

## Introduction

This briefing summarises key messages from the Sustainable Development Research Network (SDRN) discussion paper *Wellbeing: Concepts and Challenges*. The paper was commissioned by the SDRN to help inform Defra's current research and policy discussions on wellbeing.

The UK Government's Sustainable Development Strategy, *Securing the Future* (2005), includes a commitment that:

*'...by the end of 2006 the Government will sponsor cross-disciplinary work to bring together existing research and international experience and to explore how policies might change with an explicit wellbeing focus.'*

(Securing the Future, 2005: 23)



Current interest in the issues of wellbeing spans a wide range of policy arenas, from local government, health and education to the work of the devolved administrations, and this reflects the recent growth in academic work in this area. However, the wellbeing research has yet to produce many specific policy recommendations.

This briefing, the third in the SDRN Policy Briefing series, provides an initial overview of the research evidence regarding wellbeing as a concept and its utility in future policymaking. It provides an introduction to the different definitions and conceptualisations of wellbeing, and their main strengths and weaknesses. It then begins to explore how public policy might be changed by a more explicit focus on wellbeing, and sets out a number of areas for further research.

## SDRN briefing three

# Wellbeing Concepts and Challenges

## Overview

Key messages from the *Wellbeing: Concepts and Challenges* Discussion Paper include:

- Wellbeing remains a contested concept, enjoying a wide variety of definitions.
- Wellbeing is more than just the absence of illness or pathology. It has subjective (self-assessed) and objective (ascribed) dimensions and can be measured at the level of individuals or society.
- Objective measures of wellbeing consist of survey data related to material and social circumstances, such as income, housing and education, which may foster - or detract - from wellbeing.
- Subjective measures are usually based on survey questions asking respondents to rate their own happiness or life satisfaction. These measures have generally been shown to be reliable and robust.
- There is a general consensus about many of the 'drivers' of wellbeing. Income (especially relative income); personal and social relationships; employment factors; and quality of political life all affect individual and social wellbeing. Mental health is increasingly seen as fundamental to overall health and wellbeing.
- Wellbeing accounts for elements of life satisfaction that cannot be defined, explained or primarily influenced by economic growth. Most notably, rising economic growth and GDP per capita in developed countries have not been accompanied by commensurate increases in reported life satisfaction.
- The connections between wellbeing research and environmental and sustainable development studies are often weak. In particular the wellbeing literature pays relatively little attention to the importance of local environment factors in people's health and quality of life.
- Specific policy recommendations emerging from the wellbeing research literature are relatively scarce, but tend to emphasise promoting positive personal and social relationships; achieving better work/life balance; and encouraging participation in communities and political life.

### Box 1: Definitions of wellbeing

*'There is no accepted definition of wellbeing'*  
Hird (2003)

*'...a positive and sustainable state that allows individuals, groups or nations to thrive and flourish. This means at the level of an individual, wellbeing refers to psychological, physical and social states that are distinctively positive'*  
Huppert, Baylis and Keverne (2004)

*'I take the terms wellbeing, utility, happiness, life satisfaction and welfare to be interchangeable'*  
Easterlin (2003)

## What is wellbeing?

There is no single definition of wellbeing. However, a good starting point is to distinguish between:

- i) objective and subjective; and
- ii) hedonic and eudaemonic wellbeing.

**Objective** wellbeing refers to the material and social circumstances believed to foster - or detract from - an individual's or community's sense of wellbeing.

**Subjective** wellbeing refers to an individual's self assessment of their own wellbeing.

With respect to subjective wellbeing, two distinct approaches are apparent.

**'Paradigms for empirical enquiry into wellbeing ...revolve around two distinct philosophies. The first of these can be broadly labelled hedonism...and reflects the view that wellbeing consists of pleasure or happiness. The second view...is that wellbeing consists of more than just happiness. It lies instead in the actualization of human potentials. This view has been called eudaimonism'**

Ryan and Deci (2001)

## Hedonic wellbeing

Drawing on the hedonic tradition of philosophy, it has been argued that subjective wellbeing consists of three elements 'life satisfaction; the presence of positive mood; and the absence of negative mood' (Ryan and Deci, 2001: 144). Hedonic happiness is therefore primarily associated with self satisfaction.

