Introduction

1 Theorising wellbeing in international development

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1.1 Development and wellbeing

At first sight it appears incongruous to discuss wellbeing in relation to developing countries. Most often, and properly, our attention and concern is for the many people who experience suffering as a consequence of their poverty. However, there are a number of reasons why it is important to confront this apparent incongruity. The first is to acknowledge the fully rounded humanity of poor men, women and children in developing countries; recognising that they are not completely defined by their poverty, nor can they be fully understood in its terms alone. Poor people in developing countries strive to achieve wellbeing for themselves and their children. For the poorest, and in the worst instances, this will largely be a struggle to limit the extent of their illbeing and suffering. But even alongside deprivations, poor men, women and children are able to achieve some elements of what they conceive of as wellbeing, as Biswas-Diener and Diener (2001) demonstrate; without this, we would argue, their lives would be unbearable. Furthermore, it is striking that the non-poor in developing countries can often experience what appear to be high levels of life satisfaction. Wellbeing is far from an irrelevant concept in the study of international development.

From this perspective the notion of poverty (or rather poverties) has a number of limitations and the literature around it is becoming increasingly complex and to some extent muddled. There are discussions and debates over many different types of poverty; from consumption to income poverty; to poverty defined in terms of the human development index or by social exclusion. Poverty can be relative or it can be absolute. The argument that will be advanced in this volume is that 'wellbeing' (including its inevitable obverse of illbeing) is a wider concept that can usefully encompass and connect these debates

over different types of poverty. The volume does not argue that we abandon concepts of poverty; they all have their different analytical and policy uses, but that we locate them in a wider discourse about wellbeing.

Current efforts to champion notions of multidimensional poverty reflect wider shifts in thinking about international development. Over time the global community has in effect been moving towards conceiving 'development' as the organised pursuit of human wellbeing. This has involved broadening the notion of development from a narrow economic conception, to encompass human development and wider ideals such as participation and freedom. At its broadest and most utopian, the objective of international development could be described as the creation of conditions where all people in the world are able to achieve wellbeing. Thus the purpose of development policies and the *raison d'être* of governments and the agencies that generate and implement the specific policies and programmes, is to work to establish those preconditions in different societies. The Millennium Goals Declaration can be seen as motivated by a minimal version of such a radical goal.

Of course, this all begs the question: what do we mean by wellbeing? The older English term 'welfare' can be traced back to at least the fourteenth century, when it meant to journey well and could indicate both happiness and prosperity (Williams 1983). In the twentieth century it gradually came to be associated with the assessment of and provision for needs in the welfare state, and acquired an increasingly objective, external interpretation. But in the latter decades of the century new discourses on agency, participation, and multidimensional views of poverty paved the way for a reinvention of the older notion of wellbeing, which can be traced back to Aristotle and the Buddha. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the nature of wellbeing is by no means agreed. The new edition of the usually concise and parsimonious *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Honderich 2005) has difficulty in defining its meaning: 'Variously interpreted as ''living and faring well'' or ''flourishing'', the notion of wellbeing is intricately bound up with our ideas about what constitutes human happiness and the sort of life it is good to lead'.

This suggests that wellbeing is an umbrella concept, embracing at least 'objective wellbeing' and 'subjective wellbeing' (SWB), although as we shall see later in the volume this very distinction is contentious and potentially problematic. Gasper in Chapter 2 defines the former as 'externally approved, and thereby normatively endorsed, non-feeling features of a person's life, matters such as mobility or morbidity'; and

SWB as 'feelings of the person whose wellbeing is being estimated'. He goes on to make finer distinctions between seven categories and eleven subcategories of wellbeing, including 'wellbeing as activity' (Bruton 1997). The conclusion of his and our mapping work is to accept plurality; wellbeing is still a novel category in applied social science, such that no settled consensus on its meaning has yet emerged.[1] It is, however, a useful term, beneath which a variety of related ideas and concepts can shelter.

We will argue here for a conception of wellbeing that takes account of the objective circumstances of the person and their subjective evaluation of these. But both the objective circumstances and perceptions of them are located in society and also in the frames of meaning with which we live. Thus wellbeing is also and necessarily both a relational and a dynamic concept. States of wellbeing/illbeing are continually produced in the interplay within the social, political, economic and cultural processes of human social being. It cannot be conceived just as an outcome, but must be understood also as a process.

