

THE DIALOGUE DANCE

From competition to collaboration
in the language of social progress
and sustainable development



-Working Paper

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years there have been increasing calls to shift from the dominant paradigms in economics and public policy that prioritise economic growth to a new conceptual framework of progress that centres on our people and planet's quality of life. The word “wellbeing” is increasingly used to refer to this paradigm shift. But other terms also have resonance – *sustainable development*, *human development*, *Doughnut Economics*, *Wellbeing Economy*, *wellbeing governments*, *happiness* or *subjective wellbeing*, the *Green New Deal* and so on.

The purpose of this essay is to explore whether and how we can reconcile different concepts into a holistic framework – taking the shared threads from each concept and weaving them into something that allows for collaboration and development, rather than competition and division. It arises from observations by the authors that it can be hard to get a new paradigm up and off the ground when so much time is spent arguing about what to call it. As we face many threats, including a global pandemic, a biodiversity catastrophe, and a war in Europe, fostering a common language and platform is more important than ever.

The different types of wellbeing

The growth in the use of wellbeing as a public policy phrase is more than a perception. In the 2022 World Happiness Report [1], Christopher Barrington-Leigh presents an analysis of wellbeing vocabulary and how similar words have been used in a database of all printed publications from 1995-2019. Chris shows that, over the past 10 years, phrases related to wellbeing are being used more often, while those related to income are in decline. His analysis also shows a rise in the use of several new terms.

Since 1995, the frequency of use of “happiness,” as a fraction of all text in books, has more than doubled, while that of “subjective well-being” has increased by a factor of eight. By contrast, the word “income” is, like GDP, on a multi-decade trend of decreasing use, having peaked around 1980 and having halved in relative usage since 1995. The phrases “beyond GDP” and “genuine progress indicator” (GPI), which are also representative of newer

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thought in the measurement of well-being and progress, have grown enormously – each by a factor of six or more – since 1995, and use of the former, at least, is still increasing.

However woolly the understanding of these new terms is, it resonates with philosophy, psychology, economics, public health and – advocates argue – with the general public. But as the debate gains ground, the wooliness is becoming more of a hindrance than a help:

There has been a cacophony of different academic languages, terminologies, different approaches, and different purposes. Confusion has arisen, for example, where contributors in debates have been talking at crossed purposes because, while they seem to be agreeing about particular issues, there have been fundamental differences in the meanings of core terms that they are using (McGregor, 2015, pg 1).

There is a lack of discipline in how we use the word wellbeing. This often results in the need for an additional word to demarcate the precise type of wellbeing being referred to, such as *subjective wellbeing*, *psychological wellbeing*, *wellbeing economics*, *societal wellbeing* or *collective wellbeing*. The dialogue dance is real – though one might argue that the dance feels more like a power struggle at times.

One way to achieve some conceptual clarity here would be to: (a) review all the relevant concepts in the literature; (b) compile a list of all the definitions that have been proposed for these; and (c) select our preferred definition (or, in the absence of one, formulate our own). However, that would not constitute dialogue dance, but rather an imposition of our own preferences and values. Moreover, other people may well disagree with our choices and disengage, in which case the conversation will not have advanced and, thus, we again regress to debate rather than dialogue.

As such, our recommendation is to allow people to find common ground *despite* having their own preferred terminology and definitions. Rather than us identifying, selecting, and promoting one definition, our strategy is to identify the underlying *principles* behind these various definitions. Each principle can be seen as offering bounded space for conceptual dialogue and discussion, within which people can choose their preferred definitions even while other people may choose others.

1. Personal wellbeing

One route into considering various principles is to use ontology, with which we can identify various dimensions of *personal wellbeing*. For example, we could begin with the Cartesian mind-body distinction and differentiate between physical and mental dimensions. Then, we could acknowledge a social dimension, as reflected in the WHO's (1948) definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity" [2]. Additionally, some scholars suggest that we ought to recognise a distinct spiritual dimension, which takes into account the transcendent or sacred [3].

