



scottish universities  
insight institute  
mobilising knowledge for a better Scotland



## Good Lives and Decent Societies

A knowledge exchange series exploring the concept of wellbeing  
and its relevance for policy and practice

### A context-setting overview of the wellbeing debate

*by Marie-Amélie Viatte and Christina McMellon*

#### 1. Introduction

In autumn 2013, the Scottish Universities Insight Institute (SUII) and its partners launched a new knowledge exchange programme on the theme of wellbeing and societal progress. This followed on from the Scottish Futures Forum's Rethinking Wellbeing<sup>1</sup> seminar series and aimed to contribute to the development of policy and practice in Scotland and further afield, including the refinement of the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework, 'Scotland Performs'. The SUII programme was designed to stimulate multi-disciplinary collaboration between academics, policy makers and practitioners to increase understanding, share learning and generate new insights. Specifically, the programme seeks to:

- develop a deeper understanding of what influences individual and societal wellbeing;
- explore how best to assess wellbeing and the influences on wellbeing to help shape and guide policy and practice;
- reflect on how best to promote and embed improved wellbeing through public, private and third sector action.

GLADS<sup>2</sup> – Good Lives and Decent Societies<sup>2</sup> – is one of five projects funded under the 2014 SUII wellbeing programme. The project takes a broad and multi-faceted approach to explore what wellbeing means in practice, with particular attention given to three themes: health, place and space, and work and employment. It aims to bring together professionals working across a number of disciplines and in a range of sectors to investigate how to embed efforts to increase individual and societal wellbeing. GLADS primarily consists of three knowledge exchange events taking place between February and June 2014.

This briefing is part of a suite of dissemination activities, also including an online presence and audio-visual podcasts, seeking to engage with a wider range of stakeholders to maximise the value of the GLADS events. Wellbeing is a vast field of enquiry and this paper does not attempt to give a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the subject. Instead, it offers a broad overview of the context around the wellbeing debate and poses some of the questions to be explored through the series. The paper also maps out some of the key landmarks in the wellbeing landscape, sign-posting to a number of sources that readers will be able to access for a more in-depth understanding.

## **2. Why Wellbeing?**

Development has historically focused upon the reduction of poverty and the acquisition of financial wealth, as measured by GDP<sup>3</sup>. This, however, raises questions about what it is that makes life worth living and presents several problems. Firstly, it implies that acquiring wealth will necessarily improve people's quality of life, and yet there is extensive evidence that, at least after basic needs are met, money is not necessarily one of the key determinants of happiness<sup>4</sup>. Also, economic growth can have a directly negative impact on wellbeing as it often leads to pollution and the depletion of resources. Conversely events that common-sense suggests may negatively impact upon subjective wellbeing – such as natural disasters, crime and divorce – can sometimes impact positively upon GDP<sup>5</sup>.

The concept of wellbeing recommends a holistic approach to addressing these challenges. A distinction can be made between the end goal of development and the means that are employed to get to that goal. Policy concerns such as education, governance, employment, health and economic growth can be viewed as ends in their own right or as instrumental means to an end goal that is related to better lives for individuals and for societies. Understanding and measuring such a goal, however, presents complex challenges for academics, policy makers and practitioners.

## **3. Starting the discussion**

The GLADS seminar series provides an opportunity to raise and explore together some of the big questions related to the challenges of how to define wellbeing, generate and make use of evidence about it, and embed it in practice.

Wellbeing is an important concept across practice, policy and different academic disciplines. Meaningful dialogue across such a wide range of approaches can be challenging and it is important to be clear about whether we are referring to the same things when we use terms such as 'wellbeing' 'quality of life' and 'happiness'. The concept of wellbeing is related to both individual lives and broader social issues. Wellbeing also extends across time and many have argued that it needs to include reference to sustainability or the need to pay attention to the wellbeing of future generations.