Across the social science disciplines there are many diverse contributions to contemporary debates over wellbeing. At the same time the term has a potentially important communicative function to play for both the social sciences and for policy discourses. The intention of this book is to provide a space for some of this interdisciplinary debate about what we mean by wellbeing and what its relevance is for both academic study and policy.

Inasmuch as it evokes competing visions about what it might mean to live well, wellbeing must be considered in relation to wider conceptions of *development* as 'good change' (cf. Chambers 1997). But understandings of and prescriptions for development depend on and change with dominant conceptions of wellbeing. The dominant conception in the modern, post-war development era has been an economic one – wellbeing comprises the material resources people control and can utilise and dispose of, measured by income and at aggregate levels by national income per head. But as we have indicated, over the last two decades this has been challenged at the level of conceptual argument and, equally important, measures and indicators. This book is structured around three particular challenges and seeks to relate them to each other and build from them.

[1] Amartya Sen uses 'wellbeing' in a distinct way to refer to 'a person's being seen from the perspective of her own personal welfare', as contrasted with 'agency goals', which can include other goals such as pursuing the welfare of others (Sen 1993: 35–6). This usage does not appear to be a common one and we shall not follow it here.

From money poverty to human development

First, the idea of development has been extended from economic to human development. This has long been a theme of heterodox writers, critics and activists from Gandhi through Dudley Seers, ul Haq and others, but undoubtedly it was the welfare economist and Nobel prize-winner Amartya Sen who played a notable role in placing such ideas on the global agenda in the last quarter of the last century. Sen disputed that command over commodities or income could provide an adequate space within which to assess wellbeing or poverty. This was to confuse a means with more basic ends, and to grasp the latter, new concepts were required. Sen initially identified the ends of human life as human capabilities and functionings – what people are notionally able to do and to be, and what they have actually been able to do and to be. At the most general level we should thus evaluate the extent of people's freedom to live the kind of life which they have reason to value (see Robeyns 2005 for a clear introduction to his approach).

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000) has taken the idea further to embrace numerous non-economic aspects of life such as the expression of imagination and emotions, affiliation and play. In 1991, Doyal and Gough contributed an alternative theory of basic human needs and identified health and autonomy as universal prerequisites for wellbeing, whatever is our more substantive notion of wellbeing. Both they and Nussbaum espouse a universal list of basic needs/capabilities, which is open to variable expression in different contexts. The last decade of the last century saw a renewed interest in these ideas. Since 1990, the annual Human Development Reports have monitored international progress in meeting a range of basic needs and extending basic capabilities. In 2004 the new international Human Development and Capability Association was formed to foster this perspective.

From money poverty to resources and agency

Second, the 1990s saw the emergence of a range of different 'livelihoods frameworks' (Rakodi 1999). These took account of the ways people make use of a wider range of 'assets' and strategies than had previously been absorbed in formal micro-economic models. The frameworks had some common points of departure, in particular Sen's publications in the early 1980s on entitlement, and work on vulnerability by a range of authors, and championed by Chambers. Sen's interpretation of modern famines as due to the decline of entitlements with which people acquire food stimulated a broader notion of vulnerability (Sen 1981a). This

broader framework encompasses not just economic, but social and political vulnerability and prompts a richer analysis of the resources people utilise to mitigate their vulnerability. These extend beyond monetised commodities and certain public services to include human capital, natural capital and later on social capital.

Placing greater emphasis on the social and cultural dimensions of the exercise of agency in the struggle for livelihoods, researchers at the University of Bath developed the Resource Profiles Framework (RPF) to generate a bottom-up perspective for comprehending what different people actually do in the round of their lives, in order to secure not only a livelihood, but also a meaningful and bearable form of life for themselves. This differed by using the concept of resources rather than capitals or assets, where resources are understood as socially and culturally negotiable.[2] Anticipating the discussions of wellbeing here, the resource profiles framework recognised that a far wider range of things, such as relationships (including adverse relationships like clientelism) and cultural status, can be both means and ends. It also provides a more realistic framework for handling people's reactions to rapid change in today's world. It can be argued that the present globalising world differs from earlier stages of modernisation in the sheer rate and complexity of change that it presents – and most notably for poor countries and peoples. This presents a challenge to development thinking, and highlights the need for approaches that will help us comprehend how different people cope with rapid change – change which often goes to the core of their very identity (Lawson, McGregor and Saltmarshe 2000).

