

Institutional capital and subjective well-being in Algeria: analytic study

رأس المال المؤسسي والرفاه الذاتي في الجزائر: دراسة تحليلية

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of institutional quality in Algeria from 1996 to 2023 using the Worldwide Governance Indicators and explores its relationship with social capital and subjective well-being (SWB). The methodology combines three approaches: a review of institutional theories, an analysis of social and governance indicators, and an assessment of empirical findings. Results reveal persistent weaknesses in voice and accountability, regulatory quality, and corruption control, despite moderate progress in the rule of law and political stability. Although human development indicators have improved, institutional stagnation may hinder trust formation and civic engagement, limiting gains in life satisfaction. The findings suggest that in rent-dependent economies, redistributive capacity can sustain material welfare without proportional improvements in institutional trust and social capital, highlighting the importance of strengthening governance quality for long-term well-being.

Keywords: Institutional Quality, Social Capital, Subjective Well-Being, Algeria, Governance.

JEL Classification: O43, D02, I31, H11, Z13.

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل جودة المؤسسات في الجزائر خلال الفترة 1996–2023 بالاعتماد على مؤشرات الحوكمة العالمية، مع تسليط الضوء على العلاقة بين رأس المال الاجتماعي والرفاه الذاتي. وتعتمد منهجية الدراسة على ثلاثة محاور رئيسية: مراجعة النظريات المؤسسية، وتحليل المؤشرات الاجتماعية ومؤشرات الحوكمة، وتقييم النتائج. حيث تشير النتائج إلى استمرار نقاط الضعف في مجال الصوت والمساءلة، وجودة التنظيم، ومكافحة الفساد، رغم تسجيل تحسن نسبي في سيادة القانون والاستقرار السياسي. وعلى الرغم من التقدم في مؤشرات التنمية البشرية، فإن ركود الأداء المؤسسي قد يحد من بناء الثقة وتعزيز المشاركة المدنية، مما يقيد مكاسب الرضا عن الحياة. وتدعم النتائج الفرضية القائلة إن الاقتصادات المعتمدة على الربح يمكنها الحفاظ على مستوى معيشة مادي مقبول دون تحقيق تحسن مماثل في الثقة المؤسسية ورأس المال الاجتماعي. ويُعد تعزيز جودة الحوكمة شرطاً أساسياً لتحسين الرفاه الذاتي على المدى الطويل.

كلمات مفتاحية: جودة المؤسسات، رأس المال الاجتماعي، رفاه ذاتي، الجزائر، حوكمة.

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Introduction

Since the seminal contributions of Douglas North, the literature on institutions and development has expanded considerably. At the collective level, social and institutional capital manifests through the existence of shared institutions and rules that promote the stability of the legal and political framework. Such stability ensures physical, economic, and social security, particularly through an effective rule of law and a structured social protection system.

Within such an environment, individuals develop a climate of trust that enables them to act more freely to consume, invest, or engage in entrepreneurial activities within a clear and commonly accepted framework. Social and institutional capital thus contributes to strengthening social cohesion, a key determinant of both individual and collective well-being.

At the individual level, social capital refers to the relational networks maintained by individuals. These relationships foster sociability, facilitate access to professional and economic opportunities, and may contribute to improved social status. Social capital therefore serves as a mechanism for social mobility and integration, reinforcing the ties between individuals and their communities of belonging. Based on these observations, several research questions arise:

- Why does institutional quality constitute a determinant of well-being?
- Which institutional factors influence subjective well-being in Algeria?
- Do institutions exert a specific influence on well-being, independently of their effects on psychological or economic variables?

To address these questions, this study is structured around three main axes:

1. An analysis of the principal theoretical approaches to institutions;
2. An analytical exploration of social and institutional indicators in Algeria.

This study is based on the following hypothesis:

Institutional trust positively affects subjective well-being in Algeria

Since 1990, Algeria has undergone profound political, institutional, and socio-economic transformations. The country transitioned from political violence in the 1990s, to oil-driven

stabilization in the 2000s, to structural stress following the 2014 oil price collapse, and finally to political restructuring after the 2019 Hirak movement.

