



WELLBEING ECONOMY ALLIANCE

WEAll Briefing Papers: Little Summaries of Big Issues

Understanding Wellbeing

28 July 2020

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1. Introduction

In the first WEAll Briefing: Short Summaries of Big Ideas', the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) set out how the 'concept of holistic wellbeing is familiar the world over, even though different terms might be used to describe its key idea: **quality of life and flourishing for all people and sustainability for the planet**'.

In this Briefing, we are going to delve deeper into how different communities of interest describe wellbeing and use it to improve lives. Broadly speaking, these discussions embrace **personal** wellbeing, **community** wellbeing, and **societal** wellbeing. We end with a short discussion of how these concepts are used by governments to promote wellbeing of populations.

The shared endeavour of these communities of interest is to understand what a good society is, and how it can be pursued.

Our aim in presenting this paper is to introduce the reader to the major points of scholarship, discussion, and voices shaping conversations about wellbeing as they are known today: what are the key perspectives and models for talking about and working to promote wellbeing? Our goal is to be *descriptive*, rather than prescriptive; in showing where the conversation is alive rather than recommending a specific outcome. We seek to illustrate how wellbeing is a positive aspiration for our personal, social, community and civic arenas.

As an emergent area for scholarship, study and exploration, this paper can only hope to start the reader on a path to learning more. By the brief nature of this paper, it cannot be exhaustive. At the end of this paper, the reader can find references cited, a list of resources for further discussion, and acknowledgements.

What are the main categories of Wellbeing?

There is a myriad of terms used to describe *wellbeing* (Figure 1). Broadly speaking, these can be categorised into three core concepts, or areas of discussion.

1. **Personal wellbeing** – how a person feels about their *own life*; often thought of as happiness or life satisfaction or having a good quality of life.

Some of the terms that arise in discussions about personal wellbeing include:

- Happiness
- Subjective wellbeing
- Life satisfaction
- Wellness
- Prosperity
- Quality of life

2. **Community wellbeing** – what we need to *live well locally*, within our communities. This goes further than aggregating personal wellbeing, bringing in concepts of social capital and democracy and the quality of the local environment.

Some of the terms that arise in discussions about community wellbeing include:

- Social capital
- Thriving Places
- Neighbourliness
- Social cohesion
- Pro-social behaviours

3. **Societal wellbeing** – what we need to live well *together as a society*, now and into the future. This goes further than personal and community wellbeing by asking us to consider inequalities between people and places, and our responsibility to future generations and our natural environment.

Some of the terms that arise in discussions about community wellbeing include:

- Social progress
- Sustainable Development
- Human Development
- Wellbeing economy

We have observed, especially in academia, a tendency to view these three forms of wellbeing as being in competition or conflict. This is particularly evident with personal and societal wellbeing, when it comes to allocating resources. We argue that these concepts are actually best seen as *interconnected layers* of wellbeing (Figure 1).

Community and societal wellbeing are more than the aggregate life satisfaction of citizens, but they cannot be said to exist in the *absence* of the personal life satisfaction of citizens. And of course, community wellbeing impacts personal wellbeing and societal wellbeing impacts community wellbeing.

Figure 1: The dimensions and alternative language used to describe wellbeing



2. Personal Wellbeing – The Pursuit of Happiness

An important life objective for most people is to be happy and content and some say that happiness is our ultimate goal. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle said, ‘happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.’ Similarly, *utilitarianism*, an ethical theory encouraging actions that maximise happiness, has been central to economics for the last few centuries (Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1997). Thus, one way to assess wellbeing is whether people have happy lives, and the extent to which social, political, and economic choices achieve this ultimate end.

An important aspect of conceiving wellbeing through happiness is the use of a person’s own report of their happiness. That is, how it is a person feels about their own life. This gives people authority over their own experiences, as opposed to allowing someone else to assert what constitutes a good life. Thus, the reliance on people’s own reports of their experiences brings a democratisation to the wellbeing agenda. Such indicators have been used widely in psychology and economics to show that many objective life circumstances do not result in people feeling as happy, as has often been assumed (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008).

One important aspect of happiness is that it is a relatively simple concept that is relatable to most people. However, whilst some argue that happiness can be distilled into a single credible and informative societal goal (Layard, 2020), others dismiss happiness on account of this reliance on self-reported measures as well as a perception of happiness being too vague a concept and not a legitimate life goal (Johns & Ormerod, 2012).

However, self-reports of happiness have undergone extensive checks to ensure they are psychologically valid and reliable (Wood & Boyce, 2017). It has been illustrated, for example,

that happiness measures, such as answers to open-ended questions and sociability, relate to biological measures of hormones, brain functioning and observable behaviour. There are [international guidelines](#) on how exactly to ask people about their happiness (OECD, 2013).

