



## ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries



From the ESRC Publication: **Britain Today 2007**

**Wellbeing and international development**  
by Allister McGregor, Director, Wellbeing in Developing Countries Research Group, University of Bath.

We are frequently confronted with images of people in developing countries experiencing extreme poverty and hardship. Such media coverage reminds us that these people are not just statistics, and brings an important dimension of humanity to our understanding of poverty – it reminds us of our relationship to them.

This more humanised perspective on understanding poverty is central to the work of a group of researchers at the University of Bath. The team has been carrying out detailed studies of how some people succeed, but many others fail, to achieve wellbeing in developing countries. They argue that the concept of wellbeing provides new and innovative insights into how we are to understand and then create policy to deal with the challenges of poverty and development.

Last year's white paper on development called for the elimination of world poverty to be tackled at a number of levels: from the international political and policy environment; through the governance of the nation state; and down to the specific conditions in which men, women and children experience poverty and insecurity in developing countries. There is much of merit in this document and it offers leadership on key development issues. But it fails to enunciate a consistent analytical concept to guide and connect development policy thinking at these different levels.

Recalling the 1986 United Nations 'declaration on the right to development', which defines development as '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', the wellbeing researchers propose that 'the promotion of the conditions within which people can reasonably pursue wellbeing' represents a coherent principle to guide international development policy choices at each level.

We must simply ask: in what ways is this policy intervention going to create the conditions within which people can do better or remove conditions that currently result in them experiencing profound 'illbeing' in the form of extreme poverty?

Wellbeing represents an important new focus for development because it situates our understanding of economic resources and the incomes that flow from them in three ways: it considers the wider social and cultural resources that people draw on; it takes account of people's psychological predispositions and states, one part of which is their 'happiness'; and it studies what people can do with their lives.

In other words, wellbeing arises from the interaction of what people have, what they can do with what they have, and what they think and feel about what they have and can do.

Applying this perspective in detailed empirical research on the persistence of poverty in four countries – Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand – the researchers focused attention not only on why some people don't have enough of what they need, but also why some cannot do things to improve their situation – and how they cope with such conditions.

The studies reveal recurring patterns in the struggles of poor people. In seeking to establish employment and livelihood strategies from which they might pursue wellbeing for themselves and their children, they typically face three options:

- They can invest their scarce resources of time, labour and loyalty in relationships that provide some security in the pursuit of wellbeing in the short term, but which may entail greater and sometimes exploited dependence on others later.
- They can migrate to seek conditions that they believe will better allow them to achieve their desired goals of wellbeing. But they often do so without the resources of money, skills or relationships that would make migration successful.
- They can break societies' rules, turning to illegal or socially unacceptable means to pursue wellbeing. But they run the risk of experiencing violence or social and legal sanctions.

By highlighting the social relationships that shape these choices and which flow from them, the wellbeing research offers explanations for the persistence of poverty.

For the first type of response, the study of Bangladesh affirms that for poorer members of communities, borrowing remains a necessity and that 'friends, relatives and neighbours' represent the major category of people from whom loans are taken. Investment in relationships with kin, friends and neighbours is necessary because this group constitutes a major source of security for most households.

But while these relationships are important in themselves for people's wellbeing, they can also explain why some households find it difficult to escape poverty. The indebtedness and obligations that arise from such borrowing can result in material burdens on individuals and households, or represent social and political constraints on their choices of what they can and cannot do in their struggles for wellbeing.

For the second type of response, the study of Ethiopia draws attention to a particular group of female in-migrants. These women, who were often widows and divorcees, cited the need to escape the difficult relationships and oppressive attitudes they experienced in rural communities as among their major reasons for migrating. But it was apparent that migrating to the city was not a miraculous solution to their problems and that they often faced different but equally difficult and exploitative relationships as they struggled to achieve even the basics in urban life.

The third type of response is illustrated by a comparison of Peru and Thailand. These are the two wealthiest of the four countries, but each is notable for the high levels of material inequality and regional imbalance that have accompanied their development.

Peru has a history of people being mobilised to violence – through the *Sendero Luminoso* insurrection – as a challenge to inequality and exclusion. Thailand, in contrast, has experienced the active management of a national ideology that emphasises ‘Thai’ values of acceptance and moderation. The research suggests that this ideological campaign may have played an important part in assuaging unrest and in helping Thai society cope with its growing levels of material inequality.

But the study also shows that Thailand is experiencing not only widening material inequality but also a growing gulf in aspirational inequality. While some people can pursue highly sophisticated, globalised and materially rich lifestyles, others can no longer realistically aspire to anything like this. Indebtedness is extreme in some communities and is reported as a major source of illbeing. Such aspirational inequality is a challenge to the ideological management that has thus far constrained dissent in Thailand. As it grows, the country’s political tensions may well be exacerbated.

So what do the findings from this more humanised, wellbeing-oriented research have to say to aid agencies intent on reducing poverty in developing countries? First, they urge the need to analyse and understand the social relationships – locally, nationally and globally – which deny people the possibility of wellbeing and result in patterns of persistent illbeing.

Second, they suggest the need for forms of intervention to help develop the institutional and organisational capacity that support social relationships which are important for wellbeing but protect people from their potentially damaging and exploitative aspects.

Third, they argue that issues of values and culture cannot be ignored and that these must be addressed where they are clearly implicated in processes of impoverishment.

And finally, they highlight the fact that inequality matters and that there are possible adverse consequences and costs of both material and aspirational inequality for the pursuit of wellbeing in our increasingly global community.

*Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research* edited by Ian Gough and Allister McGregor will be published by Cambridge University Press in May.