plan and District Rehabilitation and Recovery Plans, (2) the promotion of the dissemination of earthquake-resistant buildings and structures, (3) the formulation of priority recovery projects, and (4) the implementation of prioritized quick impact projects (QIPs) (24 projects). QIPs include two types of projects: facility and infrastructure projects, and livelihood recovery projects (agriculture-related projects). In the agriculture-related livelihood recovery projects, priority in beneficiary selection was given to female-headed households headed by widows and to Dalits, who have been socially marginalized and excluded from participation under the caste system.

From the LNOB perspective, the analysis focused on whether QIPs such as “formation of a women’s association,” “goat farming for women,” or “improvement of vegetable production techniques for women” contributed to recovery without isolating women and impoverished groups, who are hindered from fair social participation. The results confirmed the effectiveness of the approach taken, as the “formation of a women’s association” created a foundation for women from various strata to participate and discuss. In interviews, all Dalit women commented on the benefits of joining the women’s association, being able to express their opinions more clearly after participating in the workshops, and gaining knowledge on household budget management, such as how to save and how to borrow money.

This project confirmed that the earthquake recovery efforts were implemented without leaving women and impoverished groups behind, but instead provided fair opportunities to those wishing to participate in the project. Additionally, a lesson learned was that for Dalit women with high illiteracy rates, hands-on support was more important than disseminating information through manuals and written materials.

2.2. Jordan: The Project for Rehabilitation and Expansion of the Water Networks in Balqa Governorate (grant aid)⁸

This project aimed to improve water supply services in Deir Alla and Ain Al Basha in Balqa Governorate, northwestern Jordan, through the development of reservoirs, pumping facilities, and transmission and distribution lines. The evaluation included household surveys divided into low-income, middle-income, and high-income groups.

From the LNOB perspective, a detailed analysis was conducted within the evaluation items of effectiveness and impact to determine whether the improvement in water supply services also benefited low-income groups and whether there were differences in improvement compared to middle-income and high-income groups. The results confirmed that water supply services have improved for low-income groups, demonstrating the project has benefited them. Specifically, some households located at the end of the distribution network or at high altitudes, where water was difficult to reach or not supplied, were able to receive water due to the project. The project’s effects also reached densely populated Palestinian refugee camps, where low-income households with relatively large family sizes reside. However, it was noted that low-income groups had slightly lower satisfaction with water supply frequency, service improvement, and service adequacy compared to other income groups. This outcome was influenced by the fact that low-income groups tend to have larger families, resulting in less water distribution per family member.

Furthermore, the evaluation confirmed impacts from the PWB perspective, such as relief from worries about running out of water and psychological stress due to improved water supply services.

3. Issue to Consider

Several challenges remain in implementing and evaluating PWB and LNOB, particularly in relation to resource constraints, such as budget and personnel, research methods, the evaluation

⁸ https://www2.jica.go.jp/en/evaluation/pdf/2022_1760370_4_f.pdf

within a project cycle, and quantitative evaluation.

Firstly, there are resource constraints on budget and personnel for evaluations, and on the capacity for data collection. Consequently, JICA currently selectively conducts evaluations on targeted projects. Regarding the selection criteria, for PWB evaluation, projects expected to benefit a wide range of recipients are given priority, while for LNOB, projects formulated with a focus on beneficiaries who are likely to be left behind are prioritized.

In PWB evaluations, challenges have been observed regarding the methods of collecting qualitative data used for detailed analysis. The data is obtained through informal surveys (questionnaires, interviews) by evaluators. The evaluators need to clearly convey abstract and ambiguous questions about happiness and elicit respondents' opinions. This task requires more experience and expertise compared to regular qualitative surveys. Therefore, survey methods and processes need to be improved and standardized. In LNOB evaluations, the quantity and quality of data used to identify beneficiaries hindered from fair social participation significantly influence the survey results. To conduct a precise analysis, it is necessary to include as many participants as possible when sampling for each project, but there are also constraints on personnel, budget, and time that can be allocated to the survey. In the aforementioned project in Jordan, due to a limited sample size, there is the possibility of bias in responses, and insufficient data on beneficiaries' income categories, leading evaluators to rely on their estimation.

The ex-post evaluation is positioned in the C (check) phase in the PDCA cycle, but its function pertains to the entire cycle. In the P (plan) phase, ex-ante evaluations are conducted, indicators are set, and the chain of changes leading to the final goal is anticipated. Then, in the D (do) phase, progress is monitored, and in the A (action) phase, lessons and recommendations from the evaluations are utilized for improvement. By integrating a common perspective throughout the entire project cycle, it becomes possible to conduct evaluations logically and consistently. Currently, PWB and LNOB are used in the ex-post evaluation as perspectives to measure effects, but they need to be incorporated from the planning stage as in ex-ante evaluation for comparing before and after, as well as verifying causality.

Although this essay focused on qualitative aspects, JICA does not exclude quantitative evaluation of PWB and LNOB (JICA 2025b, 49). Another challenge to consider is setting indicators during the planning stage and measuring quantitative results.

Conclusion

Amid the recent rise of complex crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, conflicts, and the transformation of geopolitical risks, UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner stated in the *Human Development Report 2021/2022* that “each new crisis reminds us that when people’s capabilities, choices and hopes for the future feel dashed, the wellbeing of their nations and the planet are the accompanying casualties” (UNDP 2022, iii). The main theme of the report was how to build security and stability in the uncertainty surrounding human development.

JICA's Annual Evaluation Report states the organization's policy of advancing evaluations from the perspective of People's Well-being, a concept that underpins the principles of human security and the SDGs (JICA 2025a, 1). Human security is a concept and approach that focuses on the diverse threats and vulnerabilities of people, organizations, and society, aiming to build a resilient society where people can fulfill their dignity free from fear and want through protection and empowerment. Regarding the relationship between PWB and human security, PWB envisions a state where people's lives, livelihoods, and dignity are protected and fulfilled, while human security envisions a state where people are free from various threats. Both share common elements that are deeply connected to human life. Therefore, JICA treats both as mutually complementary concepts. The state of human security free from various threats is verified using the multifaceted well-being perspective, including physical, psychological, and social aspects (JICA 2025b, 49).

Evaluation encompasses both an objective perspective, which maintains a certain distance from the subject and makes unbiased judgments using universal, commonly shared criteria, and a subjective perspective, which draws on the values, experiences, and perceptions specific to individuals

or groups. These two perspectives are integrated into evaluation. The introduction of well-being evaluation was underpinned by a clear intention to place greater emphasis on subjectivity in order to capture the realities of people's everyday lives. As demonstrated by the cases presented in this essay, both the anticipated effects and a range of unanticipated secondary effects were confirmed. These effects were generated in economic stability resulting from the acquisition of livelihoods; the alleviation of water shortages and the reduction of health risks through improvements in the living environment, which in turn led to relief from psychological stress and greater mental well-being; as well as strengthened interpersonal ties within families and local communities, increased trust in public authorities, the preservation of culture and customs, and a deepening of religious faith.

In discussions on human security, the challenge has been recognized as advancing the assessment of elements that constitute human vulnerability, thereby making human security an operational analytical concept (JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development 2022, 93-94). From this perspective, well-being evaluation—by seeking to disaggregate and measure the effects of development interventions on people's lives and happiness across multiple dimensions—may be regarded as a meaningful attempt that offers valuable insights for more fully embedding the concept of human security within development projects.

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