First, we need to acknowledge that there is a wealth of overlapping concepts and definitions within each dimension that we can identify. Within the broad space of the mental dimension, for example, there is a range of notions that seek to capture all or most of this dimension, including *happiness*, *mental wellbeing*, *emotional wellbeing*, *subjective wellbeing*, and

psychological wellbeing [4]. Each of these concepts has subtle differences, as well as a range of definitions and sub-concepts accompanying them. In addition to the four main ontological dimensions of wellbeing, there are a myriad of factors which influence personal wellbeing [5]. In some cases, the distinction between something being a dimension versus a determinant of wellbeing is blurry, and some phenomena may constitute both. Social relationships, for example, are important for *mental wellbeing*, but also represent the essence of *social wellbeing*. As a further example, we find references in the literature to *financial wellbeing* which operates at a personal level, with poor financial wellbeing both being a wellbeing outcome itself and a determinant of poor outcomes in other wellbeing areas, such as physical and mental health.

Finally, we can aim to situate the various near synonyms of wellbeing in common discourse, such as *health*, *thriving*, and *flourishing*. One way to understand these terms is through the common metaphor of imagining the main dimensions of wellbeing – mental, physical, social, and spiritual – as a spectrum from illness to health, spanning the worst and best possible versions of these varied states. With *mental wellbeing*, for example, this ranges from the worst possible mental torment to the very peaks of attainment, as represented by notions such as nirvana. The metaphor is imperfect; the ‘dual continua’ model of *mental wellbeing* for instance argues for the functional and experiential independence of mental illness and mental health, such that these can be present simultaneously to an extent [6]. Nevertheless, the notion of moving into ‘positive territory’ still holds, and the deeper one does, the more we might use terms like *thriving* and *flourishing* [7].

2. Collective wellbeing

Beyond these four dimensions of *personal wellbeing* (physical, mental, social, and spiritual) lies the territory of *collective wellbeing*, variously referred to as *collective*, *societal*, *national*, or *gross national happiness/wellbeing*. This language has its roots in the field of *sustainable development* and consists of three main lenses:

- That current wellbeing cannot hinder future wellbeing (the future generations lens);
- That we must harmonise three core elements: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected and equally crucial for the wellbeing of individuals and societies (the integration lens);
- That none of us is well until all of us are well – eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions is an indispensable requirement for sustainable development (the inequalities lens).

Within the collective dimensions of wellbeing, we see a basic principle that people are not merely individuals but also part of a global collective of human beings. These concepts require us to think not merely about ourselves but also of those whose lives are affected by our decisions (as consumers and citizens) and of future generations whose choices will be affected by the decisions we make now.

The choice of terminology made by advocates often relates to local cultural and political narratives. For example, Bhutan has implemented Gross National Happiness as an approach to governance, but their concept of *happiness* is based on connectedness and social cohesion. When Carnegie UK sought to consider this in a UK context, it was translated to Gross

Domestic Wellbeing [8], to avoid the sense of individualism that western happiness narratives can infer. Similarly, *national wellbeing* needs to be translated for both supra-national and sub-national initiatives within the field. The need to ensure relevance again suggests to us the need to allow for fluidity within the field rather than seek one option.

Linking principles to terminology

To better understand the languages used, we began to explore similarities and differences amongst key concepts. We limited this to those that we found most regularly in the literature and in our own discussions as advocates and academics.

The different terminologies also suggest a different set of policy objectives and implications (see Table 1).

Table 1: Identifiable principles behind key terminology

	Personal wellbeing				Collective wellbeing		
	Social	Physical	Mental	Spiritual	Integration of social, economic & environment	Future generations	Inequalities
Personal/ subjective wellbeing	*	*	*	*			
Flourishing /Thriving (personal)	*	*	*	*			
Flourishing / Thriving (communities/ places)	*	*	*		*	*	*
Happiness (western narrative)			*				
Sustainable development	*	*	*		*	*	*
Gross Domestic Happiness/ Wellbeing	*	*	*		*	*	*
Wellbeing Economy	*	*	*		*	*	*
Doughnut economics	*	*	*		*	*	*
Collective wellbeing	*	*	*		*	*	*

What does the synergy mean in practice?