Wellbeing has objective and subjective aspects: it includes observable facts about people's situation and condition, as well as subjective experience and self-evaluation. Objective wellbeing indicators only provide part of the picture since two people can have the same life circumstances yet experience their life very differently<sup>6</sup>. Subjective indicators allow for a more nuanced understanding of objective measures, including acknowledging the complex interplay of different factors and a consideration of how people value and prioritise the different areas of their lives. There are challenges relating to measuring and evidencing all aspects of wellbeing in general, but assessing subjective wellbeing raises particular practical problems. Subjective wellbeing indicators are increasingly utilised in wellbeing surveys but there are arguments that quality of understanding is more important than quantitative measures and that policy and practice should be informed by narrative accounts of the ways that people experience their everyday lives.

#### 4. Wellbeing around the world

In response to debates about the limitations of GDP as a measurement of progress and influenced by the writing of Amartya Sen<sup>7</sup>, in 1990 Mahbub ul Haq developed the Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>8</sup> upon which the United Nations Development Project bases its annual Human Development Reports. The HDI is an aggregate measure of three development indicators: life expectancy, levels of education (as measured by literacy rates and school enrolment) and standard of living (as measured by GDP). The 2013 Human Development Report is entitled The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World<sup>9</sup>.

In 2008, the French Government initiated the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress<sup>10</sup>, led by Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. Following on from this inquiry, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) launched the Better Life Index (BLI)<sup>11</sup> in 2011. BLI measures 11 dimensions of wellbeing: housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, governance, health, life-satisfaction, safety and work-life balance. It includes "How's Life", a comprehensive report of the international wellbeing data across these dimensions and "Your Better Life Index" an online interactive tool which makes it possible to adjust the weighting of the different dimensions in order to compare different aspects of wellbeing across countries.

In 2011, UN member states unanimously adopted a resolution noting that GDP "was not designed to and does not adequately reflect the happiness and wellbeing of people in a country" and inviting countries "to pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and wellbeing in development with a view to guiding their public policies"<sup>12</sup>. The resolution led to the designation of 20<sup>th</sup> March as World Happy Day<sup>13</sup>, and empowered Bhutan to convene a High Level Meeting looking at "Happiness and Wellbeing: Defining a New Economic Paradigm" in April 2012<sup>14</sup>. Since the early 1970s Bhutan has been developing and implementing an alternative model of development based upon the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) which is defined using 4 pillars, 9 domains and 72 indicators and has been measured in two national surveys in 2008 and 2010.

Using data from Gallup's World Poll<sup>15</sup>, the first World Happiness Report was published in advance of the High Level Meeting and compares happiness across countries. It found that six key factors were found to explain most of the difference in happiness over time and between countries. These six factors are: real GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, having someone to count on, perceived freedom to make life choices, freedom from corruption, and generosity<sup>16</sup>. Other comparisons of wellbeing across countries include the World Database of Happiness<sup>17</sup>, an archive of international research findings on subjective enjoyment of life and the New Economic Foundation's Happy Planet Index<sup>18</sup> which compares wellbeing in different countries across the world using an aggregate of life expectancy, experienced wellbeing and ecological footprint.

Closer to home, the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) programme of Measuring National Well-being<sup>19</sup> aims to provide a holistic measure of wellbeing in the UK which "is about looking at 'GDP and beyond'". The programme identified four 'capitals' that make up wellbeing - natural capital, produced capital, human capital and social capital - and the indicators used to evidence these capitals are illustrated on the National Well-being Wheel of measures. In 2013, ONS reported on the subjective "personal wellbeing" indicators in the UK for the first time suggesting that there have been small improvements in personal

wellbeing between the years of 2011/12 and 2012/13. Westminster's Environmental Audit Select Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry examining the policy implications of the work conducted by ONS<sup>20 21</sup>.

