Editorial

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In December 1986 the Declaration on the Right to Development was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This declaration starts by recognising:

... that development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the *well-being* of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom [emphasis added]

While this statement goes to the heart of what many would agree international development should be about, the notion of human well-being that is central to it has proven to be a particularly difficult idea to use in international development policy and practice. For many years income measures have been dominant as proxy indicators of successful development and much development policy and strategy has been shaped accordingly (Sumner 2007). There have been many practical and philosophical criticisms of the adequacy of income measures as proxies for development (e.g. Saith 2005) but they still remain the most prominent form of indicator and continue to strongly influence policy and practice.

Gradually, however, there has been increasing momentum for a new paradigm with which to think about development. The work of Amartya Sen on what is called the ‘capabilities approach’ has been particularly influential and in 1998 Sen’s contribution was acknowledged with the award of a Nobel Prize. His approach, which shifts attention from whether development increases income to whether it expands human capabilities and freedoms, has been the inspiration for the UNDP’s

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Human Development Index and its related annual reports. Alongside the work of others, this approach has sought to return the human being to the centre of international development thinking.

This journal special issue arises out of a research programme which sought to build on the foundations of Sen's contribution and complement this by drawing on a broader range of insights into development and social change from across the social sciences. The Wellbeing in Developing Countries Research Group (WeD)¹ brought insights from social policy, social psychology and the political economy of international development together in order to construct a practical conceptual framework and methodology to study the ways in which people struggle to make meaningful and rewarding lives for themselves in particular developing country contexts (Gough and McGregor 2007). It is important that even when studying poverty in developing countries, where people experience harrowing deprivations and face complex challenges that we do not lose sight of the humanity of the people experiencing it. Like others in more developed and affluent contexts, they have aspirations for themselves and their children; they actively pursue their notions of wellbeing; and even in situations of adversity they seek to attain some satisfaction with their quality of life.

Although many men, women and children in the countries and communities studied do not manage to escape the poverty and hardship which blight their societies, the term wellbeing, nevertheless, provides a conceptual fulcrum for this effort and a broader way of evaluating what constitutes successful development. The WeD Research Group has developed a practical and *social* conception of wellbeing for use in development research and policy deliberation. A social conception of wellbeing must take into account three aspects of the human condition: it must consider whether people's human needs are being met; whether they are able to act meaningfully in pursuit of their goals (*pace* Sen's freedoms); and whether they are experiencing a satisfactory quality of life. It is this final dimension of evaluating the quality of life of those in developing countries that international development policy makers and thinkers have been slow to engage with.

This is not to say that international development has not engaged with people's own views of their development experiences. Robert Chambers (1997) has been a powerful proponent of the importance of the participation of the poor in development and the World Bank's 'Voices of the Poor' study (Narayan et al. 2000; Narayan and Walton 2000) represented an important signal of official recognition. However, the way that this has shifted development policy and practice has been patchy and mainly through the institutionalisation of processes of participation at particular points in policy processes. A major example of this is the requirement for governments in developing countries to produce participatory Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) as a form of development aid conditionality (see Lazarus 2008).

One major conclusion of the WeD research programme is that research into Quality of Life or more specifically subjective wellbeing has much to offer current

¹ The support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries, involving studies in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand.

international development thinking. It offers new insights in terms of how we conceptualise the relationships between different dimensions of development processes and also methodological insights into how development might better take account of peoples' aspirations and satisfactions. At the same time development research and practice, through its engagement with people in a wide range of cultures and in diverse social and economic contexts, may also offer important new insights for the study of the quality of life.

The papers in this special issue all explore the ways in which the study of quality of life might contribute to our better understanding of international development. They are drawn from a set of sessions on 'Wellbeing, Quality of Life and Subjectivities' at a major conference on *Wellbeing and International Development* held in 2007 at the University of Bath. The aim of these sessions was to exchange ideas between a range of scholars working on issues of subjective wellbeing and quality of life. All of the papers explore how we might take better account of what people themselves aspire to and the quality of life that they achieve through the attainment (or otherwise) of valued goals. They also highlight the relationship between quality of life and the particular place in which people are located.

Although the importance of taking account of local cultures and local meanings has often been recognised in international development literatures, both theory and policy still have a tendency to retreat to universal models (McGregor 2004). A central problem in development therefore has been how to work with the relationship between 'universal' concepts and 'local' realities in a way that might contribute to more effective empirical study and policy formulation. The papers in this special issue focus on disadvantaged populations, but the settings range from urban Toronto to rural Thailand and they each highlight the importance of context in mediating the effects of poverty and ill-health on people's wellbeing. The multi-disciplinarity that characterises wellbeing research is evidenced here where contributors include anthropologists, economists, psychologists, and specialists in organisational behaviour, and the papers critically combine universal and local indicators. An overarching theme is that understanding poverty and its persistence requires a move away from uni-dimensional poverty indicators, and an acknowledgment of the role of social inclusion, cultural context, and non-material 'resources' such as spirituality. The studies reported here have each in their own way sought to understand how men, women and children seek to socially and culturally construct their wellbeing in these different community and country contexts.