1. Theoretical and Empirical Overview

1.1 The Theory of Institutional Efficiency: An Economic Approach

The theory of institutional efficiency is grounded in the Coase Theorem (1960). According to this perspective, if existing economic institutions benefit certain groups while disadvantaging others, negotiations may be undertaken to modify or create new institutions capable of improving collective outcomes.

This approach assumes that societies tend to adopt efficient institutions aimed at maximizing national income and promoting optimal resource allocation. However, it presents several limitations:

a) If all nations spontaneously adopted institutions that maximize national income, cross-country differences in economic performance could not be attributed to institutional quality. Yet, numerous empirical studies demonstrate that institutional differences constitute a major source of disparities in income and growth (Mijiyawa, 2010).

b) Collective institutional choice involves complex negotiations that are subject to free-rider problems, which may hinder collective action.

c) The issue of government commitment remains problematic. In cases where political leaders deviate from agreed-upon rules, what mechanisms enable citizens to enforce compliance? Institutional negotiation implies interaction between the state and society, but power asymmetries may distort this process (Mijiyawa, 2010).

Ultimately, this theory views the creation of institutions—particularly those protecting property rights—as the outcome of a cost–benefit trade-off.

1.2 Historical Approach

The historical approach, notably developed by Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001–2002), as well as Sokoloff and Engerman (2000), highlights the impact of colonial strategies on the institutional trajectories of former colonies. The modes of exploitation implemented by

European powers generated differentiated institutional structures, which partly explain contemporary development disparities.

However, this approach does not provide a comprehensive explanation for current institutional differences. Some countries have successfully transformed inherited institutions. The example of Japan during the nineteenth-century Meiji Restoration illustrates the capacity for profound transformation of political, economic, and social structures (La Porta & al, 1999).

1.3 Political Approach

Douglas North proposed a theoretical formalization of the political role of institutions in *A Neoclassical Theory of the State*. He emphasized the existence of transaction costs that may create a divergence between institutions that maximize collective income and those selected by policymakers pursuing their own interests (Mijiyawa, 2010).

The work of Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson extends this perspective by demonstrating that institutions protecting property rights influence not only the level of income but also its distribution. Institutional choices result from conflicts of interest, resolved in favor of groups holding political power (Robinson, 1998). Thus, institutions are not necessarily selected for their overall economic efficiency but rather for their distributive consequences.

Institutionalism is now widely recognized as a central paradigm in development analysis (Lafaye & al, 2007). Although neoclassical theory long marginalized this dimension, the history of economic thought reveals the enduring importance attributed to institutions (Benedique, 2010).

1.4 The New Institutional Economics

New Institutional Economics (NIE), notably developed by Coase, Williamson, and North, builds upon the concepts of bounded rationality (Simon) and agent opportunism.

Coase (1937) demonstrated that firms may be more efficient than markets when they reduce transaction costs. Williamson further developed this analysis by examining governance structures that limit opportunistic behavior (Knack & Keefer, Does social capital have an economic payoff? A cross-country investigation, 1997).

NIE posits that institutions emerge to minimize transaction costs and regulate economic interactions. The state may serve as a driver of wealth accumulation, but it may also become a source of obstruction when it generates institutional distortions (Grefe, 1997).

Within this framework, efficiency principles guide institutional selection. The concept of “good governance” is rooted in this logic, aiming to reform the state in order to facilitate market functioning (OTANDO, 2012).

1.5 Institutions and Social Capital

Empirical studies highlight a close relationship between social capital, trust, and economic growth. Databases such as the World Values Survey measure interpersonal trust through questions such as: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted?” (Côté & Helliwell, , 2002).

The distinction between trust within close circles and generalized trust is essential. In some countries, trust is strong within the family but weaker toward strangers.

