

Wellbeing, Development and Social Change in Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand has experienced economic and social transformation over a relatively short period of time and its experiences may offer salutary lessons for many other developing countries. However, the characteristics of Thailand's transformation to modernity encourage us to consider new frameworks for analysing and understanding development and social change. This paper presents a distinctive concept of wellbeing that can provide valuable new insights into development and social change for the social sciences and for policy makers. A social definition of wellbeing argues against a focus on 'the individual' and requires us to comprehend the profound interdependence of the person and their society. The definition does not equate wellbeing with a narrow conception of happiness, nor can it be indicated simply by wealth. It is a practical definition in that it can be operationalised for empirical research and by focusing on wellbeing as resulting from the interplay of needs met; freedoms to act, and satisfactions in achieving goals, the approach yields new interpretations of development problems. The paper describes the research methodology that has been developed from this definition and summarises some of the results from two years of field-study in rural and urban communities in the Northeast and South of Thailand. In this paper we highlight the significance of a person's primary location of residence not only for the wellbeing that the person is able to experience but also that they are able to conceive of. The paper concludes by recognising the clashes between different

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conceptions of and strategies for wellbeing that are often entailed in processes of development and social change and it highlights the policy and governance challenges that these represent for Thailand and other rapidly developing societies.

Keywords: modernisation, wellbeing, development, social change, poverty

Introduction

Thailand's transition from being amongst the poorest countries in the world to one at the forefront of modernity has been remarkable. But the transition has brought with it profound challenges. The considerable economic growth that the country has experienced has resulted in changes in the economic structure of the society and has been accompanied by rapid social and cultural change. Thailand, today, is a fascinating kaleidoscope of the modern and traditional; the rural and the urban; the affluent and the impoverished. As such the analysis of Thailand's development experiences provides important lessons for all aspirant developing countries.

Thailand's transition encourages us to bring new perspectives to our study of development processes and to how we think about the formulation of policies that will promote development as good change. In this paper we argue that the concept of wellbeing is important because it provides us with new and innovative ways to understand the processes of societal changes that are stimulated by development. The notion of wellbeing that is used in this paper is a distinctive one. It has been developed by a multi-disciplinary team of social scientists engaged in an extended empirical study of development and change in four countries across the global south¹. The definition of wellbeing used here combines insights from across the contemporary social sciences: from the path-breaking work of economist Amartya Sen on human capabilities to the burgeoning work on subjective wellbeing and positive psychology. It also incorporates the

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contributions of sociologists and social anthropologists on how we are to understand the social and cultural construction of the societies we live in.

Wellbeing we argue must be conceived of as a social concept. It is:

“... a positive state of being with others in society, where needs are met, where one can act effectively and meaningfully to pursue ones’ goals, and where one is able to experience happiness and feel satisfied with one’s life.” (McGregor, 2007b)

While this bears similarities to the many different definitions of wellbeing that abound in the literature it is important that its distinctiveness is recognised. It is first and foremost a social definition of wellbeing, as opposed to an individualist or reductionist one. The emphasis here is upon the effort to live a life well together with others and on wellbeing outcomes that are continuously generated through conscious and sub-conscious participation in social, economic, political and cultural processes. It is a multi-disciplinary and hybrid definition that combines elements of both subjective and objective notions of wellbeing, but transcends them by recognizing the role of social construction in each. How we experience wellbeing is based on what we do with what we have, mediated by the relationships we experience in society. The satisfaction that we achieve from ‘havings’ and ‘doings’ transforms into states of ‘being’ that are shaped by the meanings and values that we live with in our societies.

Wellbeing

The term wellbeing is not new, either in the study of development or more generally in philosophy or the social sciences. Many contributors to current debates trace their position back to Aristotle but it can equally be traced back to the teachings of the Buddha, or the tracts of other major philosophies of life. Most established religions offer a view as to how wellbeing is to be defined and offer moral guidance for life based upon it.

In the modern social sciences Jeremy Bentham’s discussion of wellbeing is regarded as establishing the utilitarian roots of contemporary economics (Collard, 2003). It is also currently

popular to identify Adam Smith's concern with wellbeing in his 'Theory of Moral Sentiment' as well as in 'The Wealth of Nations'. More recently the term wellbeing has been prominent in Amartya Sen's challenge to the utilitarianism of mainstream welfare economics. His debates with Martha Nussbaum, who is cautious of the term precisely because of its utilitarian baggage, and the creative and intelligent work of many of their discussants, have enriched the recent development literature (Nussbaum and Sen 1993, Alkire 2002, Gasper 2004). Other notable contributions to our understanding of the concept include Partha Dasgupta's 'Inquiry into Human Well-Being and Destitution' (Dasgupta, 1993) and some of the recent writing of Robert Chambers on the notion of 'responsible wellbeing' (Chambers 2004).

Elsewhere in the social sciences the emergence of positive psychology and the work of Nobel prize-winner Daniel Kahneman and others debating the merits of hedonic and eudaimonic notions of wellbeing (Kahneman et al, 1999, Ryan, Huta and Deci, 2006) have also raised the profile of the concept in academic and policy circles. While this crescendo of work has found much resonance across the contemporary social sciences and in policy circles it is not always clear exactly what we mean by wellbeing.