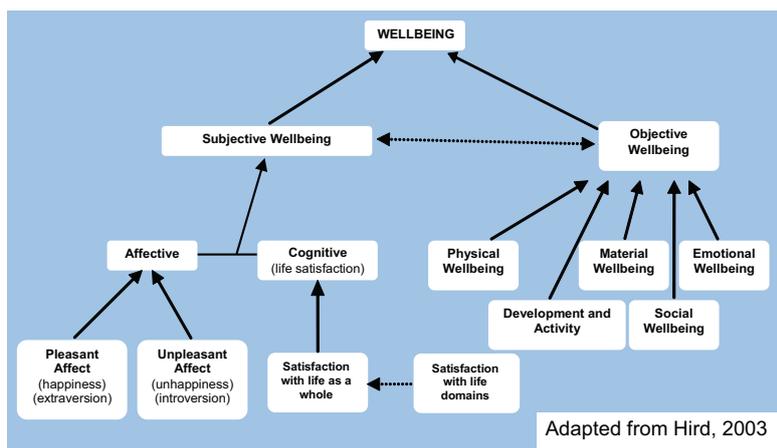


Figure 1: The relationship between different aspects of wellbeing

## Eudaemonic wellbeing

In contrast, eudaemonic theorists argue that wellbeing and happiness are distinct, and that not all sources of pleasure foster wellbeing. Instead, it is argued that it is the realisation of human potential (a 'developmental' component), rather than simply life-satisfaction, that is central to wellbeing.

In spite of a wide variety of definitions, the research literature on wellbeing suggests the following points of common ground:

- Wellbeing is more than the absence of illness or pathology
- The terms 'life satisfaction', 'happiness', 'quality of life' and 'wellbeing' are often used interchangeably.
- Wellbeing has both subjective and objective dimensions. Both are useful and together they provide a fuller picture of wellbeing.
- Both individual and societal wellbeing are important and measurable. The interaction between the two is where much of the link with policy arises. In some cases actions that enhance personal wellbeing may be negative for society as a whole, and vice versa. Moreover, the balance of wellbeing now and in the future must also be taken into account.

## Measuring Wellbeing

Broadly speaking these measures can be categorised as either **objective** or **subjective**, although some indices combine both.

## Objective measures of wellbeing

Objective measures of wellbeing relate to material, economic, and social circumstances that may foster - or detract from - a sense of wellbeing. They are often referred to as 'social indicators' and include data like housing standards, GDP, income and employment, educational attainment, and poverty. Such data are routinely collected through government statistical services, and already feature prominently in the UK Government's Sustainable Development Indicators.

Although objective measures of wellbeing provide crucial baseline information about the health and living conditions in any given area, they can not provide information on how individuals actually perceive and experience living in their area - the experiential aspects of wellbeing.

## Subjective measures of wellbeing

The subjective measurement of wellbeing is usually based on survey questions asking respondents to rate their levels of satisfaction or happiness (see Box 2). Although a growing consensus has emerged regarding the robustness of subjective measures, there is disagreement about how the emotional aspects of wellbeing relate to the overall definition and measurement of subjective wellbeing.

### Box 2: Subjective measures of wellbeing: examples of social survey questions

*Taken all together, how would you say things are these days - would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?*

US General Social Survey, Question 157

*On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?*

Eurobarometer Survey Series

## Reliability and validity

The principal issue posed by the use of subjective measures concerns reliability and validity. How can we be sure that individuals understand 'satisfaction' and 'happiness' in the same way? Do individuals use wellbeing scales in the same way? Do cross-cultural differences make comparisons between groups or nations meaningless? Although these issues may intuitively appear problematic, research (e.g. Veenhoven, 1997; 2002; and, Easterlin, 2003) suggests that the reliability of questions rating overall life satisfaction is good. Although place and political regime may affect an individual's wellbeing, 'the meaning of terms such as happiness or satisfaction is preserved across languages' (Donovan and Halpern, 2003: 8).

