



“Subjective wellbeing” a lucrative contemporary jargon for development management?

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Summary:

This article seeks to expose the rationale for increase contemporary focus on “subjective wellbeing” analyses in the design and implementation of development interventions. It sees it as adding holism to interventions via participation of the poor themselves on how they perceive their needs/quality of life etc. It is also based on research on people centred studies on wellbeing and subjective wellbeing in developing countries.

The tyranny of generalisations in development theories and practices left a big scar on the interpretation of poverty and well-being. This was due to the fact that designers of top-down classical interventions may have imagined that as issues like human rights were universal so too was happiness or a test on quality of life or wellbeing.

With modern inclinations towards participatory learning processes (Bond, 1999) as entry points to development management, it is becoming even more clear that not only did earlier research on quality of life measurements depend on Western observations (Camfield, 2004) but it actually assumed that these observed indicators could be used to analyse livelihoods in developing countries and which were some times very diametrically opposed in needs, cultures and civilisations. This led to the following misjudgements that:

- a) Financial and economic stability was the main if not the best way to strategise for a sustainable livelihoods outcome.
- b) Projects in the developed countries could be replicated in developing countries without corresponding in-depth analyses of the capabilities and assets of the beneficiaries, thereby neglecting other important issues like social networks and power relations hence failure (Gow and Morss, 1988).
- c) Development policies were tailored from the findings solely of economists and politicians without any possibility of policy dialogues at the local, state, national , regional and international levels hence interventions could not sufficiently react to changes on the ground for want of both environmental and stakeholders’ analyses leading to top-down decision making and failing projects (Weaver, 1985), despised by beneficiaries themselves.
- d) The poor were a passive lot or passive victims incapable of strategising for better livelihoods outcomes hence ignoring the fact that many poor livelihoods only existed because the poor were proactive (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005) and had strategies based on their assets and capabilities to be resilient to shocks and stresses pertaining to their situations.
- e) Western logic of wealth, ideal living and quality of life indicators (Brock, 1999) became tools of analysing people usually cut-off from these parameters of social, mental and economic thoughts hence mono-dimensional in content and contexts to the diverse communities and interpretations of poverty (Hall and Midgley, 2004) that modern social science research has unfolded. This led to the lack of holism, participation and partnerships in the design and implementation of development interventions hence little impacts on the societies they sought to help and even more poverty in the world.

While it will be misleading to think that western models for development interventions are solely inappropriate for developing countries, this article is only suggestive that for these interventions to have any impacts on sustaining poor livelihoods, they must be designed with keen inclinations to participation, regional, national or local interpretations

of wealth, poverty, happiness, active citizenry etc. These interventions must take into consideration the following points that:

- a) Happiness is multi-dimensional and can be relative, regional, local or universal hence based on contexts (Brock, 1999, White and Pettit, 2005).
- b) Poor people generally or essentially seek to better their existing well-being and do not necessarily want to lose their handed down traditions for so called progressive cultures. This consideration is essential in designing better interventions because it encourages the use of already tested local strategies to resist shocks and stresses hence incidentally supporting capacity building in local communities while using scientific parameters for development change too. This may also lead to community participation, partnerships, growth and development.
- c) Perceptions of poverty by the poor themselves vary from classical drawings of the vice. This statement can best be described if we import or rephrase the words of Schkade and Kahneman, (1998) “does living in California make people happy?”; therefore, if poverty can be interpreted from monetary indicators, livelihoods indicators, assets to access, regional perceptions etc, then interventions must be holistic, flexible, participatory etc in design to effectively target or redress it.

Perhaps the mind or contemporary studies have favoured livelihoods analyses and frameworks (Scoones, 1998) as a key to better development interventions (DFID, 2004) but livelihood frameworks might mean little if they are not grounded by what is now termed “subjective wellbeing” analyses.

These are holistic, person centred, dynamic driven studies and interventions seeking to give clearer understandings to peoples lives so as to better interventions aimed at poverty reduction (Camfield, 2007). They are based on peoples own perceptions of their destitution, their strategies to resist this destitution, what they regard as happiness, as an ideal happy man/woman in society etc. The benefits of these approaches are that:

- a) New indicators of quality of life and well-being previously omitted in research on wellbeing like peoples relationships with their friends, families etc, celebrating holidays or fiestas, or whether they were ethical or respectful individuals in society etc have increasingly been considered important tools in measuring how people perceive themselves, their achievements or needs. This tendency is therefore more inclusive of most developing countries that still keep extended families, friends, and cultures, networks etc which warrant closer observations from intervention designers in redressing their destitution (Camfield, 2007).
- b) Aspects of people’s life like the happiness from religious practice, matrimony, children, family support etc previously considered intangible are now tangible for they are considered not only as goals that people strategise to achieve but assets that have values to the livelihoods outcomes of the poor. This adds holism in understanding of poverty and depth to studies of environments which can also in the long run affect not only development policies towards poverty alleviation in these regions or countries but also business strategies and considerations on corporate social responsibility, stakeholder analyses and social entrepreneurship in these areas hence strategic development interventions.
- c) They have demonstrated that translating cosmic visions of poor peoples is not enough. Their cosmic visions must be understood for development interventions

to affect them hence the need for psycho-economic, socio-cultural and political analyses as key ingredients to modern development management.

The justifications for subjective wellbeing it must be noted gained strengths with more recent exploratory works by the WeD Group (2007), reviews on participatory work on poverty and ill-being (World Development Report 2000/01) etc. Also the continuous evolution and use of livelihoods principles and frameworks as entry points to better interventions (Toner and Franks, 2006) have incidentally favoured “subjective wellbeing” approaches in their stride to integrate holism with partnerships, participation, flexibility and accountability, enterprise approaches and dynamism in the design and implementation of interventions.

If this trend towards learning processes for development management continues as seen now in the works of important stakeholders like DFID, World Bank etc (Hussein, 2002) and “subjective wellbeing” in particular (Camfield, 2007), then it may not be farfetched to intimate that development policies no matter how economically viable they seem may need an ingredient of “subjective wellbeing” to make sense on the poor peoples they seek to help. By this same strand of reason, living in an urban ghetto or suburb is not prima facie a rationale for urban/suburb unhappiness just like we cannot justify living in California as a measurement of urban happiness (Schkade and Kahneman, 1998) .

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