From money poverty to subjective wellbeing and quality of life

The third, more recently ascendant challenge has returned to the individual subject, to question substantially the ends of development and how we conceive and measure them. The related ideas of 'Subjective Wellbeing', 'Life Satisfaction', 'Quality of Life' and 'Happiness' have brought subjective evaluations centre-stage and propose to measure these directly rather than via proxies such as resources or human development. This perspective has been developed in different disciplinary bases, notably health services research into health-related quality of life, the psychology of hedonic balance and life satisfaction, and the economics of happiness. By the start of the millennium some of these strands were fusing and cross-fertilising in interdisciplinary arenas such as the International Society for Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS)

[2] Five categories of resources are identified – material, human, social, cultural and natural (or environmental).

and the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Though the vast bulk of such work has been disconnected from development issues, there is a close but as yet little explored affinity between this research and the literature on participation in development. The merger between these streams is forming the third fundamental challenge to narrow economism in thinking about wellbeing and development.

This book is the first to set out, discuss and relate all three of these critical approaches to conceptualising and explaining wellbeing in developing countries. Initiated by the ESRC research group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) at the University of Bath it provides an overview of its first phase in which concepts, theories and methodologies for the study of wellbeing were reviewed. The volume builds on a small international workshop held at the Hanse Wissenschaftskolleg in Germany, where we were privileged to hear leading researchers report on and evaluate the state of the art in understanding wellbeing from different disciplinary perspectives. The book brings together papers by key contributors to the three movements described above alongside contributions from WeD researchers. It is organised around the three themes of Human Needs, Resources, and Quality of Life. In each section there are papers whose primary focus is conceptual and others where it is methodological, though the dividing line is a rough-and-ready one.

An important feature of the WeD research and of this volume is its interdisciplinary range. The following chapters come from anthropology, economics, political theory, psychology and sociology. Moreover, the disciplines do not reside in separate compartments. Thus we find psychologists writing on basic needs (Ryan and Sapp), sociologists writing about resources (White and Ellison) and an economist writing on subjective life satisfaction (Rojas). The book is built on the premise that cross-disciplinary communication and understanding is necessary to conceptualise human wellbeing; to research it; and to debate the policy implications of it.

In the remainder of this chapter we review the three bodies of literature which were the starting points for this study of wellbeing, explain the rationale for the structure of the book and preview the contributing chapters. In the final chapter of the book we reflect on the points of convergence and the challenges that confront a wellbeing research agenda and outline the methodology developed for the WeD empirical research programme. This methodology provides further insight into the ways that the three organising themes of needs, resources and quality of life cohere in a unified research programme on human wellbeing.

1.2 Human needs and capabilities

The concept of human needs has long been a cornerstone of development thinking. The idea that there is a core set of basic needs which must be satisfied if we are to consider development to have taken place stretches back to colonial government policy. It has long underpinned national strategies for development in major developing countries such as China and India. But the idea did not gain notable momentum in international development policy until 1976, when the International Labour Organization adopted a Declaration of Principles and Programme of Action for a Basic Needs Strategy of Development and in 1978 when the World Bank initiated work on basic needs. These initiatives marked some of the first global institutional responses to the inadequacies of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and economic growth as measures of either development or human welfare. As a measure of development GDP is limited because of the restricted conception of resources which it uses. As a measure of welfare the problems of per capita GDP are legion: it takes no account of the composition of output between need satisfiers and luxuries (nor between those elements of consumption which are 'good' or 'bad'); nor of the distribution of welfare between groups and within families; nor of the direct impact of production on human wellbeing; nor of the side-effects of production on the environment and the biosphere and hence of the sustainability of future production and welfare. A critical and imaginative response to these omissions was long overdue. Yet by the mid 1980s the basic needs movement was starting to founder.[3] Why?

At one level it fell victim to the resurgent neoliberal wave that had been building through the post-war years and gained ascendancy in the early 1980s. The ability of states to define authoritatively what it was that people needed was heavily questioned; needs were only legitimately expressed as the preferences of individuals in markets. But it was also criticised from very different ideological perspectives. Critics from developing countries regarded the basic needs idea with suspicion, seeing it as a further example of post-imperial patronisation and cultural imperialism. Illich (1992: 88) wrote: '"Basic needs" may be the most insidious legacy left behind by development' (quoted by Gasper 2004: 153). Others saw the needs agenda as a means of blunting their demand

[3] This is not to deny the range and quality of writings on the topic that appeared in the 1980s; both conceptual, including Braybrooke (1987), the important collection edited by Lederer (1980), Plant *et al.* (1980), Springborg (1981); and those relating needs to development, including Max-Neef (1989), Stewart (1985), Streeten (1984), and Wisner (1988). Furthermore many countries and NGOs continued to inhabit and develop the needs discourse; but it disappeared for a time as a global discourse.

for a New International Economic Order. The *dependista* thinking which was prominent at the time instead stressed structural considerations and the prior necessity for developing countries to reduce their economic dependence on the West.