## The role of genetics in subjective wellbeing

Psychological research has found that levels of self-reported happiness are influenced by inherited dispositions, posing a fundamental question about the role of genetics in subjective wellbeing. There remains, however, a lack of consensus as to how much of our happiness is genetically determined. Layard identifies two reasons for this: 'First, people with good genes also tend to get good experiences. Their parents are good at parenting. Their own niceness elicits good treatment from other people....Then there is the second reason: that many genetic effects are only triggered by bad situations and vice versa' (2005: 58).

## Wellbeing research: what is the evidence telling us?

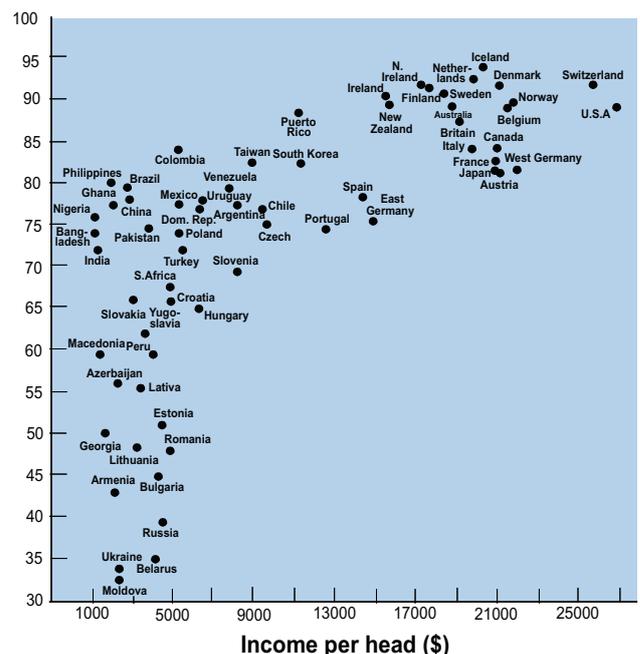
Research has revealed a number of variables which influence wellbeing and which may be susceptible to policy interventions.

## GDP, income and wellbeing

Despite conflicting evidence about whether levels of wellbeing are increasing or decreasing over time (for example, see Easterlin, 2003; The Economist, 2005), in recent decades life satisfaction rates in developed economies, such as the UK, have failed to reflect actual increases in income growth.

This is not to say that income does not influence life satisfaction. Life satisfaction for those living above subsistence is significantly higher than for those in poverty, and in poorer countries income increases make a bigger difference to satisfaction (both individually and nationally).

## Happiness Index



(Layard, 2005: 32)

Figure 2: The disassociation of income and happiness

However, as Layard (2005) shows, once average income in a country exceeds \$20,000 per head, increases in income become disassociated with increases in happiness (Figure 2).

## Relative income and hedonic adaptation

In attempting to explain this disparity, economists have concluded that relative income influences wellbeing more than absolute wealth. As the wealth of individuals and societies increases, they adapt to new, higher living standards and adjust expectations upwards. This 'hedonic adaptation' means that aspirations are never satisfied, and that increasing pleasure is needed to maintain a steady state of wellbeing.

## Non-material correlates of wellbeing

In addition to material considerations, research has identified a range of social and political factors which affect wellbeing.

## Personal relationships

Many researchers (e.g. Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004; Helliwell and Putnam, 2004), consider marriage and family relationships central to wellbeing. Marriage appears to have a lasting positive influence on wellbeing, whilst unions that end result in lower rates of satisfaction over time.



### Social and community relationships

Individuals who actively participate in their community report higher levels of social wellbeing than non-participants (Keyes, 1998), a finding corroborated by literature on healthy communities. Although difficult to measure, a common indicator of social and community relationships is level of participation in various bodies (e.g. church, political organisations, clubs etc).

### Employment

The influence of our working lives on wellbeing is most clearly illustrated by the detrimental social impacts of unemployment. However, happiness is less affected by unemployment if the person concerned lives in an area of high unemployment (e.g. Layard, 2005; Donovan and Halpern, 2003), highlighting the role of relative status in wellbeing and the interrelationship between community and employment factors.

