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## After 2015: '3D Human Wellbeing'

'3D Human Wellbeing' is emerging as a complement to the more traditional and material ways of conceptualising and measuring poverty and deprivation such as those implicit in the MDGs. But human wellbeing is not simply a new banner. It stands at the heart of the argument for a more human-centred approach to development and helps us to rethink indicators and policies for pro-poor policy.

Recent initiatives, the most notable of which is the OECD's *Measuring the Progress of Societies*, suggests that current approaches to poverty and development indicators and pro-poor policy need rethinking.

'3D human wellbeing' shifts our focus beyond incomes and narrow human development indicators to take account of what people can do and be, and how they evaluate what they can do and be (see box, right). Human wellbeing is three-dimensional (3D): it takes account of material wellbeing, subjective wellbeing and relational wellbeing. Policy that is intended to stimulate development processes cannot realistically focus on just one or two of them to the exclusion of the other(s). People's own perceptions and experience of life matter, as do their relationships and their material standard of living.

### What is the value of a focus on '3D human wellbeing'?

A 3D human wellbeing approach adds value to the 'traditional poverty' lens of the MDGs (which define poverty largely as material deprivation) in two ways. Firstly, it explicitly integrates *relational* and *subjective* perspectives on human

### What is '3D human wellbeing'?

Wellbeing arises from a combination of:

- what a person has
- what a person can do with what they have
- and how they think about what they have and can do.

It involves the interplay of:

- the resources that a person is able to command
- what they are able to achieve with those resources and what needs and goals they are able to meet
- the meaning that they give to the goals they achieve and the processes in which they engage.

Source: McGregor (2007)

wellbeing. How people relate to others and what people feel they can do or can be play a strong role in what people will actually do and be able to be. Secondly, it is a positive perspective. A wellbeing focus is respectful of the rounded humanity of all people by focusing on what people *can* rather than *can't* do, be or feel. It is also respectful in its focus on self-determination. The 3D wellbeing focus is inherently political. It addresses the questions of who has what? Who can do what? And who feels positive about what they can have and do?

### What does refocusing development on 3D human wellbeing offer for pro-poor policy and practice?

Refocusing development on 3D human wellbeing offers critical ways of reflecting on the adequacy of our currently accepted wisdom concerning how we think about and do development.

There is much nervousness about a policy focus on human wellbeing. It is argued by some that wellbeing is too personal for public policy. Others point out how complicated the concept of wellbeing is and that this makes it difficult to work with. It is increasingly recognised that we need more complex understandings of human development, yet policy and practice is struggling to find ways to cope with this observation. A 3D human wellbeing focus represents a coherent way of framing this complexity so that it is more amenable for policy thinking.

This means that we must work to develop indicators of each dimension and find ways of integrating these into development policy design and into monitoring and evaluations systems. The

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Table 1: Interventions for 3D Human Wellbeing

| Types of Intervention \ Dimensions of Wellbeing | Material Dimensions of Wellbeing                                                                              | Relational Dimensions of Wellbeing                                        | Subjective Dimensions of Wellbeing                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Capabilities</b>                             | Asset transfer schemes; credit and savings schemes (e.g. MDG 1)                                               | Human and skills development schemes; Empowerment programmes (e.g. MDG 2) | The social and cultural dimensions of education programmes (e.g. MDGs 2, 3, 5, 6) |
| <b>Conditions</b>                               | Land reform; The regulation of markets (e.g. monopoly regulation, moneylending, trading weights and measures) | Legal reform; Rights-based approaches; Governance reforms                 | Societal campaigns for social and cultural reform (e.g. dowry campaign)           |

indicators that flow from a 3D definition differ from those that currently dominate development practice. Income-based and even human development indicators deal primarily with material and objectively observable (or reportable) dimensions of human wellbeing. Here we require a combination of 'needs satisfaction indicators', 'human agency indicators' and 'quality of life indicators' (see Gough and McGregor, 2007).

Using the 3D wellbeing framework we can construct a simple matrix to illustrate the types of analysis and policy choice when considering the combinations of personal 'capabilities' and societal 'conditions' interventions that the focus on human wellbeing requires (see Table 1, above). For example, a focus on improving the material wellbeing of sections of the population may involve the establishment of a credit programme but must also consider whether market reforms are necessary to ensure that any credit received is not immediately eroded by unfair market conditions in which poor people might operate. Equally, however, the approach encourages us to consider whether such efforts to improve the material dimensions of wellbeing must be accompanied by actions in relation to the other two dimensions in order to have overall effect on human wellbeing outcomes.

Post-2015 development policy should continue in its emphasis on material wellbeing but place this in its proper three-dimensional human wellbeing context. More attention is needed to the subjective and relational domains of human wellbeing and particularly to how these relate in the spheres of human values, relationships, norms and behaviours.

## Credits

This *In Focus Policy Briefing* was written by **J. Allister McGregor** and **Andy Sumner** from the Vulnerability and Poverty Reduction Team at IDS. The series editor is **Clare Gorman**. For other briefs on the crisis see: [www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus9](http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus9)

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## Further reading

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