



## Dreams and nightmares: measuring and modelling people's life goal satisfaction as a means to understanding development priorities and problems

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### Introduction

The starting point of this presentation is a set of four controversial propositions. First, development practice should be grounded in more complex understandings of individual human wellbeing. Second, the scientific basis for such understanding should draw more on psychology as a discipline. Third, this will require new diagnostic and evaluative tools. Fourth, psychological ideas and methods will need to be better understood and appropriated by development specialists who are not psychologists. Rather than discuss these propositions in abstract, the presentation presents one such tool; one that has been developed and piloted as part of the WeD research. The diagnostic tool I will present is called the WeDQoL - there are many others. It is intended to elicit: (a) the most important **life goals** of individuals in a particular population or community; (b) measures of individuals' **satisfaction** with their achievement of these goals; (c) explanations for variation in importance attached to different life goals and satisfaction with life goal achievement. Using the WeDQoL involves four stages and these are discussed in turn below.

Before doing so it is useful to highlight a number of principles underpinning its design. The tool emphasises the primacy of how people themselves think and feel, rather than so-called objective indicators. It is plain wrong to dismiss such data as less reliable because it is subjective: much of our so called objective is also based on what people say rather than what we directly observe. Further, it is based on a eudaimonic approach to wellbeing that emphasises the importance of personal fulfilment in relation to goals, values and personal identity: something that is important in itself as well as a determinant of how happy and sad we are over time. In contrast to a bias toward public or shared goods and services arising from use of group-mediated tools its emphasis is thus on individual priorities. These are identified and aggregated (across groups of people) purely inductively, rather than by imposing external or dominant values on the data. In other words, no prior view is imposed on what constitutes universal basic needs – nor indeed how many there might be. However, there is scope for a trade-off in use of the tool between cultural-specificity (realism) and universality (generality) depending on nature of the policy issue, availability of resources and the size of the population in question.

### Stage 1. Planning and scoping

Key questions at this stage include the following. What is the main purpose of the research? What is the relevant population? How is it socially stratified – by language, for example? How similar is the population to other groups for which a WeDQoL questionnaire has already been developed? What resources are available for the research? What ethical issues arise? For example, what are the agencies that will use the data trying to achieve, how realistic are their goals and what are the risks of them doing harm to others (with and without access to the data to be collected)? The concept of harm here includes not only conflict but also misunderstanding and waste arising from socio-cultural 'disconnects' between different stakeholders.

## **Stage 2. Qualitative work**

Field work starts with an initial period of participant-observation and trust building. Field workers should not raise expectations about the nature of any possible intervention outcomes of their research. As and when sufficient rapport has been established the field workers then conduct a round of semi-structured interviews with a reasonably representative sample of the population. A key question for these is as follows. "Suppose someone moves to live here. What do you think they will most need to be happy? This data is then used to draw up a list of the most widely cited *items*. This list can be cross-checked against existing WeDQoL questionnaires. Care is needed to check on common meanings of words, particularly when this entails language translation.

## **Stage 3. Quantitative data collection**

The items identified in Stage 2 are used to develop a battery of questions, either from scratch or by selectively adding and subtracting them to existing WeDQoL questionnaires. Translation and testing of question formats and responses is also important. The two core sets of closed questions are in response to the following. (1) How important is *[item]* to be happy here? (not necessary, necessary, very necessary)? How satisfied are you with *[item]*? (Don't have, not satisfied, so-so, satisfied)? Other subjective questions can be added for cross-analysis, on gender, age, household and residence status, education, income and access to specific resources, for example). As with all survey work, critical practical issues include the thoroughness with which enumerators are selected and trained, and the questionnaire pre-tested and refined.

## **Stage 4. Analysis.**

Data on life goals can be analysed item by item in its raw form. Additionally, exploratory and confirmatory factor (principal component) analysis can be used to identify a smaller number of underlying goals that are shared by the respondents. Focus group analysis is then used to identify a culturally appropriate label for each factor drawing on data and understanding from Stage 2. Scores for the importance of each factor can then be worked out for each respondent. The same factor structure is then imposed on the individual satisfaction scores to estimate how satisfied each respondent is with each of these underlying goals. Relative goal importance and satisfaction across different socio-economic sub-groups (e.g. by site, age, language group, education, access to resources) can then be analysed. The analysis can also be repeated using smaller sub-samples and more site-specific questions (sample size permitting), or pooled with data from application of the WeDQoL elsewhere (depending on the extent of commonality of questions). This entails making a trade-off between output that is more locally and culturally specific, versus output that is more universal and general.

## **Ongoing research.**

This method has been applied to a sample of individuals in each of the four WeD research countries, with analysis ongoing at country level as well as for the pooled four country dataset. It has also been extended beyond WeD sites in Peru - to assist NGOs working with indigenous groups in rain forest areas, for example. In addition structural equation modelling has been conducted of life goal satisfaction in relation to goal importance, perception of availability of other resources, personality, and perception of prevailing community values. Each of these additional variables required development of a separate battery of questions using the same methodological stages outlined above. A final ongoing line of research is to compare rankings of individual wellbeing using life goal satisfaction with those based on other wellbeing indicators, such as per capita household income, need satisfaction and response to 'global happiness' questions.

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