Assessing Women’s Wellbeing in Rural Malawi: A Capabilities Index

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Rationale

• Growing interest in both academia and policy practice on
  – how to assess quality of life
  – how to monitor progress in society
• Debate on inadequacy of using standard methods for policy evaluation
• Public health programs are complex interventions
  – aim at improving the well-being of healthy individuals
  – generate health and non-health outcomes
• How do we assess the impact on overall wellbeing?
• What is wellbeing?
Context: MaiMwana Project

- Community-based participatory intervention
- Aim is to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality in rural Malawi
- Women are organized in groups to discuss, develop and implement strategies to overcome maternal and neonatal health issues
- Evaluated with a cRCT: MMR fell by 74% and NMR by 41%
- The cost of women's groups was US$114 per year of life lost (YLL) averted
- However, programme effects might impact many aspects of quality of life
- These effects should be included in the evaluation
Women’s Group Action Cycle

Phase 1: Identifying problems and prioritising them together
Meeting 1: Group formation
Meeting 2: Identifying maternal health problems
Meeting 3: Identifying neonatal health problems
Meeting 4: Identifying health problems from the rest of the community
Meeting 5: Prioritising problems
Meeting 6: Identifying contributing factors
Meeting 7: Identifying preventative and management activities
Meeting 8: Sharing discussions with men

Phase 2: Planning strategies together
Meeting 9: Identifying opportunities and barriers
Meeting 10: Identifying strategies
Meeting 11: Preparing for discussions with the whole community
Meeting 12: Sharing discussions with the whole community
Meeting 13: Planning the strategies
Meeting 14: Gathering resources
Meeting 15: Developing monitoring tools

Phase 3: Acting together
Meeting 16: Implementing strategies
Meeting 17: Preparing to evaluate
Meeting 18: Evaluating the group
Meeting 19: Evaluating the impact on the priority problems

Phase 4: Evaluating together
Meeting 20: Planning for the future
Malawi
How to develop a wellbeing index

1. Development of a theoretical framework: identify a set of dimensions relevant to the study and context

2. Development of a measurement model: selection of indicators and questionnaire design

3. Building a capability set for a sample of women
   - Household survey with 345 women of reproductive age

4. Weighting and aggregation of the capabilities into one index:
   - normative (participatory exercise and equal weights);
   - hybrid (ranking);
   - data-driven (principal component analysis);

5. Assessment of the validity and reliability of the instrument
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Theoretical framework

- 15 focus group discussions
- Sample stratified by:
  - rural/peri-urban; presence/absence of WG; age below/above 25 years
- Discussion organized in two sections:
  a) Responsive questioning to explore concepts of quality of life (what is good life, what is bad life, what do you value in life, why do you do what you do)
  b) Deliberative democratic process on the values, partial-ordering and ranking of the dimensions, using beans (from 0 to 10)
- Framework analysis
What women say about Good Life

“One should be nicely [clean] dressed, and should not fall sick often”

“The goodness of one's life is to have enough money”

“A person living a good life has no worries. When you have a peaceful mind everything goes well”

“Being in a peaceful marriage and well-fed means that you are a free person”

“Sometimes there are people who are in need, but they do not steal. They work hard and we look at them as living a good life. We regard those who steal as living a bad life”

“Being respected is good life because one gets help”
What women say about Bad Life

“Being beaten up, going without food, lacking clothes, yet having ten children you cannot take care of. This is bad life”
Theoretical framework

physical strength: being able to do physical work, having enough food, being able to avoid diseases, being able to space births

happiness: satisfaction, happiness

economic security: safety net, land, assets, business opportunities, coping with shocks

community relations: access services, feeling safe and comfortable in the village, social exclusion and discrimination, being respected

inner wellbeing: peace of mind, control over personal matters, free from oppression, living without shame, knowledge

household wellbeing: free from domestic violence, control over money, living in a decent house, house adequate, house adequate in future, children’s education, family care

GOOD LIFE
What women say about Physical strength

“If you have plenty of food, you are a free person. If one has food, is not getting sick now and again; if you lack food, you cannot work [in the field]... you have no energy. If people are strong, they have no worries; they work properly, and get money to buy other needs”

“It is possible for someone to have nothing; she may struggle to get things. But if that person maintains hygiene in the house she doesn't get sick”

“With un-spaced births women do not become healthy... Even the children do not grow properly, they become malnourished... Maternal deaths become inevitable and so recurrent infections”
What women say about Inner Wellbeing

“A person struggling with life is recognised by worries, and you can recognise them in a group because they feel out of place”

“People who practice witchcraft have a defective life. People always talk bad about them, so they lack peace of mind”

“Maybe you spend a lot of time doing casual labour without having some time to have fun”

“A person should be independent, because when sick she doesn't wait for someone to tell her what to do”

“The educated is able to see what is right and what is wrong”

“Having good conduct is more important than being healthy, one may have food, but if she is a brute, she is good for nothing”

“Sometimes people laugh at you; if you are too poor, they avoid you assuming you are there to beg”
What women say about Household Wellbeing

“A house should have a toilet, a bathing shelter, there should be a rubbish pit, and the house should be well taken care of”

“When people cooperate [in the household] it becomes easy to develop [prosper]. And you have a good life. You live peacefully in the home”

“If his [child] body is healthy, he is never absent from school... when a child is healthy parents have no worries”

“Men sometimes are just violent. You have done nothing wrong and they will just come to you and beat you up. This is lack of respect. Everybody deserves to be respected”
What women say about Community Relations

“If your friend is lacking something you can give him a hand. Some day he will do the same for you”

“Work hard so that you can get more support from the community”

“Associating with others such as in an organisation makes people lead to good life because you learn one or two new important things for living a good life. Living in isolation doesn't help”
What women say about Economic Security

“If one rears animals, she doesn't struggle; if she is broke, she can sell some”

“If I am doing some business, I will buy whatever for my children with my own means”
What women say about Happiness

“You can't be happy if you are always worried by poverty and thinking about the way out, you waste time doing small works, you don’t prosper”

“When you are a happy person you do forget problems, you are also loved by people and they usually like to come to your house”

“When you are hardworking, the house is full of happiness”

“A happy person becomes healthy and if you want to be happy, you have to be healthy”
Conclusion

- Wellbeing is complex and multidimensional, and includes subjective and objective elements
- The list of capabilities is remarkably similar to other lists: a unifying framework of core capabilities?
- People, even in low literacy contexts, can express abstract concepts and value judgments through a collective deliberative process
- Empowerment is a key determinant of good life
- In the majority of FGDs, being in control, being free and being independent emerged as key factors for achieving a good life
- Participants gave a value of 9 out of 10 to these dimensions
- Empowerment does matter to people, and cannot be overlooked when designing, implementing and evaluating social and development policies
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