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Abstract

Is wellbeing relevant to international development policy and practice?

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Contemporary international development policy and practice can be viewed as an arena of contest between four discourses, attaching primacy to economic growth, basic needs, human rights and 'the local' respectively. Each has a distinctive and consistent normative position, way of interpreting change and set of prescriptions for action. Section 1 examines the four discourses in relation to a broad definition of wellbeing. Section 2 draws on research by the WeD group in Peru to suggest that positive psychology can usefully add to the portfolio of methods for identifying normative goals and indicators of subjective wellbeing against which Development is planned and evaluated. Section 3 explores the relevance of the concept of wellbeing to political economy analysis at the national level, with particular reference to Peru and to reform of social assistance. It suggests that analysing relational, symbolic, affective as well as material dimensions of social change also contributes to more effective Development. Section 4 suggests how wellbeing is relevant not only to the programming of development, but also to the way it is structured. More specifically, it favours a move towards approaches that are more reflexive, pluralistic, decentralized and holistic. Section 5 summarises the argument and concludes with a discussion of how far the benefits to development policy and practice of a richer conceptualisation of wellbeing depend upon context.