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Politics and Wellbeing

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Politics and Wellbeing

Presentation draws on two publications:

1. Bache, I. and Reardon, L (2016) **The Politics and Policy of Wellbeing: Understanding the Rise and Significance of a New Agenda**, Edward Elgar.
2. Bache, I. (2015) **Evidence, Policy and Wellbeing**, CWiPP Working Paper No.3, Centre for Wellbeing in Public Policy, University of Sheffield
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/cwipp/working-papers/2015_03

Defining wellbeing – it's not just happiness!



I. Understanding the rise and significance of a new agenda

1. How and why has the idea of wellbeing risen up the political agenda? (multiple streams approach: Kingdon 2011)
2. What are the policy implications of the rising political interest in the idea of wellbeing? (social learning: Hall 1993; 2013)
3. Is wellbeing an idea whose time has come?

We look at rise of wellbeing internationally, but look in detail at the UK (and compare this with the EU). From this we:

- Critique and develop the MSA to incorporate the insights of multi-level governance (emphasizing importance of international level on domestic agenda-setting)
- Propose a synthesis of MSA and social learning

Wellbeing on the agenda

Debates on the ‘good life’ and the role of the state in promoting it goes back to ancient Greeks

Current interest in wellbeing critiques the dominance of GDP and related indicators as emblematic of progress.

Two waves of political interest post-Second World War.

- First wave emerged in 1960s – ongoing social problems and rise of post-materialism (Lyndon Johnson; RF Kennedy)
- Second wave 1990s to now – began with environmental concerns, but increased understanding of drivers of wellbeing / how to measure wellbeing also important.

The rise of wellbeing (UK)

Interest under Labour govt.

- Local Govt Act 2000 (wellbeing powers)
- Strategy Unit report 2002 ('there is a case for state intervention to boost life satisfaction')
- Activity in some govt. depts. (eg DoE wellbeing measures.),

Cameron an advocate since 2006

- QoL group as part of Conservative Party policy review
- QoL in 2010 manifesto
- Took high profile stance as PM in 2010 to support ONS Measuring National Wellbeing Programme (to be used in policy)

Important to place UK development in international contest (e.g., Sarkozy/Stiglitz Commission 2009)

Policy implications (UK)

- Most are ‘first order’ changes - adjustments to departmental surveys or to evaluation and appraisal techniques
- Also small number of ‘second order’ changes (IAPTs; flexible working)
- ‘Third order’ change – a change in overarching government goals (paradigm shift) - a distant prospect

But this is seen as a long-term policy agenda – initial hesitance shifted to a focus on ‘what works’ to promote wellbeing through policy: What Works Center for Wellbeing created in 2015



Is wellbeing an idea whose time has come?

- In some respects yes – new measurements, shifts in discourse and some policy changes. But to argue this convincingly requires evidence of major shifts in policy – at the stage of finding out ‘what works’
- Would require a ‘third wave’ in which wellbeing is internalized by key actors and is institutionalized in policy practice.
- This is some distance away – but this is explicitly a long-term agenda
- Evidence on ‘what works’ to promote wellbeing through policy is seen as an important next step



2. Evidence, Policy and Wellbeing

Research for the WWCW Community Evidence Programme

Purpose - to explore with stakeholders/policy-makers some of the key issues on the use of evidence in relation to wellbeing (other What Works Centres already covered on this).

- A review of some of the key contributions on the use of evidence in policy – academic and more practitioner-focused
- Interviews with policy-makers/stakeholders



Key academic literature

- Boswell, C. (2008) The political functions of expert knowledge: knowledge and legitimation in European Union immigration policy, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15:4, 471-488
- Head, B. (2010) Reconsidering evidence-based policy: key issues and challenges, *Policy and Society* 29, 77-94
- Layard, R. and Clark, D. (2014) *Thrive: the power of psychological therapy*, Penguin
- Majone, G. (1989) *Evidence, argument and persuasion in the policy process*, Yale University Press
- **Weiss, C. (1979) The many meanings of research utilization, *Public Administration Review*, September/October 1979, 426-31**

Key practitioner-focused literature

- Government Social Research Unit (2007) *Analysis for policy: evidence-based policy in practice*, HM Treasury.
- House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2006) *Scientific advice, risk and evidence based policy making, Seventh Report of Session 2005-06, Volume 1*.
- Nutley, S., Powell, A. and Davies, H. (2013) *What counts as good evidence? Provocation paper for the Alliance for Useful Evidence*, School of Management, University of St Andrews
- Rutter, J. (2012) *Evidence and Evaluation in Policy Making*, London: Institute for Government
- **Shepherd, J. (2014) *How to achieve more effective services: the evidence ecosystem*, Cardiff University/ESRC What Works Network**



Interview themes and questions

1. Understanding of key terms and issues

- **Wellbeing** - how do you understand this term? How do they think other people understand it? What do you understand by 'community wellbeing'?
- **'What works'** – what does this mean to you?
- **Policy** – What does 'policy' mean to you? What aspects or types of policy might be most suited to a wellbeing approach?