'Meaningful work' is also frequently cited as a contributor to better wellbeing, although precise demonstrations of this effect are difficult to find.

### Political regimes and wellbeing

Research has shown that those living in unstable political environments, or nations characterised by high levels of corruption, have lower levels of wellbeing than those in countries where there is stability and accountability in public life. There is strong evidence from Switzerland that participation in democratic processes has a positive influence on wellbeing (see Donovan and Halpern, 2003: 30). However, international evidence also shows levels of wellbeing do not automatically rise with increased moves towards democracy, because the social and economic upheaval associated with such a political shift may counteract the positive effects of democratisation.

### Environmental factors

Despite a wealth of literature recognising the effects that nature (e.g. Wilson, 1984; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989), the built environment (Halpern, 1995) and public open space (CABE Space, 2004) all have on human health, the importance of environmental factors has not been a central concern of much wellbeing research.

In her literature review of research into the relationship between access to green space and wellbeing, Morris concludes that 'relevant research activities are currently fragmentary and mono-disciplinary' (Morris 2003: 20). Indeed a central message of the SDRN discussion paper is the need to better link research on wellbeing, health and local environment.

### Environmental justice

Access to good quality living environments is a central concern in the field of environmental justice. Recent Scottish research suggests that problems of low wellbeing, environmental degradation and material deprivation may coincide in certain neighbourhoods. Scots living in neighbourhoods with 'high incidence of street level incivilities' (i.e. litter, dog fouling, graffiti) perceived their areas as less safe than those in well-kept neighbourhoods, and were also more likely to report anxiety and depression (23% compared to 13% in communities with low incidence of street-level problems) (Curtice *et al*, 2005).

## Putting wellbeing research into practice: implications for future policy

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the research reviewed in '*Wellbeing: Concepts and Challenges*' is to highlight the importance of non-economic factors to wellbeing. Moreover, it shows that recent research has broadly succeeded in demonstrating that it is possible to measure and monitor subjective wellbeing over time, as well as attending to objective measures of circumstances which contribute to life satisfaction.

To date however, relatively few specific policy recommendations have emerged from the wellbeing research literature. Those that have tend to emphasise promoting positive personal and social relationships; achieving better work/life balance; and encouraging participation in communities and political life.

### Box 3: Example of 'A Wellbeing Manifesto'

#### 1. Measure what matters

The government should develop a detailed set of national well-being 'accounts', to help to understand well-being better and track changes over time.

#### 2. Create a well-being economy

Rather than focusing on economic growth, high quality, meaningful work should become a priority.

#### 3. Reclaim our time

The importance of work/life balance should take priority over increasing incomes. The UK should end individual opt-outs to the EU Working Time Directive and aim to achieve a maximum 35-hour week.

#### 4. Create an education system that promotes flourishing

Education policy must acknowledge that the best way of enabling people to realise their potential is to value them for who they are rather than their performance against targets. Young people should be exposed to the broader study of what makes a 'good life'.

#### 5. Refocus the health system to promote complete health

The National Health Service (NHS) and other health institutions need to continue to broaden their focus to promote complete health by accelerating the move towards a preventative health system.

#### 6. Invest in the very early years and parenting

Children need a lot of responsive individual attention in their first years. Parental leave should be extended and high-quality childcare subsidised for those parents who need, or wish, to work.

#### 7. Discourage materialism and promote authentic advertising

Commercial advertising aimed at the under-eights should be banned, and a strong code of conduct developed for advertising for the under-16's. Support should increase for cheap and local leisure provision, such as sports centres and arts venues, as well as informal open spaces and parks.

#### 8. Strengthen civil society, social well-being and active citizenship

The government should support community engagement and civil society organisations. Central government targets for service providers should be replaced with a process of stakeholder engagement and accountability centred on the user.

Taken from *A Wellbeing Manifesto for a Flourishing Society* (nef, 2004)

One example of an attempt to highlight the policy implications of wellbeing research is shown in Box 3. Proposed by the new economics foundation, an independent economics thinktank, the 'Wellbeing Manifesto' proposes eight areas in which government could act radically to promote wellbeing.