The quality of public institutions also constitutes a major determinant of growth, indirectly influencing investment in human and physical capital.

Research shows that regions characterized by high levels of social capital benefit from stronger economic and financial performance (Côté & Helliwell, , 2002).

Regarding the welfare state, the debate remains open. Some analyses suggest that it may weaken informal solidarity mechanisms. However, other studies indicate that it can instead strengthen social cohesion and encourage volunteerism, as observed in the Netherlands and Sweden.

1.6 Social Capital and Human Capital

Social capital and human capital maintain a bidirectional relationship. The development of human capital fosters the creation of social networks, while strong social capital facilitates the accumulation of human capital (Razafindrakoto & Roubaud,, 2006).

According to the OECD (2001), high levels of social capital are associated with:

- better health outcomes,

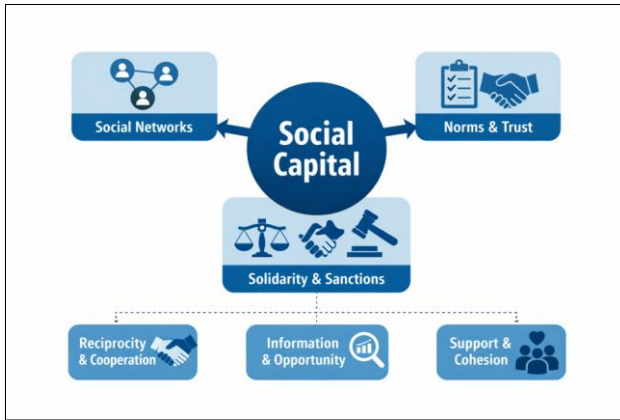
- higher subjective well-being,
- improved child protection,
- lower crime rates,
- more effective public administration.

Social capital rests on three fundamental pillars:

1. Social networks;
2. Formal and informal norms;
3. Sanctioning mechanisms ensuring compliance with rules.

These components are interdependent and closely linked to institutional, political, and legal contexts.

Figure 01: Conceptual Framework of Social Capital.



Source: OECD (2001).

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 defines **social capital** as a multidimensional construct structured around three core components: **social networks**, **norms and trust**, and **solidarity and sanction mechanisms**. These dimensions interact to generate cooperative behaviors and collective outcomes that enhance both individual and societal well-being (Helliwell, Layard, R., Sachs, J. D., & De Neve, 2023).

- Social Networks

Social networks constitute the structural dimension of social capital. They refer to the set of formal and informal relationships that connect individuals and groups (Bourdieu, 1986), (Coase, 1960). These networks facilitate access to information, economic opportunities, and social support. Putnam (1993, 2000) distinguishes between:

- **Bonding social capital**, which strengthens ties within homogeneous groups (family, close friends);
- **Bridging social capital**, which connects individuals across diverse social groups.

Through these relational structures, individuals gain access to resources embedded within social interactions, thereby improving their economic and social mobility.

- Norms and Trust

The relational dimension of social capital is grounded in shared norms and generalized trust. Trust reduces uncertainty and transaction costs in social and economic exchanges (Fukuyama, 1995).

Generalized trust extended beyond close circle plays a central role in promoting cooperation at the societal level. Empirical studies using data from the World Values Survey show that higher levels of interpersonal trust are associated with stronger institutional performance and higher economic growth (Côté & Helliwell, , 2002). Norms of reciprocity further reinforce cooperative behaviors. When individuals expect mutual cooperation, collective action becomes more sustainable (Coleman, 1988).

- Solidarity and Sanction Mechanisms

The third component emphasizes the regulatory and normative dimension of social capital. Social cohesion depends not only on networks and trust but also on mechanisms that enforce compliance with shared rules (Ostrom, 1990).

Formal institutions (laws, judicial systems) and informal mechanisms (social pressure, moral obligations) act as sanctioning devices that discourage opportunistic behavior. These mechanisms strengthen cooperation and stabilize social interactions.

