

# Networks of wellbeing in the global south

*HSRC Flagship Study on Poverty and Inequality:  
Better Lives in Troubling Times*

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“Wellbeing is more than the absence of illness or pathology [with] subjective (self-assessed) and objective (ascribed) dimensions; it can be measured at the level of individuals or society; it accounts for elements of life satisfaction that cannot be defined, explained or primarily influenced by economic growth”

McAllister, 2005

“While the North lives/acts, the South survives/reacts” (Rosa, 2014)



## Who/what is the global south

- Africa, Central & Latin America, most of Asia
- Challenges: Poverty, environmental degradation, human and civil rights abuses, ethnic and regional conflicts, mass displacements of refugees, hunger, disease
- ‘Developing countries’, ‘low income countries’, ‘third world’, ‘poor world’, ‘non-Western world’

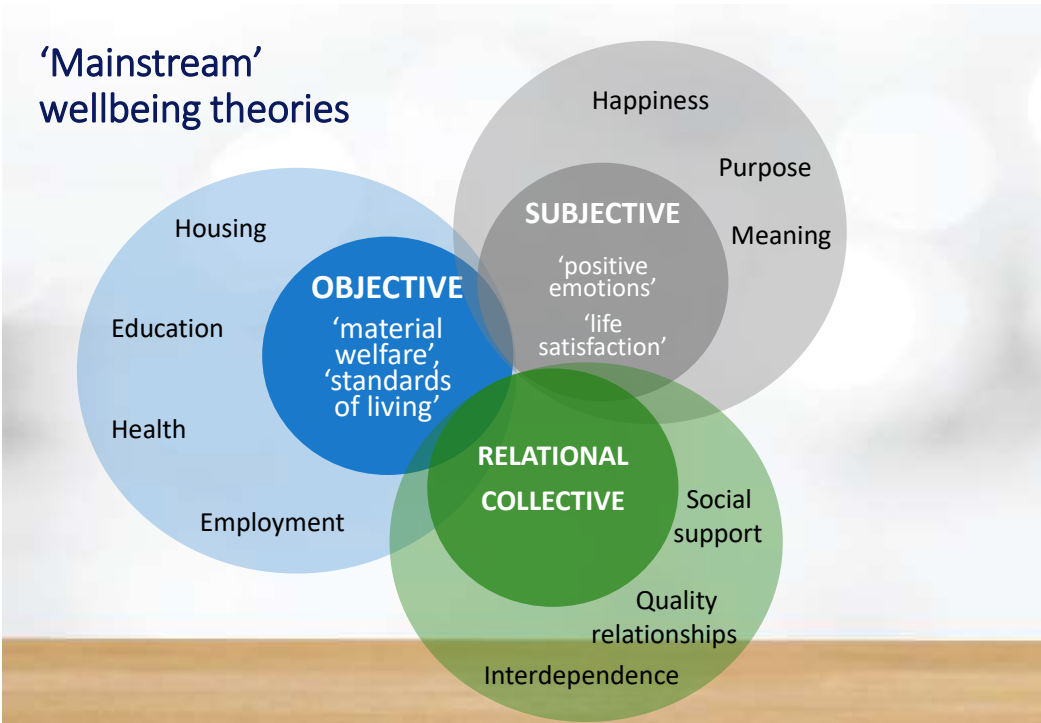


We use this term to counter the 'ahistorical' and 'decontextualized' disparagement precisely because we find that wellbeing research and development practice in countries of the global south do not always adequately capture the particularities of those regions and its inhabitants, aspects like language and culture for instance



### 'Mainstream' wellbeing theories





## Critiques

- Lack of engagement with context
- Wellbeing as a private phenomenon
- (Re)production of poverty and inequality?
- Differential access to resources?
- Origin in wealthier, overdeveloped global north



## A southern perspective on wellbeing?

"What does a southern perspective *ask us to do* that we are not now doing, as knowledge workers?" (Connell, 2014 )

Context in which people aspire to be well: Social, governmental, political & cultural structures (White, 2015)

Networks of relations:

1. The individual and the collective
2. People and the state
3. People and the environment
4. People and power



## People and other people

“Good relationships with immediate and natal family”  
(Ethiopia, Thailand, Bangladesh)

“Care and support” (SA)

“Having the strength to care for family, keep good social relations” (Peru)

“Doing what is right according to family, community” (India)

- Hostile environments and social capital
- Beyond ‘relational wellbeing’
- Poverty & inequality can undo social networks



## People and the state

- Racialisation, gendered oppression, class & caste systems
- Deregulation, structural adjustment programmes, international trade & aid (Green, 2013)
- Interests of economic, political & military elites (Rojas & Vega, 2017)
- Theoretical lens that explicitly tends to structural inequalities

- Active citizenry?
- Transformative state social protection?



## People and the environment

- Environmental risks and resources
- Nature and human beings
- Complex assemblages between **people and places** - interactions between **environments, histories & beliefs**
- “**Human wellbeing** is intimately tied up with **planetary wellbeing**, and that the natural world has its own processes, flows and constraints, checks and balances which respond to human action” (White, 2015)
- Colonial histories of **environmental resource exploitation**
- Environmental degradation on wellbeing is **gendered**



## People and power

- **Colonial systems** relied heavily on **skewed relationships of power**
- Role of **neoliberal policies**: injustice & disparities in wealth
- **Vertical inequities** vs. **horizontal inequities**
- Social identities: **social networks** are often stratified according to **local power relations**
- Experiences of **powerlessness** have profound **psychological impact** on how people experience being well or unwell



## Final thoughts

- Explore creative possibilities of **north-south learning**
- Theorize wellbeing in ways that resonate with **universal challenges** (natural resource pressures, environmental disasters, unequal distribution of wealth)
- Theorize wellbeing in ways that resonate with **context specific challenges** (impact of colonial histories and related power dynamics)
- **Wellbeing as existing in relationship**: "relationship is [...] at the centre of wellbeing analysis and politics" (White, 2010)



## Provocations

Scholars in the global south might need to think about how to effectively measure networks of wellbeing:

1. Can all the dimensions be measured at once?
2. What dimensions are more crucial for certain aspects of wellbeing critical to the GS?
3. How do we formulate a measurable and empirically verifiable theory grounded in networks of wellbeing?
4. What might be some of the consequences of defining wellbeing in terms of networks?
5. Does this mean that we should utilise theories of social network, social capital and social cohesion to better understand wellbeing?

