

Measuring Progress: STATEC Well-being Seminar Series

16:00 CET (10:00 AM Eastern) – 17:00 CET (11:00 PM Eastern)

7 October 2025**Revisiting the relationship between income inequality and happiness:
New insights from the Social Data Recycling (SDR) program.****Dr. Malgorzata Mikucka, Mannheim University**

Abstract: Social scientists often argue that income inequality harms subjective wellbeing (SWB), yet empirical evidence remains inconsistent. Some studies report negative effects (e.g., Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011; Schröder, 2018), others positive (e.g., Rözer & Kraaykamp, 2013; Helliwell & Huang, 2008), and still others no significant association (e.g., Ngamaba, Panagioti, & Armitage, 2018; Kelley & Evans, 2017). These mixed results suggest regional variation, with inequality appearing more harmful in developed than in developing countries. This study revisits the link between inequality and SWB, addressing methodological limitations in prior research. I draw on data from the Social Data Recycling (SDR) program, which harmonized post-hoc data from 23 international survey projects (3,329 national surveys). Covering about 100 countries and more than one million individuals in the final sample, this dataset is uniquely suited to examine the link between income inequality and SWB. Using multilevel regression models, I control for country- and survey-clustering and distinguish analytically between within-country changes in inequality from cross-country differences. The results show that SWB declines during periods of rising inequality (within-country effects). Consistent with earlier research, the relationship varies with socioeconomic development, but there is no evidence of more positive effects in developing countries. Instead, the observed positive associations in developing countries reflects cross-sectional effects, whose causal interpretation is problematic. The main conclusion is lack of evidence supporting a positive relationship over time between income inequality and SWB.

Dr. Malgorzata (Gosia) Mikucka is a sociologist specializing in quantitative data analysis. She is a postdoctoral researcher at the School of Social Sciences, Mannheim University, and has previously held positions at LISER (Luxembourg) and the Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium). Her research examines the social determinants of health and subjective well-being, their development across the life course, and their links to macro-level factors such as income and gender inequality. She is also interested in how cumulative advantage processes shape the development of inequalities over time, and in the potential of these insights to inform policy decisions.

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