Wellbeing and (some of) its Challenges to the Business of International Development

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Over the past three years the WeD Research Group has been carrying out detailed empirical studies in rural and urban communities in four developing countries (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand) in an effort to better understand why poverty persists and why it persists for some people in particular. To do so it has developed a conceptual framework for understanding what we mean by wellbeing and how we are to study it. This framework was translated into a comprehensive methodology with which to produce evidence for these particular countries on what it is that causes poverty to persist and to understand what specifically causes some men, women and children to fail to achieve globally acceptable levels of wellbeing.

Challenge 1: to redefine what we mean by development.

The research echoes the 'Declaration on the Right to Development' adopted by the UN General Assembly in1986, and argues for a redefinition of the goal of international development assistance as:

* "…the creation of conditions in societies all around the world within which all people can reasonably pursue their wellbeing."

While wellbeing can appear to be a fuzzy idea and this definition of development can seem utopian, neither need be the case.

Challenge 2: to define wellbeing in a way that it can be researched and is meaningful for policy.

Wellbeing arises from a combination of what people have, what they can do and what they think about what they have and can do. It arises from their material, relational and cognitive conditions.

For the study of poverty the notion of wellbeing is reversed and is more often about what people do not have, what they cannot do and how they perceive of themselves, their quality of life and their opportunities. The wellbeing research framework is designed to help us explore why is it that some people do not have enough of what they need; why some are not able to do the things that might enable them to meet their needs; and how people are often able to settle for and cope with the conditions of extreme poverty. In order to study this, a multi-disciplinary methodology which combines quantitative ands qualitative methods and takes account of objective, subjective and inter-subjective data is needed.

Challenge 3: to place the social human being at the centre of development policy considerations.

We argue that the promotion of the conditions for the human wellbeing provides a central and coherent principle to guide analysis of policy choices at each level.

In the case of development and poverty policy this principle turns our attention to the sources of harm that different people experience. Avoidance of harm is a major reason for people's inability to achieve or pursue wellbeing. Harm as consequence of material deprivation is well understood in the development literature, what are less well understood in development analyses are the relational and cognitive sources of harm. Relational sources of harm are addressed in literatures such as those on social exclusion, social capital and clientelism. Cognitive dimensions of harm are a less familiar consideration but lie at the heart of a range of distinguished and significant discourses in the social sciences: relative poverty, the culture of poverty, alienation, and anomie. These three dimensions of harm are equally significant, they cannot be thought of as operating in a hierarchy, and they work in interaction with each other.

At each level of policy consideration it is possible and necessary to ask in what ways might policy action might address sources of harm and either remove barriers to the achievement of wellbeing or promote better conditions within which people can <u>reasonably</u> pursue their visions of wellbeing

Challenge 4: to recognise that wellbeing reaffirms the salience of political and governance dimensions of development.

Wellbeing is not a utopian concept. Not all people can achieve their wellbeing simultaneously. The research emphasises that at all levels of human society, from neighbourhood to globe, we must struggle to accommodate and find ways of living with each others ambitions and strategies for achieving wellbeing. Good society, whether at the neighbourhood or global level, depends on us recognising that not all ambitions for wellbeing can be accommodated if we are to live together well and not all strategies for achieving wellbeing can be coped with by society or the globe. The research points to the overwhelming, contemporary challenges of unsustainable wellbeing, which can be manifest at the highest level in global inequalities in levels of consumption or locally, in your neighbourhood, by one person's pursuit of their goals at the expense of everyone else's.

If we accept that development is fundamentally about competing visions of what constitutes wellbeing then we need political systems that are better able to cope with this competition of ideas and ideologies. This does not stop at systems of multi-party democratic election but depends on working systems of governance (at all levels of human society: from globe to locality) which people are able to conceive of as legitimate and are able to consent to.

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