- Outcomes of Social Capital

The interaction between these three pillars produces key outcomes:

- Reciprocity and cooperation ;
- Access to information and economic opportunities;
- Social support and cohesion ;
- Improved well-being and governance quality.

According to the OECD (2001), high levels of social capital are associated with better health outcomes, greater subjective well-being, reduced crime rates, and more effective public administration. Thus, social capital operates as a bridging mechanism between individuals and institutions, linking micro-level interactions to macro-level development outcomes.

1.7 Social Capital and Subjective Well-Being

According to Putnam, social capital exerts a major influence not only by deterring antisocial or delinquent behavior but also by mobilizing collective energies and directing them toward positive goals. Other economists emphasize that, in analyzing the links between crime, social mistrust, and inequality, the loss of self-esteem, dignity, and social status constitutes a central explanatory factor. When poverty and exclusion undermine these dimensions, interpersonal trust and social relationships are affected, with consequences for health and delinquency (Côté & Helliwell, , 2002).

Several studies conducted in different countries further show that, all else being equal and controlling for initial health status, the density of social networks that is, the closeness of relationships maintained with family, friends, and acquaintances is positively correlated with life expectancy. Among the dimensions of well-being that have attracted increasing attention in recent years are subjective well-being and happiness (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004).

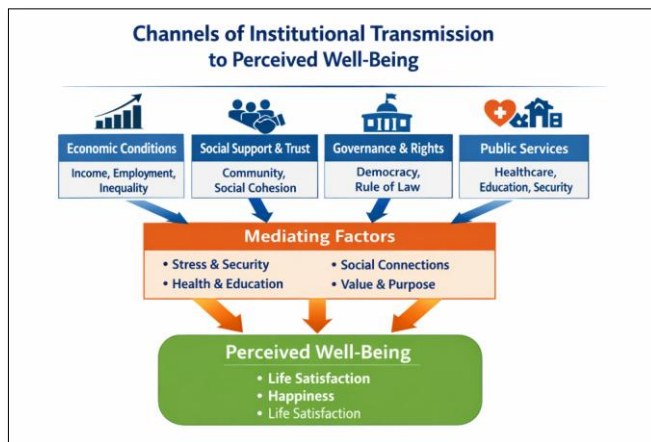
2. Determinants of Subjective Well-Being

Diener's research indicates that there is no single determinant of subjective well-being. Certain conditions, such as good mental health or positive social relationships, appear necessary

for achieving high levels of subjective well-being; however, they are not sufficient on their own to guarantee happiness (LARSEN, 2008).

Most individuals conceptualize subjective well-being on the basis of objective realities. Although each person may define happiness according to personal criteria, surveys conducted in numerous countries reveal that the elements most frequently associated with happiness are similar and largely relate to everyday life domains in which individuals perceive themselves as having some degree of control. It is also important to consider subjective measures of well-being, which complement objective indicators (MAAMRI & IFOURAH, H, 2016). Indeed, they make it possible to better capture dimensions of quality of life that conventional measures do not always adequately reflect. The following figure illustrates the various components of subjective well-being.

Figure 2: Channels of Institutional Transmission to Perceived Well-Being.



Source: Adapted from Helliwell and al. (2023); OECD (2013); Sen (1999); Ott (2010).

3. Evolution of Institutional and Social Variables in Algeria (1990–2025): An Economic and Institutional Analysis

The analysis is grounded in institutional economics (Acemoglu & Robinson,, 2012) and development theory (Sen, 1990) . Institutions influence development through:

1. Property rights and rule of law → investment climate;

2. Governance effectiveness → public service delivery ;
3. Corruption control → resource allocation efficiency ;
4. Political accountability → policy responsiveness.

In a hydrocarbon-dependent economy like Algeria, institutional quality also determines whether natural resource rents are used for long-term diversification or short-term political stabilization.

- Period 1: Political Crisis and Institutional Breakdown (1990-1999)

The 1990s were marked by civil conflict and severe political instability. This period weakened:

Table 01: Political Crisis and Institutional Breakdown, Algeria, (1990-1999).

