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Wellbeing and International Development: Promises and Pitfalls

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Abstract

This paper argues that there is added value from using a concept of wellbeing to interrogate international development thinking and practice. It explains the specific definition of wellbeing that has been employed to direct the WeD research. This is a hybrid definition which combines elements of objective and subjective wellbeing but also seeks to transcend them by recognizing the role of social construction in each. Any efforts to study or use this notion of wellbeing in practice must take account of three dimensions of social being: the material, the relational and the cognitive. The paper goes on to explain the multi-disciplinary research methodology developed by WeD and outlines the range of data generated by it. The paper moves on to discuss some of the promises and pitfalls of a wellbeing approach. The promises arise from the focus on human flourishing as a means of achieving policy coherence; escaping sterile debates over the roles of market and state; the reintegration of the analysis of social change with analysis of growth and human development; and the ways the concept highlights issues of political organisation and power. Potential pitfalls include the traps of individualism; cultural relativism and the relationship to bureaucracies. The paper concludes that the concept of wellbeing can have considerable benefits both for how we understand and might act in international development.