Further, happiness is not as vague a concept as many might imagine. To save the misconception of happiness as being solely about laughing and smiling, academics will typically speak of happiness as **subjective wellbeing** and/or psychological wellbeing (Linley, 2009). In this sense there are three distinct types of happiness. First, there is a person's **life satisfaction** or happiness with their life overall (referred to as either evaluative happiness or evaluative wellbeing). Second, there is a person's moment-to-moment experience of positive and negative emotions (referred to as either hedonic happiness or **emotional wellbeing**). And third, is whether a person meets psychological needs, including freedom, connectedness, and purpose (referred to as eudemonic happiness, psychological wellbeing, or **human flourishing**).

Happiness aside, in the personal wellbeing domain, we might also hear concepts such as **wellness** and **prosperity**. Wellness typically refers to living a healthy life, whereas prosperity can mean the *extent* to which someone is generally flourishing. Ordinarily, however, prosperity refers to material or financial success. Both are related to the core notion of wellbeing. However, as concepts they are both loose and vague in their meaning, and they do not carry the same academic weight as happiness, as discussed above.

One debate concerning happiness centres on whether happiness ought to be a single societal goal or leading measure of government policy. However, none of the measures of personal wellbeing are perfect as *single* indicators of progress, with each being important to people's lives in different ways. For example, evaluative measures of happiness are reliant on goals and expectations, which often revolve around achieving societal yardsticks, rather than fulfilling intrinsic human needs. Happiness in the moment is important but achieving this sort of happiness all the time is unrealistic, and desiring happiness in the moment can sometimes get in the way of actually experiencing it. Further, humans are remarkably good at getting used to their circumstances (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). Thus, out of psychological survival, people will still find some happiness in abjectly appalling conditions. Finally, although many experts on the subject of human flourishing, would agree that there are universal psychological needs (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryff and Keyes, 1995), should it be experts who get to decide which are the most important, when, and for whom?

Another term used in relation to wellbeing is **quality of life**. Quality of life takes in notions of what a 'good life' entails. Quality of life can refer to physical attributes of a person's life, such as their physical health, family life, education, employment, wealth, safety, security and freedom. Still, it also has a subjective component, in that feeling that one is living a 'good life' also depends on a person's culture and expectations. The ultimate end of living a 'good life' would no doubt equate to feeling happy with one's life. However, quality of life is important here, because it specifies more concretely how that 'good life' or happiness might be achieved, which can be useful when guiding government to ensure personal wellbeing (Part 2) is in balance with community wellbeing (Part 3) and societal wellbeing (Part 4).

3. Community Wellbeing – The Pursuit of Social Capital

Following the concentric circles shown in Figure 1, we now move from a discussion on how we think of *personal wellbeing*, to how we live, learn, and lead together to establish *community wellbeing*.

A core question facing wellbeing scholars and activists is “*what makes a good life?*”. While analysis of personal wellbeing provides helpful insight into what makes a person better off, the personal pursuit of happiness can come at a cost to the happiness of others. Thus, community wellbeing entails *more* than just the sum of the personal wellbeing of the people who live in a particular geographical area (Atkinson et al, 2017).

Relationships between individuals and groups are at the core of community wellbeing. The idea of **social capital** was popularised in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000), and while definitions vary, the focus is generally on the quality of relationships between people within a place (OECD, 2007). This is determined by **trust** and reciprocity between community members and having the tools to come to a shared understanding, all of which help foster connections and enable action.

A place can be said to be **thriving**, when relationships within it are strong and capable of being mobilised to respond to local needs. For example, in the immediate response to COVID-19, many communities were able to use their *social capital* to meet the emerging challenges of accessing food and providing friendship (Stansfield, Mapplethorpe and South, 2020).

Many, but not all, indices and models of wellbeing include community wellbeing, for example, the [Gallup World Happiness](#) report, the [OECD’s Better Life Index](#), the [United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the [New Economics Foundation’s ‘5 Ways to Wellbeing’](#)). These indices and models typically measure subjective indicators of **neighbourliness** and **social cohesion**, but occasionally touch on pro-social behaviours such as kindness.

Despite these measures, an understanding of community wellbeing is underdeveloped, with significant gaps in knowledge in this area (What Works Wellbeing/Happy City, 2019). There is some evidence that community wellbeing is supported by active volunteering, community engagement and the existence of spaces to meet. However, evidence is more likely to be *correlational*, as it is much more difficult to establish causal evidence for community wellbeing than for personal wellbeing. Thus, the importance of community wellbeing can be disregarded.