### The way forward for wellbeing

Those who advocate a wellbeing perspective often argue that a fundamental paradigm shift is required. Although current policies address many of the key areas identified in the wellbeing literature, they do so in a context of growing social and economic inequalities. For example, Layard (2005) recommends more redistributive taxation to reduce the income and wellbeing gap between rich and poor and to encourage all to devote more to their lives outside work.

Environmentalists argue that we must account for the ecological costs of economic growth and recognise the value of non-traded commodities, such as domestic labour and caring work, and that only then will we have sustainable community life with high levels of wellbeing.

It is difficult to define exactly what a 'wellbeing society' might look like because we do not know how the world would look if we made economic equalisation (locally and globally) a priority, and took a long-term view of how education and community action could de-emphasise consumption and encourage the values of the 'true' good life.

A less radical, but nonetheless innovative view of the role of wellbeing in policy suggests that it presents the opportunity to properly assess the impact of political and economic decisions on individuals' lives. A focus on wellbeing encourages the integration of social, economic and ecological policies and allows welfare to be examined as a thing in itself, rather than being subsumed under measures of economic growth. The wellbeing perspective also raises questions about the role of social inequalities in determining individual satisfaction.

Copies of the full review:

McAllister, F. (2005) *Wellbeing: Concepts and Challenges*. Discussion Paper prepared for the Sustainable Development Research Network.

Are available online at  
[http://www.sd-research.org.uk/wellbeing/documents/SDRNwellbeingpaper-Final\\_000.pdf](http://www.sd-research.org.uk/wellbeing/documents/SDRNwellbeingpaper-Final_000.pdf)

## Defra's Wellbeing Research Programme

Defra's Sustainable Development Unit (SDU) has established a research programme, reviewing the use of wellbeing and related concepts in policy making in the UK and internationally. One of the aims of the research is to provide a better understanding to policy makers of the relationships between these different concepts and to look at how government policy might change with an increased focus on wellbeing. The four projects commissioned by Defra, and due for completion in 2006, are:

### 1. Review of international evidence on the effectiveness of wellbeing focused policy interventions

This project comprises a review of non-UK policy interventions explicitly designed to improve wellbeing or life satisfaction. It will provide an overview of approaches taken, the range of definitions of wellbeing applied, and the kind of policy domains to which it has been applied. The study will also include information on how the effectiveness of wellbeing focused policy interventions has been assessed, including information on data and/or indicators used.

### 2. Review of research on the influences on personal wellbeing and its application to policy making

There is a substantial body of research identifying factors that influence or are associated with individual wellbeing across populations. This project reviews the evidence concerning the causative factors associated with various concepts or components of wellbeing with a view to establishing the strength and robustness of that evidence and addressing the question: "What are the main influences on wellbeing: how far do these differ between, or coincide for, different definitions of wellbeing and why?"

### 3 a & b. Reviews of the relationship between wellbeing and sustainable development

Two complimentary projects on wellbeing and sustainable development are being undertaken. The first of these includes a literature review, questionnaires to key stakeholders, and an interdisciplinary workshop. The literature review draws out the tensions between, and the complementarities of, the sustainable development and wellbeing agendas, while the questionnaire aims to acquire a diverse array of perspectives on the relationship between these two concepts.

A second complimentary project focuses on the relationship between the wellbeing of individuals and sustainable development at the local, national and international levels. It looks at the evidence for a link between subjective wellbeing, attitudes to the environment and environmental behaviour. The project will include a consultation with three leading international experts, which will inform a literature search. The final report will look at how sustainable development policies might change with an explicit wellbeing focus.

There are a number of ways through which it might be possible to quantify wellbeing, using both objective measurement of factors that may affect wellbeing, and subjective measurement based on people rating their wellbeing or happiness through surveys. Building on the research projects, the Government will be considering how wellbeing can be measured, with the view to establishing some provisional measures next year. These will supplement the Government's existing indicators of sustainable development

For further information on all the above projects, please contact Isabella Earle:  
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## Notes

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## Sustainable Development Research Network

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