

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



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

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

...contributing to sustainable development in the United Kingdom by facilitating the better use of evidence and research in policymaking.

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