There are also reasons for caution around the supremacy of community wellbeing. Whilst overall, there is evidence of correlation between community wellbeing and personal wellbeing, there is also evidence that those not considered part of the community can suffer poor personal wellbeing, even when the overall community is thriving. The concept of **othering** within communities is well-researched (see for example, Lajos, 2015). Also, it has been found that ethnic diversity can actually reduce social cohesion: the community is cohesive as long as it is not diverse (Bagnall et al, 2017). In other words, *belonging* matters, but is it a double-edged sword when some community members are excluded from its benefits.

There are important conversations in the field of wellbeing, on inequalities between groups in society and on the different experiences of communities of interest. However, these are generally discussed as equality issues at a societal wellbeing level - cutting across the whole population (see

for example, OECD 2020a). There is also a risk that the sole focus is placed on collective wellbeing, rather than individual wellbeing. For instance, women do more unpaid work in the house and community, doing 30 minutes more work a day when paid and unpaid work are taken into account; a focus on the community may reinforce these gender roles (OECD, 2020a).

4. Societal Wellbeing – The Pursuit of Sustainable Development

The third and final conceptual aspect of wellbeing is on the *societal* level, which includes wellbeing across generations.

Trebeck (2019) describes a wellbeing economy as a regenerative, collaborative and purposeful economy in service of human and ecological wellbeing, which aims at meeting the *needs* of all, rather than the *wants* of a few. In a society that is **thriving, flourishing and developed**, meeting “the needs of the present [is done] without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report, 1987).

Groups from divergent political backgrounds which are interested in promoting societal wellbeing, share the perspective that societal wellbeing must be achieved with the following in mind:

1. **Human rights:** Promoting the wellbeing of some within the society cannot be done at the expense of others’ human rights. See, for example, Sen (2009) or Bevan Foundation (2019).
2. **Equality:** Wellbeing should not be concentrated *disproportionately* within one group in society, even if the effect is a reasonable average societal score for subjective and objective wellbeing indicators. See, for example Wilkinson & Pickett (2009).
3. **Personal agency and control:** The ability to live a meaningful life requires all of us to experience agency and control; freedom from oppression and freedom to pursue our own wellbeing are essential components. See, for example, Sen (2009).

There are many issues and questions that arise in conversations about the balance between personal and societal wellbeing; more than this short paper can address. Here are a few questions that come up:

- How do we address that a person’s own pursuit of maximising personal happiness can come at the expense of others’ happiness in the group?
- How do we reconcile this conflict? Is it necessary for some people to be less happy than they otherwise could be, for the good of the whole?
- How might *ethnocentric* conceptions (the idea that one’s own group is superior) of happiness be used to justify harmful choices that lead to the subjugation of different peoples throughout the world or to environmental degradation?
- How do we account for the effects of our choices that we may not directly see, such as on carbon emissions or on the happiness of future generations?

One way we talk about societal wellbeing is through **sustainable development** i.e. development that allows for personal and community wellbeing to be achieved everywhere in the world and maintained across generations. One of the critiques of sustainable development is that it is still measured and pursued through consumption expansion and the imperative of growth

(Wiedmann et al., 2020). Wackernagel et al. (2017) discuss how countries progressing on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are high-income countries with a high per capita demand on nature.

This excessive consumption and accumulation of economic wealth for some people impacts others around the world with the lowest incomes, who face resource insecurity as a result and who lack the financial means to cope with the effects of global unsustainability. This is a stark example of why societal wellbeing is dependent on **environmental boundaries** for our means to achieve wellbeing: they help avoid the erosion of environmental and social capital to the detriment of others' opportunity for wellbeing.

The WWF (2018) defines an *environmental boundary* as follows: the amount of resources necessary to produce goods and services to achieve wellbeing for ourselves, cannot exceed what is *equally* available to each of us. These environmental boundaries are set on a planetary scale, which implies we have to respect them *collectively* (Rockström et al., 2009).

There is broad agreement that global society should strive for “a prosperous, high quality of life that is equitably shared and sustainable” and that this *can* be achieved by staying within planetary boundaries and protecting capabilities for ongoing flourishing (Costanza et al., 2014).

Economic wealth, nature, and social interactions provide different, often un-substitutable, contributions to our wellbeing. In order to understand the link between wellbeing and sustainable development, we need to explore the relationship between our levels of consumption, our economic wealth and natural and social capital.

One way to do this, is to ask the following question: “*Is it true that consumption and economic wealth i.e. money, are reliable indicators to a person's and their community's wellbeing?*” The answer, simply put, is no.