Using the identified principles (*personal*: social, physical, mental, and spiritual; *collective*: integration, future generations, and inequalities) we can begin to discern the shared territory that advocates are working within.

Across all these various terms, we can see a clear synergy in terms of their challenging of the dominant economic paradigm where economic growth (measured internationally through GDP) is seen as the goal of governments and societies.

Whilst the original architects of GDP warned against its use as a measure of societal success or wellbeing, for decades we have evaluated national development and progress by its growth and per capita average. GDP tells us the monetary value of all goods and services produced by a country during a given period of time but tells us nothing about the impacts of that production on our people and planets' wellbeing.

The advocates for *personal wellbeing* and *collective wellbeing* ask us to shift the burden of proof so that we are not, for example, evaluating our health sector by its contribution to GDP, but rather evaluating our economy by its contribution to our mental and physical health. All these various concepts ask us to remember that every good we produce comes first and foremost from the earth and every service we provide is valuable in so far as it contributes to our wellbeing. There is therefore a synergy in these various concepts in terms of their challenge of GDP as a measure of societal progress and a shared call for new indicators that more directly reflect our level of wellbeing.

The terms in the bottom half of the table (from *sustainable development* downwards) fundamentally challenge current structures and systems of the economy by asking us to expand our understanding of what the economy is and can be; to evaluate the economy not by its capacity to generate wealth but rather wellbeing; and to move away from narrow obsessions with efficiency, productivity and growth towards the achievement of harmony and balance with ourselves, others and our natural environment.

There are important points of divergence between the personal wellbeing terms and those concepts that pertain to both *personal* and *collective wellbeing*. We see that the terms *flourishing*, *thriving*, and *happiness* accommodate the four areas of *personal wellbeing*, while the terms that pertain to both *personal* and *collective wellbeing* fail to incorporate *spiritual wellbeing*.

In contrast, *flourishing*, *thriving*, and *happiness* struggle to shift from the personal to the collective, from the consumer to the (global) citizen. The bottom half of the table shows how these terms are generally used to indicate the integration of the personal and the collective. An important gap or area for potential development in these various concepts could therefore be to illustrate more clearly not only how our natural environment supports our social, mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing but critically how humans can also positively contribute to the wellbeing of our natural environment [9].

We also note that most concepts are still overwhelmingly anthropocentric in terms of viewing human wellbeing as separate and superior to that of other species and life on the planet. Whilst some of the concepts in essence consider both social and environmental

dimensions of wellbeing, they present them as separate or distinct dimensions, thus implicitly prioritising the social over the environmental. Furthermore, these concepts often speak to the environmental domain in terms of respecting “planetary limits” which presents our environment as a constraint rather than the source of all life.

A further exciting area of evolution and development in wellbeing concepts centres around the importance of participatory and democratic processes. The current paradigm shift is not only about our metrics of success but critically about moving from hierarchical, siloed, and mechanistic ways of thinking and organising towards more holistic, integrated, and emergent systems [10]. This shift is seen as particularly important for our governance systems as we know that broad-based participation not only generates more inclusive and sustainable outcomes but the act of participating in the decisions that impact our lives is critical to wellbeing in its own right. This shift, therefore, asks us to recognise that the “how” matters as much as the “what” in terms of a new conception of progress. At present, democracy is usually seen as a subcategory of the social domain. Carnegie UK and others are arguing that it is so vital to our lives that it requires separate and careful consideration in the study and application of wellbeing policy.



Conclusion and call to action

As more and more academics, advocates, and policymakers come into the wellbeing field, there is a risk that we define ourselves by the very small number of things we disagree about, rather than defining ourselves by our shared principles.

This essay has sought to show how there are common elements of all *personal* and *collective* wellbeing narratives. Utilising these principles, underneath our core terms, allows advocates to move seamlessly between different languages to describe the shift.

We limited our analysis to those terms that we found most regularly in the literature and in our own discussions as advocates and academics. This essay is, therefore, only a partial analysis. We would welcome suggestions of other concepts and emerging terminology to consider, allowing us to update this paper to keep in touch with developments in this growing and exciting field.

If you have any comments, or suggestions for inclusion, please contact Jennifer.Wallace@carnegieuk.org.



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