

Well-being: a new development concept

Be well ...

Leading aid models focus on economic growth and poverty reduction. The well-being approach aims for more comprehensive change. A recent study designed tools for implementing this new concept.

In 1986, the United Nations' Declaration on the Right to Development defined development as 'a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals'. But has the international community really taken this human-centred definition to heart in its efforts to tackle deep and widespread poverty in developing countries?

There has certainly been a series of bold commitments made toward reducing poverty in recent years. These include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), slogans such as 'making poverty history' and strategies to eliminate poverty entirely. There has been a lot of discussion on 'human development', as well as national and global initiatives to assess progress by broader means than standard economic indicators.

The Thai government's national planning documents, for example, focus on poverty alleviation and improving the quality of life for its citizens so that 'sustainable development and well-being for all can be achieved'. And the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) chief statistician, Enrico Giovannini, recently said that 'progress must increasingly be measured against criteria more closely aligned with public aspirations and notions of what a better life means'.

But although there appears to be general agreement that the social and cultural dimensions of development must be taken into account, how this can be achieved is not clear. The MDGs are laudable and have measurable targets, but they are very much 'top-down' in approach. And, by

Summary

- Over the last two decades, various comprehensive approaches to development have been proposed that attempt to address the many different elements of change, including socio-economic, political and cultural factors.
- One such approach is human 'well-being', the subject of a seven-year, multidisciplinary research project. Although similar, it is different from the one-dimensional concept of happiness and similar trends that mainly focus on the individual.
- Well-being combines poverty with two other global development agendas: environmental and social/political sustainability.
- Contrary to some other broad approaches, the well-being research project tries to establish effective research methods, solid criteria and policy proposals at both the local and global levels, and has created a toolkit for implementing the concept.

fragmenting development into seven distinct objectives, they lack a coherent grassroots explanation of what can actually be done to reduce poverty given the local realities of development practice.

Dr Allister McGregor of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, UK, argues that international development needs a practical concept of well-being if it is to make progress in confronting chronic poverty and the interlinked challenges of conflict and sustainability. 'A well-being perspective changes how we think about development policy', McGregor says. 'It forces us to ask the big question, "How are we to live together in our neighbourhoods, and nation states, and in the global community"?'?

Well-being in developing countries

For the past seven years, McGregor has led Well-being in Developing Countries (WeD), a multidisciplinary research group based at the University of Bath, UK. WeD is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the UK's

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Imraguen celebrations in Mauretania

main public funding agency for social science. The group drew together perspectives on well-being from all areas of the social sciences to produce a conceptual synthesis. This became the framework of a methodology for empirical study. They then applied this methodology to select communities in four developing countries: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand.

‘We were keen to understand what people conceive of as well-being and how they act in pursuit of it’, McGregor explains. ‘To go beyond the macro statistics on growth, poverty and inequality and get a more fine-grained understanding of the distributions of resources and relationships that constitute the barriers to successful development in particular contexts. This is what development policy must engage in’.

The work of the group brought together four major bodies of thinking about development, each of which has been adopted with some success by developing countries and development agencies: theories of human need; Nobel laureate Amartya Sen’s ‘development as freedom’; the

‘participation’ and ‘livelihoods’ frameworks; and the work of social psychology on subjective well-being.

Building on these approaches and applying them to empirical fieldwork in specific rural and urban communities, the group has developed its own definition of well-being as a ‘state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one’s goals and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life’.

According to McGregor, ‘well-being, defined in this practical way, is a route back to coherence, re-establishing that each of the MDGs is intended to contribute to a broader purpose of promoting human well-being. The well-being framework enables the generation of evidence with which to challenge contemporary thinking and practice for international development’. In particular, he calls for the systematic integration of ‘well-being audits’ into development practice as a means of engaging with the realities of the lives of poor people.

The research programme of McGregor and his colleagues began by recognizing advances in the social science of





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development. But they took the view that these efforts tend to operate in debates relatively isolated from each other. This disjointedness has been reflected in development policy and practice, where new ideas have been put into action without sufficient connection made between them. Work on human need, capabilities and participation have all formed the basis for major efforts by international organizations, but they have not been ‘joined up’.

A central focus of WeD’s research programme has been to develop a better understanding of the relationship between ‘universal’ concepts and ‘local’ realities, and to explore how both these concepts and realities might contribute to more effective empirical study and policy formulation for poverty reduction.

The group argues for well-being as a universally relevant concept, but the practical framework should take account of local circumstances, relationships and meanings in understanding how different people in different locations and cultures are able to conceive of and pursue well-being. This approach offers a universal model that acknowledges the significance of the local.

The simplest cross-national finding of WeD’s work has been that the concept of well-being can indeed be regarded as universal. It has proved to be a comprehensible concept in all of the communities in which the research was carried out and the methodology was applied.

When defining well-being, WeD emphasizes a state of being that is continuously generated through conscious and subconscious participation in social, economic, political and cultural processes. This calls for taking account of three dimensions of an individual’s well-being:

- The material circumstances that they reach – and with which they seek to achieve future well-being.
- Their own subjective comprehensions of their current state of being – and their aspirations for the future.
- The way that both of these dimensions are given meaning through their relationships with others in society.