Institutional Context	Social and Economic Outcomes	Economic Mechanism
-Political accountability -Rule of law -Investor confidence	-High unemployment, particularly among youth -Reduced private investment -Declining economic growth -Rising informal sector expansion	-Risk premiums -Capital flight -Public security expenditure crowding out productive investment

Source: (IMF, 2024), (World Bank, 2024a).

The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), available from 1996 onward, reflect low scores in political stability and voice/accountability during the late 1990s (World Bank, 2024). Youth unemployment reached extremely high levels during the mid-1990s (World Bank, 2024a).

4. Period 2: Oil-Financed Stabilization and Social Expansion (2000-2013)

Rising hydrocarbon prices increased Algeria's oil rents as a percentage of GDP during the 2000s (World Bank, 2024).

Table 02: characteristics of economic situation, Algeria, (2000-2013).

Oil Revenue and State Capacity	Social Progress	Institutional Evolution
-Massive public investment programs Expansion of public employment -Subsidy systems -Infrastructure development	-Life expectancy steadily increased (World Bank, 2024c) -Education enrollment expanded -Human Development Index (HDI) improved significantly (Into 2010s, Algeria entered the “High Human Development” category (UNDP, 2024).	-Governance quality indicators remained moderate to weak -Corruption perception persisted (Transparency International, 2025) -Political liberalization remained limited (Freedom House, 2025)

Source: (IMF, 2024), (World Bank, 2024a).

This reflects the “rentier state equilibrium”: **Oil rents substitute for taxation → reduced accountability pressure → limited institutional deepening.** (Acemoglu & Robinson,, 2012).

-Period III: Oil Price Shock and Structural Constraints (2014-2018)

The 2014 global oil price collapse significantly reduced fiscal space.

Table 04: development of structural situation, Algeria, (2014-2018).

Macroeconomic Effects	Social Impact	Structural Diagnosis
-Budget deficits increased -Foreign reserves declined -Public investment slowed	-Youth unemployment - remained elevated -Private sector job creation - remained insufficient -Rising frustration among - educated youth	-Hydrocarbon-dependent -State-driven -Weakly diversified

Source: (IMF, 2024), (World Bank, 2024a).

- Period 4: Hirak Movement and Political Reconfiguration (2019-2021)

Table 05 : Political situation, Algeria, (2019-2021).

Political Transformation (2019)	COVID-19 Shock
-Dissatisfaction with corruption -Demands for accountability -Youth frustration Subsequently: -New constitutional reforms were adopted in 2020 -Political restructuring occurred	-Output contraction -Employment pressures -Strain on health systems

Source: (UNDP, 2024).

UNDP (2024) highlights global HDI setbacks during COVID-19, affecting many middle-income countries including Algeria.

- Period 5: Recovery, Reform Efforts, and Structural Risks (2022-2025)

Table 06: economic, institutional and social indicators, Algeria, (2022-2025).

Economic Recovery	Institutional Indicators (Recent)	Social Indicators
Fiscal balances Foreign reserves Growth performance	Governance scores remain moderate Corruption perception remains a policy concern (Transparency International, 2025)	Life expectancy remains high compared to 1990 Education levels expanded Youth unemployment remains structurally elevated

Source : (IMF, 2025), (World Bank, 2024), (UNDP, 2024).

For Long-Term Trends (1990–2025), we can summarize:

Variable	Long-Term Trend
Life expectancy	Strong upward trend
HDI	Significant improvement
Youth unemployment	Persistently high
Governance quality	Limited improvement
Oil rent dependence	Structurally high
Corruption perception	Moderate to weak control

Source : (UNDP, 2024), (WB, 2024), (IMF, 2025).

Between 1990 and 2025, Algeria experienced:

- Institutional fragility (1990s) ;
- Oil-driven stabilization (2000s) ;
- Structural vulnerability exposure (post-2014) ;
- Political reconfiguration (post-2019) ;
- Recovery with unresolved structural weaknesses (2022–2025).

