

Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) Conceptual Framework: Issues Arising from Workshop 1, held on Tuesday, 25 February 2003

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The workshop began its deliberation on the WeD conceptual framework, following a comprehensive yet succinct presentation of its main components by Dr. Pip Bevan. In her presentation, Dr. Bevan explained the main model of the framework as well as a table that indicated the main issues (objectives) of the study by crossing two elements of the model: namely, the ‘domains’ by the ‘level of measurement. In the course of the group discussions and the plenary session following the presentation of the conceptual framework, a number of issues were raised. Workshop participants called to attention the strong points of the framework, as they pointed out, in the form of questions of clarifications, what they considered to be its shortcomings. Following, I present the important points that were raised by the workshop participants, as well as my own observations.

1. The conceptual framework holds out a promise of sound multi-disciplinary investigation and understanding of inequality, poverty and subjective quality of life in specific societies. It brings together the concerns of three major disciplines: economics, psychology and social anthropology. Moreover, it has the potential of providing an opportunity for a genuinely interactive interdisciplinary investigation by researchers drawn from the various disciplines. With some additional effort, it can be further developed to provide “common grammar”, and hence the basis for shared discourse among researchers that are otherwise kept apart by their discipline-specific theories, models, paradigms, concepts, and terminology; not to mention the well-known method bias.
2. It also has the clear advantage of being well grounded on there major theoretical components developed within the disciplines of economics, psychology and social anthropology that come together to serve the objectives of the conceptual framework.
3. The framework equally provides for a dynamic analysis of wellbeing. It allows for capturing change overtime and articulating factors behind these dynamic processes. Yet, attention must be paid in the choice of research methods and research design, so as to make the latter compatible with the study of change over time. In other words, care must be taken to avoid the tendency to tilt towards research designs and instruments that are static, such as cross-sectional surveys.
4. The framework provides for the consideration of wellbeing as well as “ill-being” as two aspects of the same phenomenon. It puts under the spotlight not just one at the expense of the other, but both of them. However, once again a word of caution is in order so that this may not be lost in the course of undertaking the actual research. Put differently, the researchers are advised not to be contented with observing just the poor, but to include in their “sample” of observations the well-to-do or even the “rich” no matter how numerically insignificant they may be. This is important, for two reasons. Firstly, a lot can be learnt about wellbeing and ill being from a scrutiny of the well-to-do as from the study of the poor. This is true even if the so-called rich are not at all that rich and represent only a tiny minority. As is the case of all deviant cases, their consideration is sought for the comparison they offer in examining and understanding the majority. Secondly, not all people, wherever they may be, are poor, and a study of the well-to-do further enhances the completeness and hence the validity of the study.

Having made the above positive remarks, I ought to be frank in drawing attention to what I believe to be the shortcomings of the framework.