The first paper by McGregor and Camfield goes to the heart of the debate and explores the relationship between 'universalist' Theories of Human Need and empirical evidence on what people in particular local contexts regard themselves as 'needing' or 'wanting' in order to live well. The paper explores the distinction between needs and wants and proposes that when theories of human need are expanded to incorporate social and psychological needs then the distinction between the two becomes more difficult to sustain. It argues for recognition of the unavoidably political nature of decisions over what constitutes a need in particular social and cultural contexts and how different needs claims are to be prioritised. Nevertheless universalist theories of human need cannot be discarded. The article argues that an extended form of a theory of human need provides the necessary conceptual framework for deliberative reasoning over the content of the needs that are to be authoritatively

sanctioned by public policy. This framework can then be supported by empirical evidence on what is important for a good quality of life and what levels of satisfaction are being achieved in particular developing contexts. The paper draws on data from an extended period of multidisciplinary fieldwork in communities in the Northeast and South of Thailand, which supports the growing international consensus that measures of people's QoL are a legitimate and important indicator of their wellbeing and should be taken into account at all stages of policy processes from policy formulation through to implementation and evaluation (Diener 2006; Diener et al. 2009).

Copestake et al. explores links between economic and subjective wellbeing indicators in Peru by contrasting national level data with the findings of two years of fieldwork by WeD-Peru. The paper highlights mismatches between the perceptions of people in poor communities (measured using a standard global happiness question) and material indicators such income, expenditure, and position in relation to the national poverty line. Copestake et al. also identify greater happiness in rural areas, despite greater material poverty, and explore this 'paradox' using data on locally-identified life goals from WeDQoL-Peru. The WeDQoL data suggests that in rural sites people's happiness arises from their satisfaction with their family and living environment, which are actually reduced by higher income (c.f. Kasser 2002).

Rojas's paper tackles the issue of the inadequacy of income indicators of wellbeing head-on. He explores poverty in a Latin-American context (Costa Rica) and asks provocatively 'does raising people's income translate into higher wellbeing?' (answer: 'not necessarily'). His paper identifies a substantial dissonance between those classified as poor and those experiencing low wellbeing (for example, 33 percent of poor people report high wellbeing, while 14 percent of non-poor are classified as in 'wellbeing deprivation'). These findings are used to explore the possibilities of trajectories out-of-poverty and into wellbeing that are not entirely focused on income improvement. Rojas recommends that public policies recognise the complexity of people's situations (for example, how they can move out of income poverty while remaining in wellbeing deprivation) and acknowledge that interventions affect people's satisfaction in all domains of life, not merely the economic. He argues that the focus of poverty abatement programmes should not be limited to removing people from "income poverty" but also place them in a "life-satisfying situation" and warns that "any strategy to reduce income poverty must take into consideration its impact on the other domains of life where people express their humanity and from which they attain most of their life satisfaction". This can be done by shifting the focus from "income generation capacities" such as social capital to "life satisfaction capacities" such as interpersonal relationships.

The third paper addressing Latin America is Wills et al.'s comparative study of the metropolises of Bogota (Colombia), Belo Horizonte (Brazil) and Toronto (Canada). This is the only paper to focus on urban populations and presents a cross cultural analysis of citizens' subjective wellbeing using measures of global and domain-specific wellbeing at the personal and national level (developed by the International Wellbeing Group; see Cummins et al. 2002). Significant differences were found between the cities on all measures, with Belo Horizonte scoring consistently poorly. This finding was interrogated using 'social status' as a proxy for social exclusion/ inclusion to see if it mediated the effects of income on global life satisfaction; an important consideration in the light of notoriously skewed income

distributions in Latin American cities. Wills et al. also proposed that the National Wellbeing Index could be seen as a “contextual antecedent” to the Personal Wellbeing Index as this indicates the presence or absence of resources and opportunities for citizens, particularly in relation to its economic condition, level of security, possibilities for doing business, and in Latin America social relationships. This proposal is consistent with the authors’ view that subjective wellbeing is influenced by dispositional (top-down), contextual (bottom-up) and cultural factors.

Finally the paper by Tilouine addresses the pivotal but rarely tested assumption of researchers into health-related quality of life that this domain has a formative influence on wellbeing by exploring the effect of health on personal wellbeing, participation in social and cultural networks, and perceptions of the environment in an Algerian population. While good health status had no effect on satisfaction with life and little on the total score for the Personal Wellbeing Index, it had a marked effect on satisfaction with marriage, friendship, and family relationships, which raises interesting questions about causality (for example, does this reflect the somatic effects of social exclusion, or the importance of health as a basis for social participation?) Pain, anxiety and disturbed sleep were the most commonly reported health problems and may indicate the daily stresses of life in contemporary Algeria. Ill-health was also more common among poorer respondents, possibly reflecting the differential effects of political crisis and rapid economic growth in the absence of an adequate welfare regime.

The five papers collectively provide illustrations of what different understandings and measures of quality of life and wellbeing can offer policy and practice in international development. The papers affirm the intuition that material deprivation is not the same as wellbeing deprivation, and there may be some situations where these are opposed, for example, the detrimental effect of economic growth on the environment or migration on individual wellbeing. They also provide new insight into the top-down, bottom-up debate (e.g. Moller and Saris, 2001), with added recognition of the importance of cultural contexts that shape people’s values and aspirations, particularly in relation to what they think wellbeing consists in, and when they feel they have achieved it. Finally, they underline the importance of a wellbeing approach for policy makers, particularly policy makers who need to understand why resources invested in, for example, urban renewal and poverty abatement programmes have failed to produce the expected returns.

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