Interview themes and questions (ii)

2. The evidence ecosystem

- **Evidence sources** – what sources of evidence do you know about and what are the ones you use?
- **Transmission lines** – what are the channels through which your organisation receives evidence?
- **Problems** – What are the main challenges around the use of evidence?
- **Incentives** – What are the main incentives for using evidence?



Interview themes and questions (iii)

3. The challenge of wellbeing

- Does the issue of wellbeing present specific challenges to the use of evidence? If so, of what types?
- Other than research evidence what other forms of knowledge are important to wellbeing (e.g., political, professional, experiential)?

4. Moving forward : the WWCW

- What specifically do you want from the WWCW?

5. Other issues and concerns?

- Are there other issues relevant to your organisation that are not covered by the themes above?

I. Understanding of key terms and issues

Wellbeing

Most interviewees shared an understand of wellbeing as holistic/multidimensional. For example:

- *‘It’s about how the nation’s doing, how communities are doing and how individuals are doing’.*
- *‘Social, economic and health - many things – and how you fit and in and relate to the community’.*

But most believe **‘others’ have a narrower understanding:**

- *‘Professionals in different areas will give different definitions - emotional wellbeing, mental wellbeing...’*
- ***‘You ask ten people, you get 11 different answers’***

Understanding of key terms and issues (ii)

Community wellbeing was generally less clearly understood / defined. Responses included:

- *‘Benefits to a whole community’*
- *‘I see it in **social capital** terms... amount of space and opportunities to mix, mix between social groups’*
- *‘We tend to talk about **social wellbeing** – our approach is influenced by Sen’s work. Participation is emphasized – it is for communities themselves to identify’*
- *‘People helping each other, **neighbourliness**’*

Understanding of key terms and issues (iii)

On whether some policy areas more conducive to a wellbeing approach ... Some identified particular policy areas (e.g., ageing, health, mental health), others took a broader view:

- *‘It could be quite central to a lot of policy-making now’*
- *‘Policies that **don’t just look at the thing in isolation**’*
- *‘It’s those that really have a **social impact** and doing them for social reasons, community reasons rather than purely economic reasons’*

2. The evidence ecosystem: Evidence sources

A wide range used, varying across different organisations and for different purposes. These include (**in no particular order**):

- Commissioned research and evaluations - Randomised control trials - **Systemic/meta-reviews** (e.g., Kings Fund/NICE/Nef) - Voluntary and community sector - Grey literature - **Syntheses of academic literature** (e.g., by think tanks, VCS) - Participatory approaches - Focus groups - Online surveys - **In-house research** (some use ONS SWB indicators) - Academic papers - Own evaluations - All-Party Parliamentary Groups - Secondary datasets - **Government reports** (e.g., Cabinet Office, DWP) - **Government surveys** (e.g., ONS, Cabinet Office) - Legatum Institute - OECD - Roundtables - Co-production



Observations on evidence sources

- *'I occasionally go back to the source material, but there is **so much research**'*
- *'I think it's **important that the ecosystem of evidence is equally valued** and equally mined but that when one is looking for some direct correlation between an input and an output that might be subject to slightly more rigorous scientific, methodological means'*
- *'If you have a hierarchy of evidence that puts certain types of evidence at the top, then that immediately narrows the amount of available evidence to you, doesn't it?'*
- *'The **Government favours quantitative evidence**'*



Evidence sources least used

- Some said they might make more use of **international sources** (and from elsewhere in the UK) but there were issues of capacity and replicability/ transferability.
- One suggested that **social media** might be used more. It gives '**lower quality but very large volume measures on wellbeing**, which can then be effectively correlated or used in natural experiments to establish direct effects on wellbeing'
- Most do not generally read **academic papers** but receive academic research through summaries, face-to-face presentations and individual contacts

Evidence ecosystem: Transmission lines

Again, a wide range (in no particular order):

- Commissioned research - **face-to-face presentations** - professional/sector networks - advisory groups - national bodies (e.g., PHE) - circulars (NICE, NHS, Kings Fund etc.) - **Twitter** - own organisation (e.g., local authority) - search engines (e.g., Pub Med) - conferences and seminars - **‘People send us things’** - meetings (e.g., Alliance for Useful Evidence/NESTA) - **information service bulletins** - universities - private consultancies - co-production - **internet** - Parliamentary events



Observations on transmission lines

The interviewees were well connected within relevant networks and **a lot of material comes through personal contacts:**

- *'You have the right conversations to make sure you're not missing any tricks'*
- *'...making sure I'm linked in with the right experts and then reports may come my way as a result of that... **not very scientific at all**'*



Evidence ecosystem: Problems (i)

