

# **Wellbeing and Social Policy in Developing Countries**

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## Introduction

Wellbeing is a key term that has captured the imagination of those interested in extending the boundaries of social policy in the twenty first century. This has taken three major forms: new measures of progress through national and international statistics; wellbeing assessment as the means to evaluate the effectiveness of projects and programmes; and the enhancement of wellbeing as an objective of programmes, often, though not always, associated with physical or psychological health. This paper provides a short introduction to this rather large area of work. As the subjective dimensions of wellbeing are the most innovative and controversial aspect, the paper concentrates on these. It begins by identifying wellbeing as a field of ideas, rather than a single concept with a precise definition, and describes its appeal for social policy. It goes on to introduce some basic concepts and measures. It then discusses the use of wellbeing in national and international indices of progress. Lastly, it introduces some primary research on wellbeing at community level in Zambia and India, and describes what this shows with relation to the strengths and limitations of wellbeing as a new concept for social policy.

### Defining Wellbeing

Wellbeing comprises a field of associated ideas, rather than a single concept or definition. At root, it concerns what it means for life to be good. This may be prescribed from above through a range of development indicators, or defined in a participatory way by people themselves. As a field, wellbeing approaches share a number of common characteristics. They are multi-dimensional, going beyond the economic to a broader understanding of what makes life good. They are positive, oriented towards people's strengths and resources, rather than vulnerabilities and lacks. They are concerned with the overall impact on people's lives, rather than the narrow achievement of project or programme objectives. And they focus on experience and enjoyment, the quality of life, including subjective perceptions not just objective achievements.

While people may define wellbeing in quite different ways, there is considerable agreement about the factors that contribute to it. These include: material sufficiency; a dependable and attractive physical environment; good personal and social relationships; dignity and respect; meaningful activity; safety and security; mental and physical health; scope for agency; a positive sense of self; and spiritual nourishment.

There is much that is familiar in this. Societal wellbeing has always been a concern of public policy; the social indicators movement and quality of life scholars have advocated measures that go 'beyond GDP' since at least the 1960s (Michalos, 2011; Noll, 2011); and there is a well established trajectory in international development arguing for a more social and multidimensional approach (e.g. Sen, 1981; 1999; Young et al., 1984; Cornia et al., 1988; Chambers, 1994; Alkire, 2002).

There are, however, two aspects of the current enthusiasm for wellbeing that are innovative. First, there is the move to interpret a wide range of indicators as aspects of a single concept, wellbeing, and so produce a composite measure to assess it. Second, there is a signature attention to subjective dimensions of wellbeing, with the claim that a new 'science' makes it possible to measure happiness (Diener, 2000).

While, on the one hand, it is the breadth of wellbeing and its multi-dimensional approach that some find attractive, for others, it is its parsimony. The utilitarian idea of the purpose of public policy being to increase happiness (or 'utility') has commanded broad acceptance. Until now, however, happiness has been seen as impossible to quantify, so income has been used as its proxy. In 'subjective well-being' it appears economists have at last a direct, quantifiable measure of pure utility. This is why the promise of direct measures of 'how people think about and experience their lives' (OECD, 2013:3) causes such excitement in statistics offices across the globe.

## **Concepts and Measures**

The literature on wellbeing is large, ranging from philosophy through psychology, economics, health and social statistics to sociology and anthropology. Hot topics in one discipline do not necessarily feature in another. There are two main approaches used in social policy, quality of life and subjective wellbeing. Quality of life approaches are the more familiar. These typically combine objective with subjective indicators (Hagerty et al., 2001). They may include some psychological variables or domains, but place these alongside other aspects of life, such as education, housing, income, family and social relationships. In international development, the most widely used example is Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach (e.g. Sen, 1993).

Subjective wellbeing, or SWB, is the approach which promises to deliver utility, and approximates to happiness in lay terms. It is, however, a particular take on happiness: happiness as a measure of subjective success in life. What makes you happy is not at issue, just 'how happy' you are, measured on a Likert scale. Advocates of subjective wellbeing claim this slimness makes it democratic and culture-neutral: the methods can be used anywhere, and people are free to take pleasure in whatever they like (Diener and Suh, 2000). Critics argue that what feels good may not be good for you, and draw inspiration from Aristotle in advancing a more 'eudaemonic' notion of a happy life being grounded in virtue, flourishing and fulfilment, rather than pleasure (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Deci and Ryan, 2008).

