

What matters most for local wellbeing?

Finding out in Central Peru



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How far can respect for local priorities be reconciled with a belief in universal human needs? And to what extent do local priorities genuinely reflect agreement among individuals in a specific 'locality' anyway? Knowingly or not, all development activity entails selecting one vision of wellbeing over others. This article describes a few of the answers that the Wellbeing in Developing countries (WeD) group, based at the University of Bath in the UK, came up with after five years of research into these and related questions. Research also took place in Ethiopia, Thailand and Bangladesh, but here we focus on work in Peru.

The community of Descanso

Nearly all the inhabitants of Descanso in the Peruvian highlands rely mainly on farming for a living, and its communal association has 170 members. The association distributes plots annually for cultivation; members also have grazing rights and share in revenue generated from eucalyptus plantations. It also has long-running land disputes with a large private landowner and two quarrying companies. In 2003, the president of the communal association entered into a partnership agreement with a European NGO to construct a school for 'Andean leadership' but this was delayed by internal disagreement over allocation of land to the project, as well as over sales of timber to help fund it. The mayor was in dispute with the head-teacher of the local secondary school, compounding rivalries between longstanding residents and returned migrants. In 2004, the municipality organised a series of participatory budget planning meetings - in line with national guidelines for decentralisation. Representatives of the school, the communal association and many other local bodies attended. But older residents observed that the town was less united than it used to be, pointing to the conflict between schools and municipality, and within the communal association in particular.

Although the name of the town is fictitious, the box provides an example of multiple and interlocking dilemmas over local development priorities. It is a reminder of the struggle that building democratic and accountable local institutions entails. While there is no substitute for this, we argue here that directly and systematically asking individuals what they think and feel is also important. Here we report on part of a tool developed by the WeD team to measure overall life satisfaction.

How to measure individual satisfaction
The tool is designed to measure individual satisfaction with achievement of a locally

determined list of wellbeing goals. For every item on the list, individual respondents are asked to assess both its necessity to them and their personal satisfaction with achievement of this goal. Statistical methods are then used to consolidate item-specific **necessity** and **satisfaction** scores into a smaller number of wellbeing indicators. These can then be used to make comparisons between different groups of people and across localities. We start by looking at some real data, and then briefly raise a couple of methodological issues.

The Peru necessity and satisfaction scales were based on answers to questions on 34 items. The table shows the mean scores for each of the most important 12 obtained by interviewing 550 people in 7 relatively poor rural and urban localities

across central Peru, including Descanso. It is perhaps no surprise that health and daily food ranked as the most important. Nor is it surprising that respondents were generally more satisfied with those items that they also regarded as more necessary: people generally devote more time and effort to meeting more important goals. They may also adapt by downplaying the importance of goals that are difficult to achieve. In contrast, the difference in ranking column (RD) reveals three items where satisfaction was ranked relatively low compared to the necessity ranking: education for children, working for a salary and being a professional.

Methodological issues

Data for **item selection** came from semi-structured interviews conducted by locally employed anthropology graduates. These

WeD Quality of Life survey Peru: necessity of and satisfaction with wellbeing

| Item | Necessity | | Satisfaction | | |
|---|-----------|------|--------------|------|-----|
| | Mean | Rank | Mean | Rank | RD |
| Health | 1.88 | 1 | 2.53 | 3 | -2 |
| Daily food | 1.85 | 2 | 2.53 | 2 | 0 |
| Education for children | 1.77 | 3 | 1.91 | 22 | -19 |
| Room or house | 1.68 | 4 | 2.33 | 10 | -6 |
| Electricity, water, sanitation | 1.63 | 5 | 2.32 | 11 | -6 |
| Work for a salary | 1.59 | 6 | 1.28 | 28 | -22 |
| Good family relations | 1.57 | 7 | 2.65 | 1 | 6 |
| Getting ahead / resolving problems | 1.56 | 8 | 2.35 | 8 | 0 |
| Tranquillity: without violence or delinquency | 1.54 | 9 | 2.21 | 16 | -7 |
| To be good with God and/or the church | 1.53 | 10 | 2.28 | 13 | -3 |
| To be of good character | 1.52 | 11 | 2.5 | 4 | 7 |
| To be a professional | 1.51 | 12 | 0.18 | 34 | -22 |

Note: RD (ranking difference) refers to the necessity ranking (column 2) less the satisfaction ranking (column 4). Item necessity was rated by respondents on a three point scale (very necessary = 2, necessary = 1, not necessary = 0). Goal satisfaction was rated on a four point response scale (satisfied = 3, so-so = 2, not satisfied = 1, don't have = 0).



The community in Peru where WeD research was done.

mimicked a casual conversation, starting out with the question 'what would I need to be happy if I came to live in this place?' These interviews generated a much larger

For some purposes the number of items listed in the table is still too large and this raises the issue of **item consolidation**. One way of doing this would be to

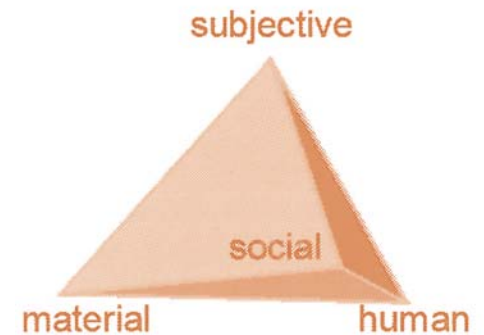
What would I need to be happy if I came to live in this place?

set of possible items for inclusion in the subsequent closed questionnaire. Careful checks were conducted to make sure that all items finally selected were widely recognised and understood by respondents in the area. This first phase of the research was itself qualitatively extremely insightful.

calculate mean aggregate goal necessity and achievement scores for all items, or for determined sub-groups of them, such as those relating to health, work or family. There are many other ways to construct and use wellbeing indicators of this kind. In all cases, the approach certainly provides

more useful feedback on how people think and feel than a focus on predetermined indicators or a single question about how happy they feel. And while important local differences emerge, the approach also reveals just how wellbeing goals are indeed common to us all.

The Pyramid of Wellbeing:



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