Briefing Paper 4/08

Social Policy for Sustainable Wellbeing

"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

- We need a vision of social policy for sustainable well-being, rather than a set of discrete social programmes

- Developing countries should develop their own social policy analysis, adapting the WeD framework of welfare regimes, rather than import Western analysis wholesale

- A social policy for sustainable wellbeing will encourage and empower broad-based social movements and work to transform existing informal arrangements which can prolong dependence

- Social policies must be rooted and grow in local soils: there are no 'One-Size-Fits-All' policies.

The contribution that social policy can make to improving society is being rediscovered in the developing world. At the same time its role is being questioned in the welfare states of the rich world, primarily in response to climate change and other questions around sustainability. Across the world there is a new interest in social policies for sustainable wellbeing.

In the developing world, global agencies promulgate a restricted notion of social policy, if any. There is a renewed interest in social *programmes*, but less in a comprehensive social *policy* to constrain inequalities and enhance wellbeing.

Much of this thinking is dominated by 'Northern' models; specific social programmes are advocated by aid agencies with inadequate regard for the diverse national and local realities that wellbeing research uncovers. Most developing countries are far removed from welfare states; at best they depend upon informal mechanisms of security which can perpetuate clientelism; at worst, they are zones of extreme insecurity.

The wellbeing approach sets out a method for developing countries to own their social policy *analysis* and to build capacity to research it. To develop sensible policies at the national level this means the following sort of analytical process:

- Map the 'welfare mix' - the entire set of institutions that are intended to enhance human security and meet needs, including those not only of the state, but communities, households and international actors.

- Study local goals and individual (dis)satisfactions of people

- Understand the relationships which determine access to this welfare mix

- And thus begin to predict the unintended wellbeing consequences of top-down policy initiatives.

In terms of social policy *design* this means the following. The first aim should be to tackle existing informal dependencies on patrons and power-brokers whilst not harming wellbeing in the process. Second, social policy should enable and empower the broader-based social movements which will ultimately press for transformative social policies based on a broad-based social contract.

Thus third, social programmes require a dual evaluation: they should meet basic needs and empower people. Outsiders need to show more modesty; countries need to undertake their own analysis and design of social policies. Above all social policies must be rooted and grow in local soils. Imported policies will not necessarily improve wellbeing and will have unintended consequences.

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Rethinking Social Policy in Developing Countries

Social policy came to fruition in Europe and the OECD world in the 20th century. Many of the welfare and security needs of individuals have come to be provided through formal 'welfare states', embracing a combination of pensions and social protection benefits, rights to collective services such as health and education, and labour market regulation. In most of the OECD world spending on these items accounts for over one half of the entire public budget and one quarter of GDP. Of course such state activities are embedded in financial and other markets and family/household systems: the resulting ensemble is usually dubbed a welfare state regime.

In many poor developing countries much of this does not apply. Well-functioning labour and financial markets are not pervasive; states have problems of legitimacy and are unable to raise sufficient fair taxes. This limits the capacity of the state to compensate for the inequitable outcomes of imperfect markets in highly unequal societies. Some entitlements to welfare may be found (in some instances, securely) in the informal domains of social relationships and cultural expectations, but these can perpetuate dependency on patrons and power-brokers. This ensemble we label an informal security regime.

There is increasing interest in social policies to support development, for two main reasons. On the one hand, economic development brings in its wake new risks of social disintegration, social exclusion and human insecurity. On the other hand, there is recognition of the productive role that social policies can play in developing market economies, by investing in human capital and collective resources. For these reasons both governments and international agencies are keen to integrate active social policies into development strategies.

But there are three qualifications. First, we must distinguish diverse social programmes (which can have varied goals, including nothing to do with welfare or wellbeing) from social policy. Social policy emerged in the 20th century to challenge purely economic, market-driven goals. Social policies assert collective goals, social rights of citizenship and broad social contracts. As an academic field of study social policy provides a counterweight to rational choice theory in economics, which defines individual desire as the sole measure of value.

Second, so much social policy thinking in the 'South' is dominated by 'Northern' models which are inappropriate in the very different contexts of informal or insecurity regimes. There are indeed lessons to be learned from the real history of the emergence of 'welfare states' in Europe and elsewhere. But these are histories of long struggles, political mobilisations and pre-emptive strategies – miles removed from the bland 'policy lessons' fostered by many international agencies. Significant social programmes, like the National Health Service or Social Insurance, have almost always emerged after protracted struggles between classes and social groups with divergent interests and power – or are introduced by forward-looking elites aware of this who wish to defuse conflict. Yet this history is often overlooked by policy makers and advisors in developing countries.

Moreover, third, the Northern model of 'growth+welfare' itself is having to face and adapt to new issues. Climate change and other dilemmas of sustainability pose new questions about economic growth as the meta-goal of public policy. In the past growth has been broadly perceived as a win-win means to accomplish other goals – now it may threaten them. This needed shift from growth+welfare to sustainable wellbeing will link more closely thinking about social policy in South and North.

Researching Wellbeing Regimes in Developing Countries: the WeD Approach

What difference then does a wellbeing approach make to social policies in developing countries? If the lessons are that there are no general policy prescriptions this does not mean there are no lessons! Rather what is needed is a new form of social policy analysis and evaluation suited to developing countries, which can be owned by groups and actors within those countries. To do this at the national level we have developed and used a *wellbeing regime* framework, from which we draw three lessons.

1. Map the welfare mix

The welfare mix describes the entire pattern of resources and programmes that can in principle rectify insecurity and enhance wellbeing in a society. These include: local communal practices, non-governmental organisations, informal markets, household livelihood strategies including migration and remittances, and the actions and interventions of intergovernmental organisations, transnational corporations, INGOs and informal networks. We label this the welfare mix (though in parts of the world a more accurate term would be illfare mix). Box 1 illustrates the welfare mix using our research in the four countries. This mapping draws on the "wellbeing audits" proposal (see WeD Briefing Paper 08/1).