This view of well-being is not the one-dimensional concept of happiness. If you are happy but hungry, you cannot be described as experiencing well-being – nor if you are well fed but in conditions of servitude that render you unable to pursue your goals meaningfully.

Equally, well-being is not simply a matter of wealth: money does not ensure that all needs are met – for example, consider the need for significant personal relationships. Nor does it automatically guarantee satisfactory quality of life.

The WeD concept recognizes that people can be happy even in circumstances of material deprivation, but argues that it would be inaccurate to describe poor people who nevertheless achieve some level of happiness as experiencing well-being.

Competing ideas about well-being

A core argument that emerges from the WeD research is that although well-being tends to be perceived as focusing on ‘the individual’ (including in the work of Sen and many of the contemporary ‘happiness’ approaches), this is a limiting approach both for social research and for policies to address poverty and inequality.

Well-being is better understood, McGregor and his colleagues argue, as a profoundly social concept. A social concept of well-being is built on the key recognition that the well-being of the individual is only achievable through their relationships with others in society, and as such is interdependent with the ‘wellness’ of society.

This means that research and policy deliberations must simultaneously analyze the well-being outcomes that an individual achieves and the conditions in society that constitute the processes whereby people achieve – or fail to achieve – some degree of well-being.

A social concept of well-being also exposes the fact that not all visions of well-being and the strategies that people may wish to adopt to achieve it are compatible – or, more broadly, can be considered socially and politically sustainable.

Both research and policy must identify and confront the trade-offs of well-being. The WeD framework provides insight into the ways in which some concepts of well-being conflict with others and how, in some circumstances, the pursuit of well-being by some denies well-being to others.

This brings the poverty agenda together with the other major global agendas – environmental and social and political sustainability – into what McGregor describes as the one big question: ‘How are we to live together?’

Poverty – be it chronic hunger, child mortality or social exclusion – is a form of violence. WeD research confirms that poverty is a consequence of direct or indirect conflicts between competing visions of well-being and the different abilities of people to pursue it. Those with few resources and

little power don't have much chance to achieve well-being – rather, they struggle to avoid ill-being.

The hidden conflicts of poverty are only one step removed from overt conflict and lie at the heart of many of the outright conflicts in the developing world today. Poverty and its conflicts are indicators of a global order that is both socially and politically unsustainable.

'Given the increased sophistication of our systems of global governance and the resources available, this is not only a moral disaster, it is political folly', McGregor argues. 'Politicians are currently seeking to mobilize more money in the name of development and for poverty eradication. But a failure to use increased development funds more effectively to tackle poverty and improve people's prospects for well-being is a route to increasing conflict and is globally unsustainable'.

Putting it into practice

So what do the findings from this more humanized, well-being-oriented research say about aid agencies intent on reducing poverty in developing countries? The first step in

Measuring well-being

Several organizations are trying to develop workable measures of well-being. The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, for example, is intent on developing new measurements to capture more of Amartya Sen's agenda than is reflected in the Human Development Index. It 'aspires to build a more systematic methodological and economic framework to underlie poverty reduction. This will enable a world in which decision-makers are able to advance people's freedoms' (www.ophi.org.uk).

Also in the UK, but focused more on well-being in developed countries, Richard Layard of the Centre for Economic Performance in London continues to build a research agenda based on his 2005 book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. He is also active in 'happiness-promoting policies', such as tackling mental illness, addressing the emotional aspects of children's education and (in joint work with the Young Foundation) initiatives by local authorities to monitor and improve the happiness of the population in their area (http://cep.lse.ac.uk/_new/research/wellbeing/default.asp; <http://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/local-innovation/strands/wellbeing/wellbeing>).

At an international level, the OECD has launched a major project called Measuring the Progress of Societies, which aims 'to foster the development of sets of key economic, social and environmental indicators to provide a comprehensive picture of how the well-being of a society is evolving' (<http://www.oecd.org/progress>).

And in the Istanbul Declaration, the European Commission, the Organisation of Islamic Conferences, the United Nations, the UN Development Programme, UNICEF and the World Bank have all signed up to an OECD-led commitment to measure and foster the progress of societies – 'to improve policy making, democracy and citizens' well-being'. It remains to be seen whether a more coherent global approach to development can emerge from these commitments.

reorienting international development policies and aid strategies is to affirm a definition of development in terms of human well-being: 'Good development is the creation of the conditions in societies around the world in which all people can reasonably conceive of, pursue and expect to achieve their well-being'.

This emphasis on 'conditions' for the pursuit of well-being highlights two important points. The first is that governments in both developing and donor countries do not deliver well-being; men, women and children achieve this through their relationships with others in society. But governments do play an essential role in ensuring that the necessary conditions are in place so that people might reasonably expect to achieve well-being.

The second point is that in various stages of development in societies, the conditions for well-being will involve different roles for 'the state', 'the market' and 'civil society', and that these will then change as the society develops. More effective development policy, therefore, consists of making choices based on evidence from specific societies. This evidence will indicate the different roles that the state, the market and civil society might play in contributing to the conditions for well-being for everyone in that society.