4. Institutional Variables from WGI (Algeria, 1996–2023+)

The WGI provides six core institutional/governance indicators:

1. **Voice and Accountability (VA)**: citizens' ability to participate in selecting their government;
2. **Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism (PS)**;
3. **Government Effectiveness (GE)**: quality of public services and policy implementation
4. **Regulatory Quality (RQ)**: ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies;
5. **Rule of Law (RL)**: confidence in rules, including contract enforcement and property rights;
6. **Control of Corruption (CC)**: extent to which public power is exercised for private gain.

The World Bank's WGI data provide a consistent annual series from 1996 to 2023+ for six governance dimensions across countries. The indicators:

- Are built from dozens of underlying surveys/expert assessments.
- Are expressed in percentile ranks (0–100) higher values = better relative governance position.
- Are useful for trend analysis and cross-country comparisons.

For example, Control of Corruption and Government Effectiveness both hover in the 20–30 range in recent years, indicating weakness relative to most countries. Political Stability, although improving from very low levels, still ranks poorly (often below 25). Meanwhile, Regulatory Quality shows gradual gains but remains the lowest among the six indicators.

Table 07: Control of Corruption (Percentile Rank).

Year	Percentile Rank
2019	28.1
2020	27.6
2021	29.5
2022	27.8
2023	30.2

Source : World Bank's WGI.

Algeria's perceived control of corruption remains relatively low compared to global standards, but shows modest improvement by 2023.

Table 08: Government Effectiveness (Percentile Rank).

Year	Percentile Rank
2019	32.9
2020	31.9
2021	28.6
2022	32.5
2023	27.4

Source : World Bank's WGI.

Government effectiveness has been **fairly stagnant**, indicating limited improvements in public service quality and policy implementation capabilities.

Table 09: Political Stability & Absence of Violence (Percentile Rank).

Year	Percentile Rank
2019	13.2
2020	17.9
2021	15.6
2022	22.6
2023	23.2

Source : World Bank's WGI.

Political stability remains among the **lower global ranks**, reflecting domestic political tensions and risks.

Table 10: Regulatory Quality (Percentile Rank).

Year	Percentile Rank
2019	7.1
2020	8.6
2021	10.0
2022	14.2
2023	16.0

Source : World Bank's WGI.

Regulatory quality the government's ability to design and implement effective regulation shows some upward movement, though still very low.

Table 11: Rule of Law (Percentile Rank).

Year	Percentile Rank
2019	20.5
2020	22.4
2021	22.4
2022	22.2
2023	26.4

Source : World Bank's WGI.

Rule of law has modestly improved by 2023 but remains below the global mid-point.

Table 12: Voice & Accountability (Percentile Rank).

Year	Percentile Rank
2019	19.8
2020	19.3
2021	20.8
2022	21.7
2023	22.1

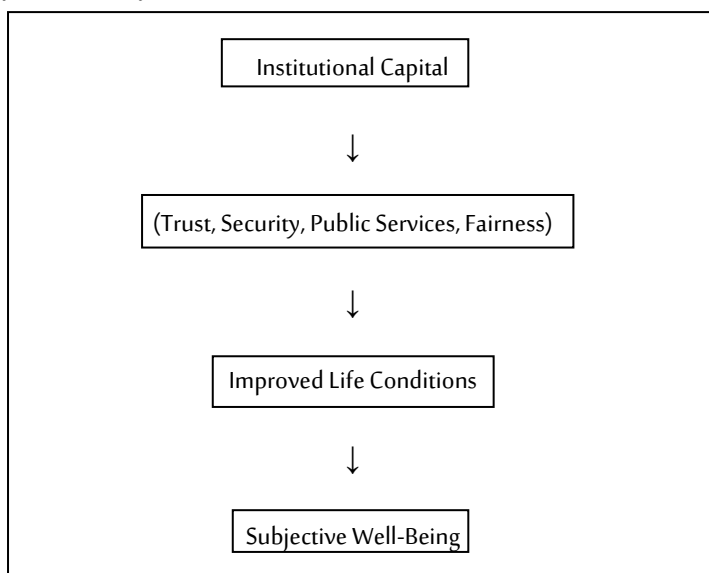
Source : World Bank's WGI.

