



## Review article

## Towards an integrated framework for understanding the links between inequalities and wellbeing of places in low and middle income countries



Joseph Kangmenang\*, Susan J. Elliott

Department of Geography and Environmental Management, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Low and middle income countries  
Inequality  
Wellbeing  
Integrated framework

## ABSTRACT

As part of a larger research programme undertaking the development of a global index of wellbeing (GLOWING) through the exploration of population wellbeing in low to middle income countries (LMICs), this paper examines the role of inequality in shaping experiences of wellbeing. The paper explores various conceptualizations of wellbeing and inequality and outlines an integrated framework for understanding the importance of measuring the wellbeing of places. We conclude by urging geographers to explicitly engage with theory and cross-disciplinary research in order to adequately conceptualize the role of place in 'Beyond GDP' and progress measures.

## 1. Introduction

Human prosperity as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and life expectancy is better now than at any time in history (Deaton, 2013). However, there is a growing recognition that prosperity has been achieved at the expense of social, environmental, and economic costs, including rising inequalities (Costanza et al., 2014; Stiglitz, 2012). Population health and wellbeing can thus be hardly judged by focusing on GDP alone or measures of life expectancy without looking at the range of other factors that affect wellbeing (Deaton, 2013). Alternative measures of population wellbeing that reflect what society values, as well as their perceptions and aspirations, are thus needed to design, measure, implement, and evaluate policies. This is because "what we measure affects what we do; and if our measurements are flawed, decisions may be distorted" (Stiglitz et al., 2009; pg 1). Currently, policies are often judged based on their potential to promote economic growth; "but if our metrics of performances are wrong, our [policy] inferences may also be flawed" (Stiglitz et al., 2009, p 1).

Recently, several initiatives aptly categorised as 'Beyond GDP' are attempting to conceptualize and measure wellbeing of populations (Stiglitz et al., 2009; Costanza et al., 2014). Current alternative measures of wellbeing can be grouped into three main categories (Elliott et al., 2017): 1) indicators that correct the weaknesses of GDP; 2) indicators that measure aspects of wellbeing directly; and 3) composite indices that combine approaches (see Table 1 for a list of these indicators). These existing indicators have been a useful guide for policy and practice in their respective countries (Boarini et al., 2014). A growing literature from the 'Beyond GDP' initiatives suggests that

cultural, social, environmental factors and subjective perceptions are equally important factors shaping population wellbeing (Elliott et al., 2017; Davern et al., 2017; Barrington-Leigh and Escande, 2018).

Despite the relevance of alternative measures of wellbeing for practical and policy purposes, their uptake remains limited in LMICs (Elliott et al., 2017). With a few exceptions (e.g. Bhutan Gross National Happiness Index, Wellbeing in Development), the majority of wellbeing research is dominated by scholarly and policy literature based on the Euro-American version of wellbeing-individual wellbeing, with its associated values and aspirations (Ferraro and Barletti, 2016; Elliott et al., 2017). The current discourse conceives wellbeing as a measurable individual pursuit, evaluated in terms of health and/or material prosperity and ignores socio-cultural, ecological and collective discourses that accompany the 'good life' in other contexts (Ferraro and Barletti, 2016; Elliott et al., 2017). Their application and relevance for policy making, therefore, remain limited in LMICs, especially in SSA where such indicators are urgently needed (Elliott et al., 2017). That is, existing measures are limited in a range of ways: they may be narrow (e.g., the world happiness index), lack context (e.g., Human Development Index (HDI)), are data driven and not adequately conceptualized to capture other issues that contribute to wellbeing such as ecology, cultural identity, participation and psychological security (Costanza et al., 2008; White, 2010; Ferraro and Barletti, 2016). Also of critical importance is whether the constituents of these 'Beyond GDP' measures represent what really matters to people in their specific contexts and if they are capable of capturing the multi-dimensional nature of wellbeing (Allin and Hand, 2014). The take home message is that theoretically informed alternative measures of wellbeing that clearly interrogate the

\* Corresponding author. Department of Geography and Environmental Management, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON, Canada.  
E-mail address: [jkangmen@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:jkangmen@uwaterloo.ca) (J. Kangmenang).

**Table 1**

Categories of alternative measures of wellbeing.

Adapted from [Vemuri and Costanza \(2006\)](#), [Costanza et al., 2009](#).

Classification of alternative measures	Meaning	Examples
Indicators that correct for the weakness of GDP (GDP +, GDP + +)	Uses GDP as a foundation and adds or subtracts other economic welfare indicators, health, education, wealth distribution adjustments, and natural, social, and human capital adjustments	Green GDPs, Genuine Progress Indicator, Genuine Savings, Ecological footprint, Index of Sustainable Development Welfare and Genuine Wealth
Subjective Wellbeing measures	Derived from questions that require an individual to reflect on and evaluate their overall wellbeing, happiness or life satisfaction; these indices are typically based on the collection of primary data	Happiness Index, World Values Survey, and Quality of life indices
<b>Composite measures of wellbeing</b> Subjective + Objective indicators	Derived from a broad range of domains and indices that rely on both subjective and objective measures of wellbeing typically sourced from secondary and primary data sources	Bhutan Gross National Happiness Index, Happy Planet Index
Only Objective indicators	Derived from a broad range of domains and indices that rely on only objective measures of wellbeing typically sourced from secondary data sources	Human Development indices, Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW), Australian Index of Wellbeing (AIW),

role of place, as well as allow for relationality across scales and between people and places are needed in LMICs.

