

**Does wellbeing travel?**  
**Debating universalism and cultural difference in understandings of wellbeing**

**10 February 2012, Bath, UK**

**Small Group Discussion: Forms of Enquiry**

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**Rapporteur's summary of discussion:**

**Key quotes** (from morning presentations):

*"Not everything is articulable"* – Laura Camfield

*"You may ask about health and you get god"* – Sarah White

**Key words:** power, livelihoods, health, vulnerability, resilience, quality of life, wellbeing in practice.

**Key issues identified and areas that need to be considered before 'enquiring':**

- i) Whose agenda matters most?
- ii) Who defines the agenda of enquiry?
- iii) How are we being measured, what forms of enquiry are used, e.g. abstract versus specific measurements?
- iv) Who is doing the measuring?
- v) Local versus imposed concerns / Ideology and power – how are these expressed?

How are local conceptions of wellbeing understood? Do people even have the space to reflect on how they are living, how they feel? For example, Catalina comments in relation to her home country Columbia, *"We are surviving, not living... we make jokes about our poverty to cope with it. It does not mean we are well."*

Development discourse is focused around growth, GDP, or capita but is failing to ask, "growth of what for whom?" Therefore, how can a wellbeing approach be used to widen this?

### **Limitations of wellbeing in practice:**

- Different standards of measurement
- Project driven by the needs of the development agencies (and may not necessarily reflect the local reality).
- Framing the project
- Researcher position
- Donor funding
- Creating categories (and excluding others) can create inequity. For example, a development focus on orphans or HIV patients in an area where all children are suffering extreme poverty or where basic health-care facilities are lacking for all people.

### **Wellbeing in practice**

Need to consider wellbeing criteria – the balance between universal or flexible, context-specific domains.

Gives rise to the need to consider;

- **place** more carefully – the cultural context, local versus imposed needs and values.
- who decides on these criteria – participants or researcher? The researcher as facilitator only?

The concept of wellbeing may be universal but its expression (meanings and values) is contextual.

Also, wellbeing can't be everything. Need to clearly define wellbeing and then look at what affects it. Wellbeing questions need to address elements/drivers/indicators that impact the pursuit and/or fulfilment of wellbeing.

The difference between quality of life, happiness and wellbeing: Happiness doesn't mean wellbeing. It is not enabling or sustainable. It doesn't mean if you are happy that you necessarily have wellbeing.

Wellbeing enquiries should be a deliberative process, 'creating conversation' rather than 'list-creating.' Wellbeing interviews are a representation of self.

Together but separate: Depending on how the question is asked can elicit personal/individual or collective responses.

The group also considered the possibility of more innovative methods, including the possible role for participant observation in generating deeper, contextual understandings and a truer representation?

### **Wellbeing in policy – factors to consider:**

The risk of reifying wellbeing. Wellbeing is not about fixing something but creates conversation...and potential for co-construction...

The need to manage togetherness and separateness in society.

Wellbeing is dynamic – engages complexity.

**Key questions for wellbeing in policy and practice (rather than answers!):**

- Ideology and power – how are these expressed?
- Are we reifying wellbeing?
- How do we take responsibility for what we're measuring?
- What level do we measure at - The universal versus the local – importance of place/cultural context
- Are we engaging in reductionism or is it relative?
- Growth of what and for whom?