Voice and accountability measuring civil liberties and political participation shows slight improvements but remains low.

Between 1996 and 2023, Algeria's governance performance as measured by the World Bank's WGI remained relatively low across all six dimensions. Voice and accountability, and

regulatory quality were especially weak, typically scoring in the bottom quartile of global rankings. Control of corruption, government effectiveness, and rule of law showed slight improvements over time but remained well below the global median. Political stability increased modestly after 2019, possibly reflecting changes in the political landscape following the Hirak movement, but continued to lag behind most countries. Overall, governance trends in Algeria suggest persistent institutional fragilities that may impede economic diversification and inclusive growth.

Our study define clearly that:



Institutional capital affects subjective well-being not only through material conditions, but also through psychological perceptions of trust, fairness, and control over life.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed the evolution of Algeria's institutional variables through the Worldwide Governance Indicators framework and explored their implications for social capital and subjective well-being (SWB). The evidence suggests that institutional dynamics in Algeria between 1996 and 2023 have shaped well-being outcomes not only through economic performance but also through their influence on social trust, civic engagement, and perceived life satisfaction.

Theoretically, institutions affect SWB through two primary channels. First, formal governance quality measured by rule of law, control of corruption, regulatory quality, and government effectiveness directly influences individuals' perceptions of fairness, security, and predictability. Second, institutions indirectly shape SWB by fostering or eroding social capital, defined as networks, interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, and civic participation (Putnam, 2000).

In the Algerian case, WGI indicators show persistent weaknesses in voice and accountability, regulatory quality, and corruption control. These institutional constraints likely limit the formation of generalized trust and weaken horizontal social capital. When institutions are perceived as opaque or inefficient, citizens tend to rely more heavily on bonding networks (family, close community ties) rather than bridging or linking social capital. While bonding social capital can provide short-term resilience, it does not substitute for institutional trust or broad-based civic engagement both of which are strongly associated with higher subjective well-being in international research (Helliwell et al., 2023).

The post-2019 period offers a particularly important case. The Hirak movement revealed a paradox: relatively stable macro-social indicators coexisted with declining institutional trust and rising frustration, especially among youth (Knack & Keefer, 1997). This divergence underscores a key finding in SWB literature: material conditions alone do not determine well-being. Institutional legitimacy and perceived fairness play an independent and significant role in life satisfaction and happiness (OECD., 2013).

From an economic perspective, Algeria's rentier model may have buffered income shocks through public spending, thereby sustaining objective welfare indicators such as life expectancy and education. However, rent-based redistribution does not automatically generate institutional trust or social cohesion. In fact, when governance quality remains moderate and accountability mechanisms are limited, rent distribution can reduce incentives for civic participation and weaken institutional-social capital feedback loops.

The empirical literature consistently finds that trust in institutions is among the strongest predictors of subjective well-being (Helliwell & Huang, 2008). In Algeria, relatively low

governance percentile rankings suggest that institutional trust may remain fragile, potentially constraining improvements in SWB despite improvements in human development indicators.

In Algeria, institutional capital influences subjective well-being primarily through perceived trust, fairness, and access to opportunities, while informal social structures play a compensatory role.

In sum, the Algerian experience illustrates that:

1. Institutional quality influences SWB not only through economic growth but through social capital formation.
2. Persistent governance weaknesses may limit generalized trust and civic engagement.
3. Rentier stabilization mechanisms can sustain material welfare without necessarily improving institutional trust.
4. Long-term improvements in SWB likely require strengthening rule of law, regulatory transparency, and participatory accountability mechanisms.

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