There is, for example, a negative association between a broad array of types of personal wellbeing and high levels of consumption (Dittmar et al., 2014). Boyce et al (2017) found that once our basic needs are fulfilled, additional income and consumption growth adds very little to personal and community wellbeing, when compared to non-economic aspects of our lives. Furthermore, as income and consumption are, to a certain extent, fuelled by exporting environmental and social impacts abroad, insisting on economic growth *after* reaching high levels of consumption will likely reduce wellbeing levels in other countries and global environmental quality. Thus, in countries with high levels of income and consumption, development policies should place increasing importance on goals such as reducing inequalities and strengthening social capital, rather than on further economic growth.

Since income and consumption are linked to indicators of *environmental pressure*, such as *ecological footprints*, their unlimited growth is both unsustainable and does not bring much benefit to human wellbeing (Wackernagel et al., 2017). Recognising that the economy is embedded in society and the rest of nature as an integrated, interdependent system, is one step towards envisioning and realising a wellbeing economy.

There is evidence that high life expectancy can be achieved with much lower CO₂ emission levels than many countries produce (Wilkinson et al., 2010), and high levels of happiness can be achieved with much lower levels of economic wealth (Coscieme et al., 2019).

These studies and real-life examples highlight how the standards of health and happiness enjoyed in the wealthiest countries can be achieved with much lower levels of emissions and consumption. Reducing emissions and limiting excessive consumption is, therefore, compatible with both sustainable development and increased wellbeing.

5. Bringing it All Together – The Role of Governments in Promoting Wellbeing

In this final section, we present a short discussion of how societal wellbeing, practically speaking, is expressed through governmental action and regulations.

As governments evolved in the twentieth century, the pursuit of economic wealth as a means to a ‘*good society*’ became the norm. By the second half of the 20th century, economic output was the dominant way by which countries measured and compared their progress. However, the connection between GDP and social progress began to break down once countries achieved a certain material standard of living. For a detailed discussion, see Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi (2009). Greater awareness of this in the early 21st century was prompted by academic and NGO activity, which encouraged governments to think differently about social progress. The **Millennium Goals**, and the subsequent **Sustainable Development Goals**, have provided a focus for this conversation. Within the OECD, a parallel conversation on measurement of social progress began to influence governments to improve their internal frameworks.

The challenge became how to turn this new thinking into policies that could be implemented. At the OECD World Economic Forum hosted in South Korea in 2018, New Zealand, Scotland and Iceland together launched the [Wellbeing Economy Governments \(WEGo\) Alliance](#). Other governments are joining the movement, including Wales in 2020.

The *wellbeing economy approach* to governance is emergent, but those governments who are embracing the approach share the following characteristics:

1. **New narratives** are being established to rebalance economic dominance of decision-making with environmental and social domains of wellbeing.
2. **Outcomes Measurement** is focused on *outcomes*, rather than inputs, processes or targets as an essential component.
3. **Horizontal integration** across the whole of government, in line with the realisation that the solutions to many ongoing and difficult policy problems can only be found in working together. Since each part of the system (education, health, policing and so on) is dependent on the other to achieve its objectives.
4. **Vertical integration** between central and local government, based on a shared understanding of key objectives, but allowing for local tailoring to suit the needs and priorities of local communities (localism).
5. **Identification & prevention** of problems before they become too entrenched and difficult to resolve or mitigate. The lost opportunities of intervening too late are recognised as costly, not just for the public purse, but also for overall wellbeing.

6. **Fostering participation** by engaging people and asking about what matters to them. Wellbeing is not something to be 'done to' people; it is rather a relational process where public servants enable people to realise their own wellbeing (Wallace, 2019).

As the wellbeing approach requires collaboration and integration, which may be easier to achieve for smaller governments, it is interesting to note that the current WEGo member countries all have relatively small populations. While many other governments of countries with larger populations, have approaches that encourage participation and democratic engagement, they are often additional programmes of activity, rather than deeply embedded in the culture of decision-making (OECD, 2020b).

Conclusion

This brief paper has outlined some of the major and emergent themes in the field of wellbeing. In doing so, the authors have aimed not to set one concept up against another, but rather to provide a structure of personal, community and societal wellbeing that identifies the strengths of each approach to create a layered and multidimensional understanding of wellbeing.

In understanding this complexity, a wellbeing economy can work at multiple levels to ensure that everyone has what they need, now and into the future. In doing so, a wellbeing economy recognises that each 'tier' of wellbeing relies on the others: happiness without a future generation is time-limited; community wellbeing without equality is ultimately destructive to societal wellbeing; and societal wellbeing can only exist within the resources of our common home, the earth.

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