1. Lack of clarity regarding the connections between the various constituent items of the framework is a major weakness of the main model. Perhaps, the first issue that calls for elaboration in this regard is the content of the box at the center of the model containing “actor-relation-structure”, and how this is related to the items above it (namely, THN, subjective QOL, Resource Profiles Framework, In/security regimes analysis, etc.). I believe that it is essential to recognize the centrality of this particular element of the model, and to proceed by offering a proper description of its contents. Firstly, if the item is meant to denote processes which is predicated on the premise that self-motivated actors take action decisions and execute actions under given physical and social context, then it has to be explicitly described as such. Also, as the limits within which actors make their choices and act, are defined by certain perquisites (i.e., material and human resources, skills, knowledge, motivation, and such other factors that are essential to performing the actions) the linkage between the content of the box on the one hand, and the theories and frameworks that are placed above the box on the other are obvious. In other words, while it is proper to place the theoretical constructs outside of the box, it is equally necessary to indicate the fact that things such as ‘human needs’, ‘material and human resources’, ‘subjective quality of life’, ‘in/security “, etc. belong inside the box, making the linkage between the theoretical constructs outside the box and the processes inside the box complete. To illustrate this further, we can take the case of ‘property rights’. The social relations of ‘property rights’, the actors that are in question (obviously, together with their skills, knowledge, motivations, perceptions, etc), as well as the particular resources that are the objects of the relation, that all fall within this box also relate to the three theories informing the framework.
2. Another problem with the conceptual framework concerns the relationship between the “actor – relation – structure” and the “UNIVERSAL” boxes. How exactly are the two related? Although the direction of a relationship in which the latter issues out of the former is suggested, how exactly this is affected is not at all clear. Why, for instance is “actor – relation – structure” considered directly behind the “UNIVERSAL” and not the “LOCAL”?
3. A similar concern arises regarding the relationship between the “UNIVERSAL” box and the five “LEVELS OF STUDY”. In the figure of the WeD framework, the arrows connecting the two suggest that the latter, i.e., ‘person, household, community, country and beyond, are underpinned by the UNIVERSAL. Whereas such cannot be the case as the two are crossed in Table 1 to provide a systematic and useful identification of the many areas of concern of the study.
4. Still another area of concern is the relationship between the five LEVELS OF STUDY and the theories on which the WeD framework is hinged. Only the first three of the six rectangular boxes that are placed below the five circles designated as ‘person’, and ‘household’ (referring to ‘objective needs’, ‘subjective quality of life’, and ‘resource portfolios’) are premised on THN, subjective QOL, Resource Profiles Framework, In/security regimes analysis. The framework does not show how the remaining three levels (i.e., ‘community’, ‘country’, and ‘beyond’), are related and benefit from the same theories. Thus the three identical rectangular boxes that are similarly labeled as ‘political economy, cultural structures, policy regime’ only serve as fillers.

There are also other secondary concerns arising from the conceptual framework.

1. It appears that the framework does not provide for the consideration of inter-household relations. Reciprocity is an important aspect of the social relation among rural households in particular, and

hence it must be essential in appraising and understanding wellbeing/poverty. Therefore, it would be appropriate to include it as a focus of the study, possibly under 'community'.

2. Whereas the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' wellbeing/poverty is central to the framework, that between 'absolute' and 'relative' poverty is ignored. Is this because the two sets are taken to be synonymous? If so, then the point needs to be stated as such. If, on the contrary, the two sets are considered to be even slightly different, then this also must be explicitly stated, and a way of dealing with it must somehow be found.
3. A final point regarding the figure of the conceptual framework concerns its lack of a 'key'. In the absence of a 'key', it is difficult to make sense of the various rectangular, square, oval and circular boxes. Likewise, the uniform arrow and the crescent-like symbol the meaning of which are not provided by a 'key', and that are indiscriminately used to signify apparently different kinds of relations between dissimilar boxes have made the figure difficult to understand.

Turning our attention towards Table 1 that is attached to the framework we observe the following problem areas:

1. The first of these relates to the way the framework makes the distinction between the two levels of measurement of subjective and objective. It is quite clear that "Basic 'bodily' need standard set" fall within the 'objective' level of measurement. However, in addition to this, "culturally constructed individual entitlements to bodily need satisfiers" is included in the same 'objective' level of measurement. Now, the question is, how different is the foregoing from "subjective interpretation of objective bodily need situation" which is put under the 'subjective' level of measurement, so as to justify the placement of the two at two different levels?
2. At the 'domain' of 'mix'. Table 1, captures "multi-dimensional individual poverty at the 'person' and at the 'household' levels, but not multi-dimensional community and country poverty. Therefore, it is necessary either to harmonize the table in this regard, or provide an explanation for the difference.

Finally, it ought to be mentioned that some of the workshop participants had misgivings regarding its applicability. They questioned the viability of implementing the study following such a complex conceptual framework. However, the study team members have responded to this by pointing out the fact that the framework is meant to guide the study in a flexible manner, and that the five-year study period provides sufficient time to undertake an exhaustive research and an opportunity to "learn-as-you-go".