This is not 'business as usual', characterized as it is by the fragmentation of the MDGs agenda around the different dimensions of poverty and the continued, uneven policy dominance of economics. Development agencies tend to suffer from 'goal displacement'. This occurs when a focus on specific but partial development objectives – such as achieving a specific economic growth rate or enrolling a particular percentage of children in formal education – results in the agency losing sight of the ultimate purpose of development.

Focusing on well-being requires development partners to consider changing their organizational structures and procedures in ways that protect against goal displacement. It urges the need to analyze and understand the social relationships – locally, nationally and globally – which deny people the possibility of well-being and result in patterns of persistent ill-being.

Well-being audits

Given their specific social, cultural and political characteristics and history, the institutions that create the conditions for well-being are different in each society. Therefore, aid agencies must maintain their capacity for informed country-specific analysis that can understand the changing conditions in the society and engage meaningfully in debates over its changing aid needs. More aid funds necessitate more capacity for critical, country-specific policy engagement.

The adoption of a practical definition of well-being calls for new indicators and new methodologies to generate evidence for more effective well-being-focused policy making. In particular, it is necessary to engage with the real lives of the people that development assistance is intended to affect.



Tools for investigating well-being

A comprehensive exploration of development processes and outcomes in a country requires different levels of investigation to comprehend the interplay of local realities and global forces. The WeD research framework integrates consideration of the macro-level with micro-level investigation of the well-being strategies of individuals and households in particular communities.

The WeD methodology consists of six interrelated research components. Conceptually, these six methods can be grouped in three pairs dealing with outcomes, structures and processes.

Outcomes:

- Resources and needs questionnaire: a specifically designed household survey to gather data on the needs that have been met and the resources individuals and households have available in their efforts to achieve their desired goals.
- Quality of life: a survey designed to measure the level of satisfaction or 'quality of life' that people are able to achieve – 'the outcome of the gap between people's goals and perceived resources, in the context of their environment, culture, values and experiences'.

Structures:

- Community profile: a report on local dimensions of social, economic, political and cultural structures, compiled using secondary data and ethnographic and participatory methods.
- Structures and well-being regimes: an exploration of the 'big structures' of political economy, policy and society, within which the communities, households and individuals are located.

Processes:

- Income and expenditure studies: monthly diaries collected over one year with a sample of households from different socio-economic backgrounds, designed to explore how resources are translated into incomes and expenditures.
- Process research: largely qualitative research focusing on how different individuals and households in different community contexts engage in processes that are key to their well-being.

See: www.welldev.org.uk/toolbox

McGregor and his colleagues advocate the adoption of well-being audits at different stages and levels of the policy process. The audits would assess whether 'in reality' policies are actually making the positive changes to the conditions for well-being that we theoretically expect.

An example of how they could work in practice is a 'reality check study' that the Swedish government has introduced to its development cooperation with Bangladesh. The study provides particular support for health, education and human rights/democracy. The pilot is described as a 'listening' study that over coming years will track changes in poor people's perception of primary health care and primary education services.

Well-being audits of this kind encourage the use of new methods to address the three dimensions of well-being:

- Needs assessments: taking account of a broader range of needs than are conventionally considered in the basic needs agenda, these assessments must determine what needs are being met and for whom.
- Resources and agency inquiries: to be able to act meaningfully in pursuit of goals depends on the resources an individual can command and the degree of freedom they can exercise to translate these resources into valued goals. These inquiries, therefore, must seek to understand what different resources people are able to marshal – including physical, human and social capital – and the extent to which these resources enable them to formulate and meaningfully pursue goals.
- Quality of life: we must use methods that allow us to identify what people regard as their own goals and priorities and assess the degree of satisfaction that people have in achieving them.

Governance and the design of public policy


Because people have different views of what well-being entails and how it should be reached, social development inevitably entails conflicts. The challenge for governance and public policy design in developing countries is in recognizing and dealing with these conflicts.

Most wealthy countries have long histories of turbulent conflict and struggles for rights. This continues in a globalizing world. In many developing countries, a basic and fundamental challenge for government and public policy is upholding the rights of the poor. And it is important that the views of the poor on their well-being contribute to debates over national aspirations and policies.

The UK government's 2006 white paper on international development argued that governance is fundamental to making development work for the poor. The WeD research affirms that view and takes it one step further: all public policy in developing countries must be designed in such a way that it contributes to effective governance.

Such policies must also contribute to the transition of poor people in developing countries from being clients to being citizens. In other words, development aid must change from service delivery (to clients) to creating conditions and catalyzing political action (by citizens).

McGregor concludes, 'we must continue to build policy systems and processes that are better informed by people's aspirations and satisfactions with their quality of life. If we are to learn to live together at any level of community, whether neighbourhood or globe, then a fundamental requirement is that we build integrated systems of inclusive democratic participation, which connect debates over well-being from the grassroots through to those in the highest global fora'. ■

 A longer version of this article can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu.