

# Wellbeing, Poverty and Conflict

*"Wellbeing is 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."*

## Key Points

- International Development needs a practical concept of wellbeing if it is to reach and go beyond the Millennium Development Goals to confront the major and inter-linked challenges of poverty, conflict and sustainability.
- Poverty is a form of violence that arises from conflicts between competing visions of wellbeing.
- A wellbeing perspective changes how we think about development policy and forces us to ask: 'How are we to live together in our neighbourhoods, and nation states, and in the global community?'
- We argue for the systematic integration of **wellbeing audits** into development practice as a means of engaging with the realities of the lives of poor people.

International Development needs a practical concept of wellbeing if it is to reach and then go beyond the Millennium Development Goals. It enables us to address the major and interlinked challenges of poverty, conflict and sustainability that confront us both in specific development contexts and globally.

The Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) was funded by the UK ESRC to research the relationship between poverty, inequality and quality of life. Despite some global economic success and growth for some developing countries, poverty persists and even has deepened for many people in global society. While there is considerable consensus on this view, there is much less willingness to grasp the nettle of explaining why this is so and what can be done about it.

This paper argues for the adoption of a practical concept of wellbeing and the integration of **wellbeing audits** into all levels of development policy processes.

Poverty, whether experienced in chronic hunger, child mortality, or social exclusion is a form of violence. It results in harms to people. The WeD research confirms that poverty is a consequence of direct or indirect conflicts between competing visions of wellbeing and the different abilities of people to pursue their wellbeing

objectives. Those with least resources and power have little chance to achieve wellbeing and mainly struggle only to escape illbeing. 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.

Politicians are currently seeking to mobilise 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 wellbeing is a route to increasing conflict and is globally unsustainable.

The WeD research recognised that there is insufficient coherence in the ideas that underpin contemporary development policy and practice. Incoherence is one reason for the often disappointing outcomes of development policy efforts. Wellbeing, defined in the practical and operationalisable way indicated above, is a route to greater coherence and enables the generation of evidence with which to challenge contemporary thinking and practice for international development.

## Wellbeing Research

The work of the Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) consisted of two phases: one of conceptual review and consolidation and the other of applying this in empirical fieldwork in four developing countries: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand.

The conceptual 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. These were: theories of human need; Amartya Sen's 'Development as Freedom'; the participation and livelihoods frameworks; and the work of social psychology on subjective wellbeing. All of these address the issue of human wellbeing but each focuses on different, albeit related, aspects of wellbeing.

The WeD Group has synthesised this conceptual work to develop a single operational definition of wellbeing that is given overleaf. This definition incorporates both objective and subjective dimensions of wellbeing, recognising that both objective and subjective conditions must be met if we are to experience wellbeing and also that wellbeing is a social state which we experience in society through our relationships to others.

### Box 1: Mixed Development and the Emergence of Conflicts

Wellbeing, as defined here, requires us to look beyond economic growth, beyond human development, and beyond democratic governance. In the course of the study, the research group has monitored the recent effects of the shifting development agenda in the four countries. The record of economic growth and human development in the four countries since 1990 is mixed. Bangladesh has achieved notable improvements in economic and human development while Ethiopia has stagnated in both. Of the middle income countries, Thailand's economic growth has been strong alongside slower human development improvements, whereas Peru has had modest human development improvements but with a stagnant economy.

In political terms three of the four countries (Peru excepted) emerged from military rule at the start of the 1990s and proto-democratic processes were ushered in. However, in the last few years the democratic record of each has become tarnished. At the start of 2007, elections in Bangladesh were cancelled and a state of emergency imposed. In Ethiopia the government has imprisoned opposition leaders and is leaning heavily on dissent. In Thailand, the richest of the four countries, a military coup in 2006 ousted the *Thaksin* government, twice elected by popular majorities. At the same time a civil war has opened up in the country's four southernmost provinces. Only Peru has maintained its democratic credentials intact but these only with a chorus of discontent and rumours of the revival of *Sendero Luminoso*. What is common across all four of the countries is that, despite their varying development successes, they are all failing to cope with the conflicts which their development processes have generated.

This view of wellbeing is **not** the uni-dimensional concept of happiness. If you are happy but hungry, you cannot be described as experiencing wellbeing, nor can one be described as enjoying wellbeing if you are well fed but in conditions of servitude that mean you are unable to act meaningfully in pursuit of your goals. Equally, wellbeing is **not** simply a matter of wealth: money does not assure that all needs will be met (for example, the need for significant personal relationships), nor does it automatically guarantee a satisfactory quality of life.

The definition is practical and has been translated into a programme of empirical research in developing countries. The ideas contained in this definition were developed and used in partnership with colleagues in the four countries to carry out detailed studies in specific rural and urban communities. The research studied the conditions that explained why poverty persists for some people while others are able to achieve some degrees of wellbeing (for more detail see p4).

## What to do Differently

So what does the experience of this research suggest that we should do differently?

The first step in reorienting international development policies and aid strategies is to affirm a definition of development in terms of human wellbeing:

*"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 wellbeing".*

This emphasis on 'conditions' for the pursuit of wellbeing makes two initial, important points:

**First**, that government does not deliver wellbeing; men, women and children achieve this through their relationships with others in society. But government plays an essential role in ensuring that the conditions are in place within which people might reasonably expect to achieve it.

**Second**, that in different societies at different stages of development the conditions for wellbeing 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-making, therefore, consists of making choices based on evidence from specific societies which indicates the different roles that 'the state', 'the economy' and 'civil society' might play in contributing to the conditions for wellbeing for the men, women and children of that society.

This is **not** 'business as usual'. Development agencies tend to suffer from 'goal displacement'. This occurs where a focus on specific but partial development objectives (such as achieving a particular rate of economic growth or enrolling a particular percentage of children in formal education) results in the agency losing sight of what the ultimate purpose of the development is. Focusing on human wellbeing requires development partners to consider changing organisational

structures and procedures in ways that guard against 'goal displacement'.

### Box 2: Wellbeing, Markets and Good Governance

It is not enough just to consider whether markets are working efficiently, but we must consider whether markets are working efficiently in ways that support wellbeing and challenge illbeing. The WeD research affirms that while well-functioning markets can be conducive to the pursuit of wellbeing, in some societal contexts the effective functioning of markets may work against wellbeing. Financial markets illustrate this well. In many developing countries the fact that poor people have little or no access to savings and credit facilities and that financial markets function poorly, is an important part of the conditions that result in illbeing for many. However, the rapid development of Thailand strikes a note of caution. For some people, credit markets function too well, to the extent that many respondents in our studies reported the pressures they experienced to access credit and that indebtedness was a major cause of impoverishment, a source of worry and a major detraction from their achievement of a satisfactory quality of life.

The idea of 'good governance' can be interrogated in the same way. It is not just whether systems of governance conform to the ideals of multi-party democracy, but whether they are doing so in a way that is conducive to the wellbeing of poor people. The WeD research in Bangladesh reveals how over-attention to the formal aspects of a system of multi-party democracy can cause us to overlook the negative grassroots dynamics of this and their implications for the wellbeing of poor rural people (see WeD Briefing Paper 08/3).

### New Skills and New Evidence

The combination of institutions that create the conditions for wellbeing will be different in different societies given their specific social, cultural and political characteristics and history. So aid agencies must maintain their capacity for informed country-specific analysis which is able to understand the changing conditions at play in the society, and is able to meaningfully engage in debates over the changing aid needs of those societies. More aid funds necessitate more capacity for critical, country-specific policy engagement.

The adoption of a practical definition of wellbeing calls for the development of new indicators and new methodologies with which to generate evidence for more effective wellbeing-focussed policy making (see WeD Briefing Paper 08/2). In particular it is necessary to engage with the real lives of the people that development assistance is intended to affect - we advocate the adoption of **wellbeing audits** at different stages and levels of the policy process. The purpose of these audits would be to assess whether 'in reality' policies are actually making the positive changes to the conditions for wellbeing that we theoretically expect them to.

These **wellbeing audits** encourage the use of new methods with which to address the three dimensions of wellbeing outlined in the definition:

**1. 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.

**2. Resources and Agency Inquiries:** To be able to act meaningfully in pursuit of goals depends on the resources one is able to command and the degree of freedom one can exercise to translate these resources into valued goals. These inquiries, therefore, must seek to understand what different resources people are able to command and the extent to which these resources enable them to formulate goals and act meaningfully in pursuit of them.

**3. Quality of Life:** It is necessary to use methods which allow us to identify what people regard as their own goals and priorities and then to assess the degree of satisfaction that people have in achieving these (WeD Briefing Paper 08/2).

### Implications for Governance and Public Policy Design

Researching wellbeing exposes the fact that different people hold different particular views of what wellbeing entails and how it should be reached. This means that societal development inevitably entails conflicts. The challenge for governance and public policy design in developing countries then is how it recognises and deals with these conflicts.

In most wealthy, developed countries, there are long histories of turbulent conflict and struggles for rights. These struggles continue in a globalising world. In many developing countries a basic and fundamental challenge for government and for public policy is to ensure that the rights of the poor are upheld. In the absence of revolution, it is important that their views on their wellbeing contribute to debates over national aspirations and policies.

The UK White Paper on International Development of 2006 argued that governance is fundamental to making development work for the poor. This 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 (see WeD Briefing Paper 08/4). 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 wellbeing from the grassroots through to those in the highest global fora.

### Written by

Dr. J. Allister McGregor (j.a.mcgregor@bath.ac.uk)



## The WeD Programme

WeD is a multidisciplinary research group dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in poor countries. The research group is based at the University of Bath and has an extensive network of overseas academic associates as well as specific research partnerships with institutes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. The initial research programme began in October 2002 and researched rural and urban communities in the four countries. The main fieldwork for the initial research took place over a period of approximately 18 months.



The purpose of the research programme was to develop conceptual and methodological tools for investigating and understanding the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in specific countries. The practical definition of wellbeing that the WeD group has developed through its work over the last five years is that:

*"Wellbeing is 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."*

Research into wellbeing involves exploring the extent to which people can achieve this state of being, and the social conditions that either enable or block this possibility.

This is a hybrid definition that differs from many of the ways the term wellbeing is currently used in academic and policy discourse. It combines both objective and subjective conceptions and transcends them by recognizing the way each is socially constructed. This defini-

tion means that any attempt to assess wellbeing or to understand the processes that affect it must take account of three dimensions of peoples' lives: the material, the relational and the affective/cognitive.

## Researching Wellbeing

WeD has developed a suite of research tools in order to research wellbeing. This toolbox comprises six distinct but interconnected research components. Each of these is intended to generate data on key elements of the WeD conceptual framework or the connections between the elements. The six methods can be grouped into three pairs dealing with outcomes, structures and processes.

**1 Outcomes** - studying outcomes for persons and households both objectively and subjectively

- a) Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ)
- b) Quality of Life (WeDQoL)

**2 Structures** - understanding the collectivities within which social human beings seek to achieve wellbeing, from the level of the community through the nation state to global structures.

- a) Community Profiles
- b) Structures and Wellbeing Regimes

**3 Processes:** investigating the processes that people engage in as they attempt to achieve wellbeing.

- a) Income and Expenditure Studies
- b) Process Research

More information on this methods toolbox can be found at <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/methods-toobox/toolbox-intro.htm>

## WeD Working Paper Series

A series of on-line working papers that illustrate the fundamental strategies behind the research programme and discuss the findings can be found at: [www.welldev.org.uk/research/working.htm](http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/working.htm). Print versions are available by contacting: [wed@bath.ac.uk](mailto:wed@bath.ac.uk)

## Selected WeD Publications

- Chambers, R. (1997) 'Editorial: Responsible Well-being' *World Development*. 25(11): 1743-1754.
- Gough, I. and McGregor, J.A. (2007) *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McGregor, J.A. (2004) 'Researching Well-Being: Communicating Between the Needs of Policy Makers and the Needs of People.' *Global Social Policy*. 4(3): 337-358.
- Picciotto, R. (2005) 'The Evaluation of Policy Coherence for Development' *Evaluation*. 11: 311-330.

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries.



[www.welldev.org.uk](http://www.welldev.org.uk)  
[wed@bath.ac.uk](mailto:wed@bath.ac.uk)  
 Tel +44 (0) 1225 384514

Wellbeing in Developing Countries  
 ESRC Research Group  
 3 East 2.30  
 University of Bath, BA2 7AY, UK