The inadequate conceptualisation of place to include the collective and socio-cultural context in wellbeing studies limits the relevance of current indicators in the contexts of LMICs where wellbeing is often promoted as a collective attribute at the community or household level rather than at the individual level ([Steele and Lynch, 2013](#); [Ferraro and Barletti, 2016](#)). Place is often used merely as a backdrop to human activity, with little consideration to the complex experiences of people in place ([Ferraro and Barletti, 2016](#)). Even among the few research that calls for a more critical attention to the role of place, there exists a dominance of a Euro-American version of wellbeing, often concentrating on its health and psychological dimensions (e.g. [Atkinson and Joyce, 2011](#); [Schwanen and Atkinson, 2015](#)), neglecting other world views. Moreover, the limited research that examines the role of place has mainly focused on the characteristics of individuals concentrated in particular places without drawing attention to collective opportunities in the ecological, physical and social environments, as well as the socio-cultural and historical features of places ([Macintyre et al., 2002](#); [Macintyre and Ellaway, 2009](#); [Mackebach, 2009](#)). Thus, using individual level measures or theories of wellbeing for populations in LMICs may be problematic and also make it difficult to interrogate the relationality across and between scales, as well as interdependences between the compositional, contextual and collective facets of places and wellbeing.

This paper explores alternative ways of conceptualizing wellbeing and the role of inequality as a key component of the wellbeing of places. The rest of the paper is structured into five parts. Following the introduction, sections 2 and 3 examines different conceptualizations of wellbeing and inequality. Section 4 then examines the link between inequality and wellbeing and the pathways that link inequalities, health and wellbeing. In doing so, we also review the empirical literature on links between inequality and wellbeing especially, within the context of LMICs. To comprehensively explain these links, section 5 explores potential theoretical and methodological approaches that can be used to assess the relationships between inequality and wellbeing along with an outlined integrated framework. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of considering the wellbeing of places along with comprehensive measures of inequality.

## 2. Conceptualizing health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing are two related but distinct concepts ([Deaton, 2013](#); [Allin and Hand, 2014](#)). Since the middle of the twentieth century, there has been a move to increasingly stress the positive dimensions of health as a resource for everyday living ([WHO, 2008](#); [Kearns, 1993](#)). As observed by the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2008) “while we see health as having intrinsic value – health as an end

in itself – the Commission also recognizes its instrumentality” (p. 10). Health is conceptualized as a positive concept that influences the social, personal and physical resources that enable individuals and communities to function emotionally, mentally and physically, and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity ([WHO, 1986](#)). Even though population health is important in itself, its major value lies in the contributions that it makes to and receives from other equally important aspects of life ([Michalos et al., 2011](#); [Michalos, 2017](#)). Therefore health must be understood as constitutive parts of ends of development which is to improve population wellbeing.

But what is population wellbeing? Even though there is a considerable body of work which aims to develop measures of population wellbeing (e.g. Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW), Australian National Development Index (ANDI), OECD better life index), there is no consensus on how wellbeing should be defined and measured ([McAllister, 2005](#); [Forgeard et al., 2011](#); [Hall et al., 2010](#); [Allin and Hand, 2014](#)). Nonetheless, different scholars guided by theoretical frameworks or consultative processes have attempted to conceptualize and measure wellbeing (e.g. [Hall et al., 2010](#); [Barrington-Leigh and Escande, 2018](#); [Michalos et al., 2011](#)). Though many different conceptualizations exist, the majority are utilitarian (including both the ‘revealed preferences’ approach and the happiness approach) or guided/based on the fulfillment of human needs, capabilities and functioning ([Bleys, 2012](#)). For instance, the Human development index is based on Sen’s capabilities approach whilst others such as Canadian index of wellbeing (CIW), OECD better life and UK’s How’s life indices employs pragmatic approaches by combining theoretical approaches and a consultative component ([Michalos et al., 2011](#); [Hall et al., 2010](#); [Boarini et al., 2014](#); [White, 2010](#); [Barrington-Leigh and Escande, 2018](#)). While these notions of wellbeing differ, they are united in the philosophy that wellbeing comprises both material and immaterial components ([Hall et al., 2010](#)). We use wellbeing here to refer to all things that are good for a person and society, that make for a good life ([Deaton, 2013](#)). Our idea of wellbeing is similar in construct to the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) and the OECD Better Life Index (CIW, 2016; OECD, 2016). For instance, the CIW conceptualizes wellbeing across eight domains including; community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment; healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards and time use ([Appendix 1](#)). The OECD Better Life index, on the other hand, conceptualizes wellbeing encompassing individual wellbeing as well as sustainability of wellbeing over time ([Appendix 2](#)). Despite these useful conceptualisations, we believe that what determines a good life is situational, contextual and is best articulated by people in their own context ([Sen, 1993](#); [Nussbaum, 2011](#)). However, a critical indicator that undermines wellbeing everywhere is rising inequality ([Pickett and Wilkinson, 2015](#); [World Bank, 2016](#)). Heightened concern about inequality stems from its dramatic increase worldwide, reinforced by the interconnectedness of the world that has increased the

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