Both supply and demand side problems (in no particular order)

- **Awareness**
- **Understanding** evidence
- Understanding who the evidence is for and why they need it
- **Lack of staff skill** in using evidence
- **Timeliness** / Timeframes
- **Time pressures** / Funding /capacity constraints
- **Access to evidence** (e.g., academic journals)
- Bad evidence



Evidence ecosystem: Problems (ii)

- **Lack of clarity** about the relative strengths of evidence
- **Academic work not practical**
- **Challenging default positions**
- Evidence is often focused on individual outcomes not social (e.g., *on 'improving blood pressure, not social capital'*)
- **Qualitative evidence less valued** (*'financial climate – VfM'*)
- **Sheer volume of research**
- Policy making is 'messy' (not rational and linear)

Observations on problems

Issue of **timeframes** is important:

- ***'It can take a generation to influence a community ... You look for options that can give more immediate results'*** (because of financial uncertainties, politics etc.)

On the **relative strengths of the evidence**, one stated:

- ***'It's beholden in publications to say, "Look, this is what we're basing these findings or statements on and here's the levels of evidence"... And letting people make up their own mind'***

A number emphasised the **messiness of policy-making**, (e.g., organisational priorities or political issues such as manifesto commitments, interest groups, electoral considerations.)



Evidence ecosystem: Incentives

A range of internal and external incentives (no particular order):

- Quality of 'own' work
- **Value for money**
- **Population benefits** / Producing better policies
- **Influencing government**
- To get more funding
- To learn and improve
- **Credibility** (e.g., *'it might give us a seat at the table'*)
- Appraisal/Assurance processes (*'you're going to be challenged'*)
- Confidence (*'that that decision that you're making isn't just based on instinct, hunch or bias'*)

Observations on incentives

Regular references to issues of **scrutiny** and **value for money** – both within their organisations and the wider policy arena:

- *‘Civil servants want to develop policies that will work – we don’t want to be caught out’*
- *‘We want evidence to be so strong that government/ Treasury cannot turn away findings because they’re methodologically unsound’*
- *‘ [There are] gates to get through for decision-making ... like impact assessments and business cases, spending reviews. So **big incentives are built into the system in some respects...** also dealing with the public’*

3. Other forms of knowledge

All identified other forms of knowledge (**professional**, **political** and **experiential**) as important, often with different emphasis:

- *‘We proceed on a case-by-case basis... **stakeholder experience** of the problem, **frontline workers** who are engaged in your policy or who could help to deliver solutions.*
- *‘We absolutely liaised with the **voluntary sector**, who do frontline delivery. We liaised with the **infrastructure bodies**’*
- *‘**Service users** can throw up implementation issues’*
- *‘The evidence ecosystem is shaped and manipulated in different directions by different interests... ‘*
- *‘**About one-third is “evidence”**’*



4. The challenge of wellbeing

Clear difference between those favouring a broad range of indicators are needed vs. SWB as a way forward, pragmatically at least.

For most, **the complex/multidimensional nature of wellbeing and contestation over definition and measurement** presents a particular challenge for the use of evidence:

- ***'It does need to move us into areas of scientific inquiries that are much more integrated across disciplines. And that challenges the way in which academia currently organises itself and scientific funding is currently distributed'***

5. Moving forward: the WWCW (i)

Address issues in the evidence ecosystem, e.g:

- **Improve accessibility** of evidence (*‘short and simple’*)
- **Promote different types of sources**
- **Scale** up examples of good practice (e.g., within a community)
- Give **‘concrete examples’** of what worked and why
- **Improve availability** of evidence
- *‘Find more innovative, creative and successful channels of evidence transmission.’*
- Organise events/ promote networking
- Provide an online resource bank for different methods
- Have **direct contact** with organisations



5. Moving forward: the WWCW (ii)

More generally:

- **Be collaborative** (*'not least with people on the ground'*)
- **Prioritise?** (i.e., provide a specific focus within wellbeing)
- Link with other WWCs (the *'multidimensional challenge'*)
- Address definitional issues/ build consensus around the term 'wellbeing' and related metrics (e.g., in government)
- **Build capacity of organisations** (esp. VCS)
- Provide simple tools and frameworks for policy-makers
- Provide evidence *'beyond what might be politically expedient'*
- **Create a demand** for wellbeing evidence
- Provide insight into upcoming/emerging trends on wellbeing
- **Develop a strong brand** (*'that can be trusted'*)



Final comments

- The interviewees indicated **considerable demand for evidence** of different types and for a range of purposes.
- Despite issues around definition and measurement outstanding, there is also a sense that **scepticism around wellbeing has receded significantly** in recent years:
- At the same time, this level of acceptance has to contend with other priorities*
- While evidence is not always decisive, there is agreement that **better evidence is an important next step** to bringing wellbeing more squarely into policy



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Thank you!

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