Wellbeing and Subjectivity in International Development
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Introduction

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Welcome!
Aims of the Conference

• Primary aim: encourage conversation
• Coming from different places, disciplines, interest, more academic, more policy and practice focused...
• Presentations and posters but also group discussions and roundtable: ‘issue board’ for posting thoughts and questions as we go along
• Day 1: introduction to wellbeing pathways project, wellbeing measures in national/international policy
• Day 2: narratives, identities and constructions of wellbeing – final roundtable
Wellbeing
So What is Wellbeing?

- A ‘field’ of associated ideas, rather than a single definition – what it means for life to be good
- Definition differs by discipline and purpose: academic, political, commercial, policy or practice
- And from person to person, including by geography, history and culture, between men and women, by community, personality, and time of life
- Not possible to give a universal definition - in fact important not to!
- Instead make space for people within a particular setting to define what wellbeing or a good quality of life means for them
Widespread agreement on factors that foster wellbeing. These include:

- material sufficiency
- a dependable and attractive physical environment
- good personal and social relationships
- meaningful activity
- dignity and respect
- safety and security
- mental and physical health
- scope for agency
- a positive sense of self
- spiritual nourishment
Characteristics of Wellbeing Approaches in Policy/Practice

- Multi-dimensional: going beyond the economic to a broader understanding of what makes life good
- Positive: orientation towards people’s strengths and resources, rather than vulnerabilities or what is lacking
- Outcome-based: concerned with the impact on people’s lives, rather than the narrow achievement of project or programme objectives
- Focus on quality of life, what people get out of things rather than what they have
- Focus on experience and satisfaction (subjective perceptions) not just objective achievements
Why Wellbeing and Subjectivity?

Subjective Wellbeing
- Slim/unitary

Evaluation
- Utility

Subjectivities
- Complex/multiple

Universal

Quantitative Orientation

Contextual

Qualitative Orientation

Substantive view of subject
• SWB claim that methods universal though experience context-specific: ‘how happy’ – whatever makes you happy
• Scepticism about universals – generally a failure to reflect on one’s own specificities
• Implicit view of both the ‘subject’ and ‘wellbeing’ that are culturally informed?
• Unease with potential disciplinary and cultural imperialism of ‘happiness’ claims
• Doubt that methods and their object can be so neatly divided: accounts of wellbeing are implicated in the methods used to produce them
• Underlying question about where this leads politically
Wellbeing in Policy and Practice

Alternative values challenging centrality of economic growth

Psycho-social added alongside social and material dimensions

Satisfaction/subjective perceptions considered alongside objective indicators

Expanded measures of success of existing development model

Individual psychology becomes main focus

SWB as measure of utility
Wellbeing Research and Teaching at Bath

- ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries, (WeD) 2002-7 (www.welldev.org.uk)

- Religion, Wellbeing and Development, India and Bangladesh, 2007-10 (University of Birmingham)

- Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways, 2010-14

- MSc in Wellbeing in Public Policy and International Development (2008 - )

- CPD unit in Wellbeing Assessment (intensive week, January)
Test empirically ‘value added’ of subjective dimensions of wellbeing in understanding poverty dynamics:

• Develop a psychosocial model of wellbeing which can be assessed in quantitative terms

• Use this model to explore people’s movements into, within and out of poverty using demographic and economic indicators on the one hand and subjective perspectives and reflections on the other

• Qualitative notes and interviews to ground quantitative data and provide deeper insights into people’s own perspectives

Two rounds of 3-4 months fieldwork in two rural communities, Zambia and India
The Wellbeing Pathways model

• Seven domains (closely interacting)
• Wider environment which enables or constrains wellbeing
• Wellbeing is experienced through interaction:
  – between the different domains
  – between the person and those important to him or her
  – between the person and the broader environment
• Inner wellbeing domain scores measured through five items on five point scale
The Wellbeing Cycle

- Locates individual experience in a broader context of structures, policies and relationships.

The Wellbeing Cycle

- Structures and institutions: social, economic, political, cultural, natural/physical
- Environment that promotes or inhibits wellbeing
- Interaction that promotes or undermines wellbeing
- Experience of wellbeing and response
Wellbeing Pathways: Summing Up

- A multi-dimensional model of wellbeing, comprising seven domains that span material, relational and personal factors
- A new concept of Inner Wellbeing: what people think and feel they are able to be and do
- Theory and methods based in research undertaken amongst resource-poor people in countries of the global south
- Measure of Inner Wellbeing statistically validated in two rural communities, Zambia and India
- An emphasis on how economic, social, political, relational, cultural and environmental contexts affect people’s experience of wellbeing
- A reflexive, mixed method approach which combines quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis with critical consideration of the way methods used shape results produced