The basic needs thinking of the time appeared particularly vulnerable to two sets of critiques from quite different sources: from economists' criticisms of needs as opposed to wants met through markets, and from growing post-modern currents critiquing its so-called arbitrary postulates about human nature from a relativist perspective (Doyal and Gough 1991: chs 1, 8). In sum, as Des Gasper writes in Chapter 2, the fall of basic needs theory reflected its lack of conceptual depth, technical refinement, and an appealing political language suited to its time.

Now basic human needs are back on the political map. The UN Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 agreed on a set of targets for tackling world poverty over the next twenty years, and five years later the Millennium Declaration was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2000. The accompanying Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) go on to set targets and identify indicators for many basic needs, for example survival (e.g. infant mortality), health (e.g. prevalence of HIV/AIDS and malaria), hunger, access to safe water, and education (literacy and primary school enrolment).

The revitalisation of the basic needs movement at this time requires some explanation. Perhaps most obvious is the accumulating evidence on the persistence of extreme poverty among many people around the world. Despite years of experimenting and spending on development programmes, the stark reality is that in many countries, and especially those in Sub-Saharan Africa, there has been at best modest growth coupled with increasing poverty. In some other countries whose economies have enjoyed growth the impact on poverty has been disappointing. At another level, the end of communism and the Cold War has ushered in a quite novel form of global order, one where new inequalities threaten the stability of capitalism yet without the alternative vision provided by state socialism. In these circumstances ideological opposition to basic needs and social rights becomes otiose or even counter-productive.

A final explanation for the rebirth of interest in basic needs has been new conceptual thinking, most influentially in the work of Amartya Sen. In a series of publications and lectures (beginning with the *Tanner Lectures* at Stanford University (1979b)), Sen has presented the case for viewing wellbeing, alongside poverty and suffering, in terms of human functionings and capabilities. This approach breaks with traditional

economics, which typically conflates wellbeing with either utility (happiness, satisfaction, desire fulfilment) or with resources (income, wealth, commodity command). In effect, he inserts a chain of new concepts to bridge the gap between these two poles as follows:

Commodities → *Commodity Characteristics* → *Capability to Function* → *Functioning* → Utility

Drawing on Lancaster's work (1966) he distinguishes between a commodity and its set of characteristics or desirable properties (see also Max-Neef 1989). A meal, for example, may have the properties of satisfying hunger, establishing social contacts or providing a focus for household life. Conversely, a number of distinct commodities will often share one or more characteristics, as when all (or most) foodstuffs have the characteristic of satisfying hunger. More significantly, he introduces the important new concepts of functioning and capability. A *'functioning'* is 'an achievement of a person: what she or he manages to do or to be' (Sen 1985a: 12). Sen's initial claim was that a person's wellbeing should be viewed in terms of the totality of 'beings' and 'doings' she or he actually achieves. Going further, a person's *capability* set represents the vector of all the different functionings she or he is able to achieve. It is distinct from functioning (bare achievement) in that it reflects a person's real opportunities or positive freedom of choice between possible lifestyles. This immediately opens up two distinct and important spaces for thinking about wellbeing.

While income and commodities undoubtedly contribute to wellbeing, there is no obvious or straightforward link between material things and the ability to function for various reasons. Notably people typically differ in their capacity to convert a given bundle of commodities into valuable functionings (*ceteris paribus*, a rickshaw cyclist requires a higher intake of calories than those he pulls who have a more sedentary lifestyle). Similarly, the other pole of welfare or utility ultimately reduces wellbeing to mental states such as pleasure or proxies for mental states, namely desire fulfilment or the fact of choice. Other valuable achievements, particularly in the physical, social or political sphere of life (such as avoiding malnutrition, being able to move around, achieving self-respect, having civil liberties, etc.) only matter insofar as they influence utility levels. The crucial problem here is that utility 'can be easily swayed by mental conditioning or adaptive expectations' (Sen 1999: 62). The ability of people to adapt to harsh environments and unforgiving situations means that expressed satisfactions may be a poor guide to objective life situations. Sen (1984) cites evidence from a post-famine health survey in India, which suggests significant disparities between the