Within psychology, SWB is seen as a composite of life satisfaction and the balance between positive and negative affect (or emotions). There are different measures of these, and they are sometimes used separately and sometimes in combination. The source of global SWB data which is most widely used at present is the Gallup World Poll, launched in 2005. This uses a life satisfaction measure (derived from Cantril, 1965) through which people rate both current satisfaction and their projection of the future. Despite the talk of 'science,' differences between measures can prove to be politically important, as they give different kinds of results, and so different kinds of evidence for policy (Graham, 2011). Measures of satisfaction with life, for example, commonly correlate with people's economic status, while measures of emotion tend not to (ibid., Diener et al., 2010). There are also serious issues with the sensitivity of these measures, with studies showing results vary significantly according to the order in which questions are asked, the number of options given as answers, and so on (Schwarz,

1999; Deaton, 2011). Frey and Gallus (2013) also point out that such questions are vulnerable to political manipulation, which makes them bad indicators for national policy. People can be coached and questions can be framed in ways that will raise average scores. People wishing to register a protest, can similarly use such measures to do so.

## **Wellbeing and the Measurement of National Progress**

An increasing number of national governments are adopting some measures of subjective wellbeing in official surveys. Canada, Australia and New Zealand were forerunners, joined in 2011 by the UK Office of National Statistics. The Report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (better known as the Stiglitz report) commissioned by President Sarkozy of France in 2008, was a key intervention. The OECD (2013) reports France, Italy, the United States, the Netherlands, Japan and South Korea as either measuring or planning to measure wellbeing at a national level.

Wellbeing data are also used to construct alternative international indices. The new economics foundation, for example, calculates life satisfaction multiplied by life expectancy divided by ecological footprint to produce its 'Happy Planet Index' (2006 onwards). Other measures take a multi-domain approach. The OECD's Better Life Index (2011 onwards) identifies eleven domains of wellbeing, which together reflect 'material living conditions' and 'quality of life'. The website stresses that it does not provide a ranking, but offers an interactive web-tool which allows users to assign their own weights to domains, and so see how countries rank against one another according to which domain is viewed as more or less important. The Legatum Institute's 'Prosperity Index' (2010 onwards) ranks countries according to eight sub-indices, again intended to reflect two key dimensions: wealth and wellbeing. The Social Progress Index was launched in 2013, combining 52 indicators of three dimensions: 'basic human needs', 'foundations of well-being' and 'opportunity'.

While they appear to be offering data in an open-handed way, these indices have a political purpose: to provide an incentive to shift policy in a particular direction. For new economics foundation the key issue is environmental sustainability. Help Age International present a 'Global Agewatch Index' to advance the needs and rights of older people. The Social Progress Index 'hopes to put social and environmental considerations at the top of the policy and corporate agenda' (Confino, 2013). The advocacy agendas of other actors may be less explicit, but nonetheless strong. The Legatum Institute and Gallup organisation, for example, are formally non-aligned, but they share a strong commitment to individual liberty, prosperity, and entrepreneurialism as the engine of growth.

While the various indices have different purposes and orientations, they also share some points in common. They are all expert-led, based in, and drawing on scholarship from, wealthy countries, especially the USA and northern Europe. They all identify wellbeing and happiness in individualistic terms. Despite the democratic appeal of interactive websites which provide free information in user-friendly form, they all rely on the advanced manipulation of statistics which makes it hard for ordinary people to evaluate the conclusions they draw.

Ideas of wellbeing are also used to argue for a different philosophy of development. The Government of Bhutan has advanced the idea of ‘Gross National Happiness’ as a culturally grounded alternative to GDP. In 2011 the United Nations responded by recognising the ‘pursuit of happiness’ as a fundamental human goal and invited member states to develop happiness and human wellbeing measures that can be used to guide public policy. Although, the links with Bhutan have been symbolically important, bringing associations of Eastern spiritual authenticity and more collectivist values, the advancement of happiness as a world agenda has been very much a collaborative effort. The first ‘World Happiness Report’ (2012) was edited by three economics professors from North America and the UK: John Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffery Sachs. In December 2013, the Government of Bhutan published a ‘new development paradigm’ produced by an international team of global ‘experts’ (NDP, 2013). Aiming to influence the ‘post MDG’ debates, this is an at times uneasy combination of some elements claimed to represent a ‘distinctive Bhutanese’ worldview (living in joy and harmony with the natural world, preserving cultural heritage and values, emphasising service rather than personal gain) in a core blend of established human development concerns with happiness economics, positive psychology and subjective wellbeing.