2. Study relationships

In many parts of most developing nations people and families rely heavily upon community and family relationships to meet their security needs. Where states are 'captured' their coordinating role is frequently taken by networks of power brokers at the national and local levels, as our case study of Bangladesh illustrates (WeD Briefing Paper 08/3). There is a wide gulf between ideal models and the everyday reality which a wellbeing approach uncovers (WeD Briefing Papers 08/1 and 08/2). These relationships are usually hierarchical and asymmetrical: they can provide informal rights and afford some measure of informal security, but often at the cost of longer-term dependency.

3. Understand the strategies poor people use

Poor people must strategise to improve their wellbeing and to do this they must negotiate the welfare mix they face. Different welfare regimes in our research countries generate different strategies, as a comparison of access to food assistance programmes shows. The huge scale of food programmes in Ethiopia provide relief but are perceived as unfair and destabilise agricultural markets. The persistence of strong 'cadres' down to the *kebele* level avoid the corruption present in Bangladesh but reinforce dependency on the state. In Peru, nutrition programmes legitimise governments but provide tiny material benefits. But in all the countries people must utilise relationships to augment, or substitute for, rules.

In conclusion, the wellbeing perspective argues that social policies must grow in local soils and adapt to national welfare regimes. To develop sensible policies at the national level this means the following sort of analytical process:
- Situate aid and social policies in the wider welfare mix
- Study local goals and individual (dis)satisfactions of people
- Understand the role of relationships in determining access to this welfare mix
- And thus begin to predict the unintended consequences of top-down policy initiatives

Social Policies for Sustainable Wellbeing

What does this concretely mean for social policy to enhance and sustain wellbeing?

The first aim is to undermine dependence on informal security accessed through patrons and power-brokers whilst not harming wellbeing in the process. This means establishing more formal social rights to security and wellbeing, and enhancing the rule of law and civil rights. Procedural and social rights go hand-in-hand.

Second, the task of social policy should be to enable and empower the broader-based social movements which will ultimately press for sustainable wellbeing. A wellbeing approach recognises the constraints people labour within but rejects arguments that they constitute a cage from which there is no escape. For example, we demonstrate the desire of most people for greater autonomy - even in societies and cultures characterised by strong relations of dependence; research also reveals the ongoing efforts of people to manoeuvre around these constraints, through creative management of their resources and cultivation of alternative relationships.

Third, this does not mean that all 'traditional' social programmes should be curtailed. Another lesson from social struggles in the North is that rights-based policies to meet needs can both provide short-term alleviation of critical importance to poor people and enhance capabilities to press for improvements. Therefore, social policies should be transformative - they should be judged according to how far they meet individual needs, and how far they empower deprived groups.

These social policies must be rooted and grow in local soils. Imported policies will not necessarily improve wellbeing and will have unintended consequences.

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Box 1. The welfare mix

The table below summarises some of the key features of the different welfare mixes in the four WeD research countries.

	Ethiopia	Bangladesh	Peru	Thailand
National and local government	Dominant role of aid. Growing government attempts to harmonise aid. Limited health, growing education programmes.	Dominant role of donors and NGOs in past. Now government formalising the relationship. Rising social expenditure.Complex public works and relief programmes.	Liberal state reforms including limited decentralisation. Some rise in social expenditure, plus new assistance and employment programmes.	Expanding state rights to education and health (2002 reforms), but limited social protection.'Well-being' discourse now emerging in national plans.
International governmental actors	Critical role. Aid = 1/3 government budget. A shift from famine and emergency aid to 'productive' services. Funding increasingly tied to good governance and human rights. Decline in budget support aid.	Aid very substantial since independence. Now reducing but still 2.4% GDP in 2005.	Aid becoming marginal in 00s but influence on programme design	Now vestigial role, except for period after 1997 crisis
Market/ Business	Private health, education and savings provision for elite and middle classes			
Community/ NGOs	Burial societies (*idir*) widespread some with health role. Religious and savings institutions. Informal care via clans and religious groups.	Huge role of NGOs - 1200+, many financed from aid. Some very large: BRAC, PROSHIKA, with wide remit. Traditional community provision for needy: (*zakat, fitra)* of unknown extent.	Vibrant community institutions in rural & urban areas: *fiestas, faenas*: collective infrastructure works. Church charities. NGOs, weakened by falling aid.	Traditional *Baan* (village) role; religious-based organisations; state-led savings groups, recent rise of local NGOs
Family/kin	Migration for begging or work of males, or whole families.	Substantial role of kinship: Industrialisation and migration to Dhaka offer new scope for mixed livelihoods.	Migration and formation of new urban squatting communities. Maintenance of Andean links.	Thai family model: mixed household portfolios with pluri-activity, diversification, internal migration, commuting, internal remittances
International household strategies	Steady migration and remittances important.	Past and present migration: fast growth of remittances (6% GDP by 2005).	High rates of emigration and remittances.	Out-migration and remittances small

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 recog-

nizing the way each is socially constructed. This definition 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.*
Print versions are available by contacting: wed@bath.ac.uk

Selected WeD Publications

De Haan, A. (2007) *Reclaiming Social Policy.* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Gough, I. and McGregor, J. A. (2007) *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Gough, I. (2008) 'European welfare states: explanations and lessons for developing countries'. In Dani, A. and de Haan, A. (eds.) *Institutions for Inclusive States.* Washington DC: World Bank.

Wood, G. and Gough, I. (2006) A comparative welfare regime approach to global social policy. *World Development* 34(10): 1696–1712.

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