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Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways Briefing No. 1

An Integrated Approach To Assessing Wellbeing

This briefing introduces the approach to assessing wellbeing being developed by Wellbeing & Poverty Pathways in its three-year research project in Zambia and India.

Key elements

A multi-dimensional model of wellbeing

Wellbeing is made up of seven domains that span material, relational and personal factors

A new concept of Inner Wellbeing

Subjective perspectives focus on 'Inner Wellbeing': what people feel and think they can do and be

An integrated, mixed method approach

Measures of how people are doing objectively complement Inner Wellbeing assessment. Qualitative data and reflection balance quantitative measures and analysis.

Why wellbeing in public policy and international development?

Wellbeing has caught the attention of policymakers and practitioners because it offers new perspectives on what matters and new ways to assess policy outcomes and their impact in people's lives. But a concern with wellbeing is not something completely new. It advances established agendas to recognise social and political alongside economic issues. It also opens up new conversations about some of the fundamental questions of public policy and society: What does it mean to live well? What is a good society? How can this be promoted and who is responsible for bringing it about?

New perspectives on what matters

Wellbeing approaches focus on what is positive and desirable, rather than what is lacking or negative. This adds a new energy and excitement into tired, problem-focused discussions. It also helps to break down the stigma that can attach to people and places that are targeted as in need of welfare or development assistance.

Wellbeing is encompassing and holistic, pointing to links across different areas of life or different sectors of policy. Human fulfilment and environmental sustainability are central concerns that complement or challenge more conventional preoccupations with economic growth.

New ways to assess outcomes

Subjective accounts of how people are doing and feeling are central to wellbeing assessment. Much recent research has been devoted to quantitative ways to measure subjective perceptions. We argue that these should be complemented by qualitative data that records how people describe their lives in their own terms. Measures of how people are doing in objective terms need to be used alongside these subjective accounts.

How programmes are implemented and the terms of interaction between staff and clients are an important focus for wellbeing assessment. This needs to consider the quality, not just quantity, of what is provided. Relationships are significant in wellbeing and it is important to explore if people are being treated in ways that respect their dignity and enhance their self-confidence.



Developing an approach to wellbeing assessment

The Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways approach to wellbeing assessment offers both a statistically validated model and a way to reflect (something of) the way people locally think and talk and feel and act.

Origins and influences

Two previous research projects were particularly influential for our thinking. The first was the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research group (www.welldev.org.uk). This identified three interlinked dimensions of wellbeing: the material - what people have or do not have; the relational - what people do or cannot do with it; and the subjective - what people think or feel.

The second research project that influenced us was the Colombo-based Psycho-social Assessment of Development and Humanitarian Intervention (PADHI) and their 'social justice approach to wellbeing'. This identified five domains of wellbeing. We have added two more domains which were highlighted as significant through other research.

The Wellbeing Pathways approach

Wellbeing is experienced when people have what they need for life to be good. Since what is seen to make life good differs by time and place, our model aims to provide a common framework that is built on theory but which can accommodate local understandings and priorities.



- The points of the star show seven domains of Inner Wellbeing
- The outer circle indicates the environment that enables and constrains wellbeing
- Wellbeing is a process which emerges through interaction:
 - between the different domains
 - between different people
 - between people and the broader environment
- The model is dynamic, not static, with flow and interchange between its different elements
- All of this is culturally embedded

Layering subjective and objective perspectives on wellbeing

Wellbeing is made up of both subjective and objective dimensions, but a simple contrast of 'subjective' and 'objective' doesn't work. In fact there are many different levels, or layers, that can be assessed. These cut across the seven domains of wellbeing and are important to bear in mind when designing an assessment. The purpose is to guide the selection of variables: it is never possible to consider all dimensions of all domains.

Layer 1: Objective environment

What resources are available in the local environment?

Layer 2. Subjective environment

What do people think of these resources?

Layer 3. Objective personal

What resources do the respondents have?

Layer 4. Subjective personal

What do the respondents think of the resources they have?

Layer 5. Inner Wellbeing

What do the respondents think or feel they are able to do or be?