The philosophy of *buen vivir* in Latin America represents a more profoundly alternative approach. Alone amongst the wellbeing approaches, it has arisen through a bottom up process of political mobilization, a rights-based struggle of disenfranchised people, combining leftist politics with indigenous worldviews. These emphasise the claims of the natural world and environmental sustainability, the need for redistribution and expanded state welfare provision, and the collective rights of marginalised peoples to inclusion within a state that recognises the equal rights of a plurality of cultures and nations (Radcliffe, 2011). A frontal assault on neo-liberal policies and values, *buen vivir* has been enshrined within the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. Paradoxically, this coexists with heavy dependence on mining and oil extraction with high environmental costs. The extent to which it can result in genuinely different policies and practice depends on the daily politics of reforming state structures, and the extent to which space can be made within international relations for a radically distinctive economic model (Radcliffe, 2011).

### **Assessing Wellbeing at Community Level**

While national measures of wellbeing have attracted the highest profile, there is also considerable interest in assessing wellbeing at the community level. In project or programme monitoring and evaluation, wellbeing shifts the focus from the achievement of project objectives to the impact on people’s lives. Wellbeing assessment can be used to identify local understandings and priorities. It broadens the scope of assessment to include aspects of life that the project is not working on directly, and potential unexpected consequences of the programme, both good and bad. It may also highlight important issues for further action, not considered in the project design. Concern with the subjective dimensions of programme delivery and outcomes also draws attention to relationships amongst staff and between staff and clients. Do the ways people relate to each other foster wellbeing? This encourages reflexive practice.

Ideally assessment involves a participatory process, in which people are asked to determine what matters to them and what the indicators should be used.

This section reports the findings of research on ‘wellbeing and poverty pathways’ undertaken in two rural communities, one in India and one in Zambia, 2010-2013. The

project aimed to explore the value added of considering wellbeing in situations of poverty. It began by constructing a new model of psychosocial wellbeing using theory and methods based in research undertaken amongst resource-poor people in countries of the global south. Called ‘inner wellbeing’ (IWB), to distinguish it from other approaches, this concerns what people think and feel they are able to be and do. This was then used to explore the relations between people’s objective circumstance on the one hand and their subjective perspectives and reflections on the other. Qualitative notes and interviews were used to ground quantitative data and provide deeper insights into people’s own perspectives.

For two such different countries, there were a surprising number of similarities between the two research sites. Both were quite remote and occupied mainly by minority ethnic communities. In both, there were major issues regarding conflicts over natural resources. In both, alcohol abuse was a significant challenge and religion seen as a primary means of personal transformation. The most striking difference was political: the strong presence of the state in India, particularly through its food security programmes, compared with the virtual absence of the state in our Zambia field site.

While specific findings varied between the two field sites, the following overall outcomes were common to both. First, there was overall a strong positive correlation of inner wellbeing scores with objective circumstances. People with higher incomes and more land or other assets report higher IWB. Similarly, although the effect is not so strong as that of economic status, married men tend to have highest IWB scores, with married women next and women heading their own households lowest. This is not true of all individuals or all IWB items, but it is a strong general trend. This was also confirmed in many qualitative interviews, where people talked about the interconnections of peace and happiness at home with economic solvency, for example, or the social and economic marginality suffered by single women. It is also consistent with the main findings of the wider literature, that amongst poor people at least, economic status tends to be positively correlated with subjective wellbeing scores (e.g. Graham, 2011).

Second, local understandings of wellbeing challenge dominant models of development and provide powerful alternative motifs for thought and action. In the India research site, for example, the people lived close to the forests, and forest products continued to form an important aspect of their livelihoods. They have an ecological understanding of wellbeing, in which human community and action, the gift of rain, and the fertility and fecundity of the earth are intimately bound up together. Such conceptions belong to the world of symbol, ritual and myth, not numbers. But in their vision of a moral economy

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