## 5. Wellbeing - the Scottish context

As set out in previous sections, the Scottish Government is not unique in moving away from a narrow definition of progress purely based on GDP<sup>22</sup> towards more holistic approaches to measure wellbeing; its efforts have been informed by the work of many others. Inspired by Virginia Performs<sup>23</sup> in the United States, the Scottish Government first introduced Scotland Performs in 2007 in an effort to move towards a more outcome-focused form of policy making. Articulated around the 16 national outcomes and 50 indicators of the National Performance Framework, Scotland Performs<sup>24</sup> attempts to provide a picture of the “progress of government in creating a more successful country”. It offers a “dashboard” of a statistics pertaining to a range of economic, health, social and environmental markers. The indicator set was revised slightly in 2011 and, in 2013, John Swinney MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, invited a wide range of stakeholders to join a Round Table to share views and ideas on how Scotland Performs could be further embedded and improved as a framework for national wellbeing<sup>1</sup>.

One key influence has been that of Professor Joseph Stiglitz who sits on the Scottish Government's Council of Economic Advisers. In February 2013, Stiglitz gave evidence to the Scottish Parliament<sup>25</sup>. He underlined long-standing concerns regarding the adequacy of GDP as a measure of a country's performance and indeed as an indication of wellbeing, and yet it has been increasingly relied upon. He highlighted that measures and statistics can be misleading and that great care is therefore required over the technicalities. Stiglitz also stressed the critical importance of distribution; averages sometimes hide stark inequalities and using the median can be more useful. His contribution gave further impetus to the debate emerging in Scotland about the place of wellbeing amongst societal objectives and how to improve and implement better measures of performance.

The Carnegie UK Trust's recent suite of publications on wellbeing and alternatives to GDP has made significant contributions to this agenda in Scotland. Drawing on the Stiglitz Commission's report, “More Than GDP – Measuring What Matters”<sup>26</sup> published in 2011, explores the complexity involved in determining what progress and prosperity consist of. It recommended that the Scottish Government develops a performance framework “better able to deliver measure and report on economic performance, quality of life, sustainability and wellbeing”. In 2012, “Shifting the Dial”<sup>27</sup> reported on six case studies of measuring wellbeing in France, the USA and Canada and argued for strong governmental leadership supported by civil society engagement. This was followed in 2013 by “Shifting the Dial in Scotland”<sup>28</sup> which highlights the crucial role of civil society and calls on the Scottish Government to pursue a broad programme of engagement to review the content and use of the National Performance Framework. It recommends embedding it in legislation “in order to provide a year on year study into Scotland's social progress”.

In June 2013, Oxfam Scotland published its second report on the Humankind Index<sup>29</sup> alongside “Our Economy: Towards a new prosperity”<sup>30</sup>. The aim of the index is to examine Scotland's progress and prosperity taking a holistic approach and going beyond a GDP-based analysis of the economy. It was developed through public consultation on what individuals in Scotland identified as their life priorities, concerns and ambitions<sup>2</sup>. In “Our Economy”, Oxfam sets out its vision for a different economy in Scotland, away from its

<sup>1</sup> A presentation on recent work undertaken on Scotland Performs will be given by the Scottish Government at the GLADS event in February and disseminated online thereafter.

<sup>2</sup> Oxfam will make a presentation on the Humankind Index at the GLADS event in February and disseminated online thereafter.

current focus on economic growth as measured by GDP and towards a greater emphasis on enhancing wellbeing. In partnership with the Carnegie UK Trust, Oxfam Scotland has created a [policy assessment tool](#)<sup>31</sup> that aims to measure the impact of policy and practice decision-making on wellbeing.

## 6. GLADS Themes

It is widely recognised that understanding and promoting wellbeing requires consideration of different aspects of life, or 'life domains'. The Stiglitz Commission report states:

“While the precise list of the features affecting quality of life inevitably rests on value judgments, there is a consensus that quality of life depends on people’s health and education, their everyday activities (which include the right to a decent job and housing), their participation in the political process, the social and natural environment in which they live, and the factors shaping their personal and economic security.”<sup>32</sup>

Importantly, the report recommended that the links and interdependencies between these domains are also carefully assessed.