An example of the layers approach for the economic domain

Wellbeing Pathways: Methods

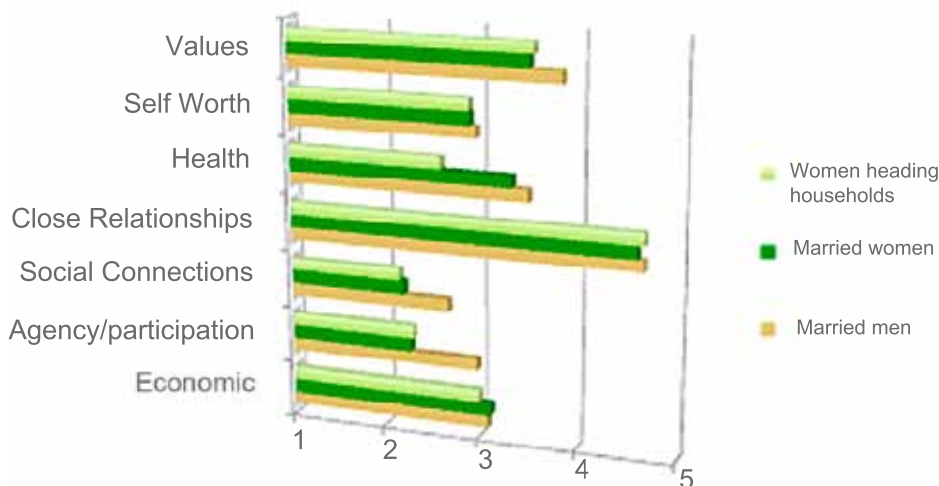
Our main method is a survey interview. This includes questions about livelihoods, demographics, education, health, disability and access to services, as well as Inner Wellbeing. We assess Inner Wellbeing through a structured set of questions and ask respondents to choose between graduated responses. These correspond to a 1-5 scale.

Within this common basic structure we develop a specific version for each context. We aim for the survey interview to be as like a conversation as possible. Examples or comments that people give are noted down and analysed. We gather qualitative data through open-ended interviews.

Community profiles are generated through group meetings, local statistics, team reflections and direct observation. Local teams of peer researchers contribute essential mediation, interpretation and reflection on the context. Frequent team meetings ensure data quality and ongoing mutual support. Statistical tests assess the validity, consistency and reliability of our model.

The Model In Use: Research in India

This graph shows the Inner Wellbeing scores generated through our research in Sarguja, India, 2011. It highlights differences between married men, married women and women heading their own households.



The overall average is low, just above the mid-point of 3 on our 1-5 scale. Close Relationships receive by far the highest scores, above 4.5 for all groups. Our qualitative data suggest that this may reflect what people feel they ought to say, even if their experience of family relationships is not in fact so positive.

The lowest scores for all groups are in the Social Connections and Agency and Participation domains. These are also the domains that show the strongest patterns of difference by gender. The Health domain shows the greatest difference between women heading households and married people.

Assessing Wellbeing: Summary

Wellbeing is multi-faceted

It needs to be assessed across different aspects of life. It is not well captured by a single indicator.

Measurement requires meaning

To interpret results, including changes over time, you need to know why people are scoring as they do. This means that qualitative work must accompany quantitative assessment.

Context makes a difference

The concepts and methods used to assess wellbeing, as well as the results they produce, are shaped by culture. This means that how you ask as well as what you ask about may need to be adapted for different local situations.

Relationship is at the heart of wellbeing

Wellbeing is not the property of an individual, it emerges in relationship. Assessment therefore needs to consider how people interact with each other and with their wider environment.

Politics are central to wellbeing

Politics determine how wellbeing is defined, whose wellbeing matters and who is seen to be responsible. Attention to power and inequality is therefore a vital part of wellbeing assessment.



Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways is an international research partnership exploring the links between poverty and wellbeing through research in rural communities in Zambia and India.

Funded by DFID and the ESRC, the partnership involves:

- University of Bath, UK
- Brunel University, UK
- Oxfam Hong Kong
- HODI, Zambia
- Chaupal, India
- G.B.Pant Institute, India

This series of briefings outlines the model of wellbeing assessment developed and applied in this research, its implementation and results.

For further information, visit www.wellbeingpathways.org or email wellbeing-pathways@bath.ac.uk