The GLADS seminar series will focus upon three key domains: health, place and space, and employment and work. These three themes are of particular relevance for Scotland given the persistent problems of health inequalities, social exclusion, poverty and unemployment and the challenges of regeneration and rising fuel costs. In addition, a life course dimension will be woven through these domains to explore how different aspects of wellbeing vary across age groups and evolve through life stages.

### *Health*

It has been well documented that being healthy and living a long life free of illness and disability is one of the things people value the most<sup>33</sup>. The state of one’s health, physical and mental, is influenced both negatively and positively by a number of factors, including the physical environment in which one lives, and employment prospects. In their book “The Spirit Level”<sup>34</sup>, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett famously argue there is a strong relationship between a country’s inequalities and the proportion of people suffering from a range of health and social problems. The social determinants of both physical and mental health, including the relationship between health, employment and place / space, and how these relate to wellbeing will be explored in the GLADS series<sup>35</sup>.

### *Place and space*

The quality of the physical environment is often quoted as providing an important dimension of wellbeing. While air, water and soil pollution has traditionally been the main concern from a physical health perspective, the quality of the streetscape and greenspace in built-up areas, and access to unspoilt nature, are increasingly recognised to have a significant impact on our individual and community wellbeing. Renewed attention is being given to how we shape space and create places and how that impacts on a number of sustainability issues, from active travel, to local food production, and social cohesion. As such, the place / space agenda is relevant to diverse policy and practice interests including housing, regeneration, health, sustainable transport, food policy, and community safety.

### *Employment and work*

Both the availability and quality of employment are critical factors of wellbeing. Income levels, employment security, work-life balance, the social and professional relationships it creates, the opportunities to develop skills it generates, and the key contribution it makes

to one's identity and self-worth: work is central to life satisfaction in the working age population. Equally, being unemployed is strongly associated with poor health outcomes and higher risks of social isolation and exclusion. As mentioned above, employment affects and is affected by many other determinants of wellbeing and plays a critical role in exacerbating or reducing social inequalities. In addition, achieving the right balance between work and personal life is a key component of individual and family wellbeing. Indeed, children's wellbeing is strongly affected by parents' ability to earn a living while also having time to nurture them.

- 1 Scotland's Futures Forum: Rethinking wellbeing seminar series 2012-2013 <http://scotlandfutureforum.org/rethinking-wellbeing-seminar-series.html>
- 2 Scottish Universities Insight Institute: Good Lives and Decent Societies <http://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/Wellbeing2014/GLADSGoodLivesAndDecentSocieties.aspx>
- 3 Suggested reading: Schimmel, J. (2009). "Development as Happiness: The Subjective Perception of Happiness and UNDP's Analysis of Poverty, Wealth and Development." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 10: 93-111 [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/24008708\\_Development\\_as\\_Happiness\\_The\\_Subjective\\_Perception\\_of\\_Happiness\\_and\\_UNDPs\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Poverty\\_Wealth\\_and\\_Development](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/24008708_Development_as_Happiness_The_Subjective_Perception_of_Happiness_and_UNDPs_Analysis_of_Poverty_Wealth_and_Development)
- 4 Suggested reading: Abdallah, S., S. Thompson, et al. (2009). The (un)Happy Planet Index 2.0: Why good lives don't have to cost the Earth, New Economic Foundation. <http://roar.uel.ac.uk/604/1/Abdallah%2C%20S%20et%20al%20%282009%29%20nef.pdf>
- 5 Suggested reading: Kasser, T. (2006). "Materialism and its Alternatives." in *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*. M. Csikszentmihalyi and I. Csikszentmihalyi. Oxford University Press [http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/A\\_Life\\_Worth\\_Living\\_Contributions\\_to\\_Pos.html?id=Smy5DRQ3HpkC&redir\\_esc=y](http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/A_Life_Worth_Living_Contributions_to_Pos.html?id=Smy5DRQ3HpkC&redir_esc=y)
- 6 Suggested reading: Veenhoven, R. (2002). "Why Social Policy Needs Subjective Indicators" *Social Indicators Research* 58: 33-46 <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1015723614574>
- 7 Suggested reading: Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press [http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Development\\_as\\_Freedom.html?id=Qm8HtpFHYecC](http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Development_as_Freedom.html?id=Qm8HtpFHYecC)
- 8 United Nations Development Project: Human Development Reports <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi>
- 9 Human Development Report (2013) *The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World* <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2013>
- 10 Stiglitz, J., Sen, A. And Fitoussi J. (2009) Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress [http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport\\_anglais.pdf](http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf)
- 11 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development: Better Life Index. <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/>
- 12 United Nations General Assembly (2011) Resolution 65/309 Happiness: Towards a holistic View of Development <http://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai2/koufukudo/shiryoku/5shiryoku/s-1.pdf>
- 13 Website for the International Day of Happiness <http://internationalhappinessandwellbeingday.org/>
- 14 Defining a New Economic Paradigm: The Report of the High-Level Meeting on Wellbeing and Happiness (2012) <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=400&nr=617&menu=35>
- 15 Respondents are asked to imagine a ladder with ten rungs, where the top rung is their best possible life and the bottom run their worst possible life, and to rate their current life on that ladder. <http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/en-us/worldpoll.aspx?ref=f>
- 16 Helliwell, J., Layard, R. and Sachs, J. (2013) World Happiness Report 2013 [http://unsdsn.org/files/2013/09/WorldHappinessReport2013\\_online.pdf](http://unsdsn.org/files/2013/09/WorldHappinessReport2013_online.pdf) see (Table 2.1)
- 17 World Database of Happiness [http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap\\_nat/nat\\_fp.php](http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap_nat/nat_fp.php)
- 18 New Economic Form: Happy Planet Index. <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/>
- 19 Office for National Statistics: Measuring what matters <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html>
- 20 House of Commons Environmental Audit Select Committee: Inquiry on Wellbeing <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/news/well-being-inquiry/>
- 21 Suggested reading: House of Commons Library (2012) Measuring well-being - Commons Library Standard Note <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN06311/measuring-wellbeing> and Measuring National Wellbeing - POST Note <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/POST-PN-421/measuring-national-wellbeing>
- 22 Suggested reading: Scottish Parliament (2011) SPICe briefing: Alternatives to GDP <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/S4/SB11-63.pdf>
- 23 Virginia Performs website <http://vaperforms.virginia.gov/>
- 24 Scotland Performs website <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Performance/scotPerforms>
- 25 Scottish Parliament (2013) Official Report of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee (27 Feb. 2013) : Alternatives to GDP <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=8026&i=0&c=0&s=stiglitz> and video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDPqEDINpYc>
- 26 Carnegie UK Trust (2011) More Than GDP – Measuring What Matters <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2011/more-than-gdp--measuring-what-matters>
- 27 Carnegie UK Trust & IPPR North (2012) Shifting the Dial: from wellbeing measures to policy practice <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/shifting-the-dial--from-wellbeing-measures-to-poli>
- 28 Carnegie UK Trust (2013) Shifting the Dial in Scotland <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2013/shifting-the-dial-in-scotland>
- 29 Oxfam (2013) Oxfam Humankind Index: The new measure of Scotland's Prosperity, second results <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/oxfam-humankind-index-the-new-measure-of-scotlands-prosperity-second-results-293743>
- 30 Oxfam (2013) Our Economy: Towards a new prosperity <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/our->

[economy-towards-a-new-prosperity-294239](#)

31 Oxfam Humankind Index policy assessment tool <http://policytool.humankindindex.org/>

32 See footnote no. 10

33 OECD (2013) How's Life <http://www.oecd.org/statistics/howslife.htm>

34 Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K (2010) The Spirit Level – Why Equality is Better for Everyone

35 Suggested reading on children and young people's wellbeing: NHS Health Scotland (2011) Children and young people's mental health indicator set <http://www.healthscotland.com/scotlands-health/population/mental-health-indicators/children.aspx>