In order to conduct the research that is summarised in this paper it was necessary to develop a precise and practical definition of wellbeing. The ongoing usefulness of the concept of wellbeing in the social science will depend to some extent on reaching some agreement about what it is concerned with. The definition advanced above synthesises contributions from three broad traditions in the social sciences, arguing that each must be comprehended if we are to develop a more holistic concept of wellbeing. From these three traditions, four main bodies of thinking that have been drawn upon to develop this conception of wellbeing are: those concerned with theories of human need, as exemplified by Doyal and Gough (1991); the work of Sen on capabilities, functionings and freedom (Sen 1999), combined with the 'resource profiles approach' (Gough, McGregor and Camfield 2007), which is a 'livelihoods' type framework that allows exploration of the ways in which different combinations of resources support or inhibit the

capacity to act meaningfully; and the aforementioned work on subjective wellbeing, quality of life and life satisfaction.

This conception of wellbeing also addresses the issue of how we might live well together in society and is concerned with development as good change. While it is necessary to focus on the wellbeing of the person this definition is nevertheless equally concerned with notions of ‘the good society’ and ‘the common good’ (Deneulin and Townshend 2007). The ability of the person to achieve wellbeing is dependent largely on society being structured so as to make this possible. We cannot hope to understand the wellbeing of the person without understanding the role that wider social collectivities play in creating the conditions that support or frustrate efforts to achieve wellbeing. Further still, there are social phenomena that are indivisibly collective, but which are nevertheless central to the wellbeing of the person. For example, a sense of identity or an institution that provides a feeling of security. Elsewhere we explain and discuss the key elements that underpin this conception of wellbeing (McGregor 2007). There we argue for the centrality of ‘meaning’ in our understanding of the ongoing construction of wellbeing. The reason for this is that through processes of socialization and culture, meanings enable the interlocking of the person and social order.

Wellbeing here encompasses the notion of happiness but cannot directly be equated with it. A person who is happy when unwillingly suffering from malnutrition cannot be regarded as experiencing wellbeing. It is possible to be happy while suffering various privations in terms of freedoms or material needs, but this cannot be taken as an adequate indicator of a more comprehensive notion of a person’s wellbeing. Nor can this conception of wellbeing be equated with wealth. Being materially wealthy but miserable about the quality of your life does not add up to wellbeing. As recent experience from more opulent societies indicates wealth can also translate into declines in wellbeing, for example, through obesity or increased mental dissatisfaction due to destructive status competition.

If the concept of wellbeing is to be operationalised in both empirical research and in policy then it must also be practical in two senses. First, it must move from its abstract

formulations to be defined in terms that are more comprehensible to people in empirical research and policy settings. Second, it must be practical in that its use provides us with new insights into social phenomena. The research that is reported here was concerned with what such a notion of wellbeing can contribute to our understanding of the persistence of poverty and inequality in developing countries. In doing so it mirrors a characteristic of the positive psychology movement: that there are advantages in looking at the positive dimensions of the issue studied rather than exclusively focussing on the negative (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The positive psychology movement has argued that it is liberating and valuable to focus on the positive side of the human experience, as opposed to dysfunctional states of the human mind and of human being. In the study of development poverty-focused approaches have a tendency to focus on what people lack. They tend to focus on the negatives, and drive out considerations of the positive characteristics of people in developing countries. In doing so, poverty studies can lose sight of the relationships of poor people to others and to the positive dimensions of development processes.

While it is easy to recognise the negative aspects of the lives of those in poverty or who are losing-out in the processes of development, it is also important to recognise the strength, resilience, forbearance, creativity and positivity of both winners and losers in the processes of development. Of course, a positive approach to studying poverty in developing countries has its political difficulties. The accusation of ‘glossing over’ or seeking to distract attention from the suffering and injustice involved in underdevelopment is poignant. But this criticism is superficial and misdirected. Ironically, professionalized concerns for poverty have had a tendency to ‘gloss-over’ harsh societal realities in a different way. The technocratic and bureaucratised treatments they foster have tended to depoliticise and dehumanize the analysis of poverty and the poor (Hickey and Bracking, 2005). They tend to lose sight of the real people; the real workings of markets and societal structures; the real distribution and exercise of power; and of the fully rounded humanity of poor men, women and children. As we argue, this notion of wellbeing has particular value precisely because it encourages us to recognise the conflicts that arise when we consider the wellbeing aspirations of different people in our societies. As such a wellbeing

approach is both humane and requires us to return an analysis of power and political relationships to the heart of our inquiry.

The article now reports briefly on five years of research partnership in Thailand in which this definition of wellbeing was used as a basis for two years of field study. It highlights a number of the headline observations that arise from the study and concludes by discussing key intellectual and policy implications that arise from the wellbeing research programme.

Studying Wellbeing in Thailand

The empirical research on wellbeing that is reported here was carried out in Thailand between 2003 and 2006. It brings purposively generated, primary data from studies of a range of rural and urban communities in both the Northeast and South of the country into the context of a wider analysis of the Thai development experience. Analysing this data within a wider conceptual framework that is required to understand the social and cultural construction of wellbeing permits new insight into the ways in which the particular challenges of development manifest themselves in the day-to-day lives of men, women and children in contemporary Thailand.

The communities studied by the Wellbeing in Developing Countries programme (hereafter WeD) are located in the Northeast and the South of Thailand; two of the most populous regions of Thailand, which together account for 48 percent of the population. As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the aggregate position of the two regions in terms of economic and human development indicators is markedly different.

Table 1. Regional variations in per capita income and poverty

Regions	Annual Per Capita Income, 20001	Poverty Incidence (percentage), 20002
Bangkok	234,398	0.3
Bangkok Metropolitan Region	208,631	1.4
Central	75,075	6.1
<i>Northeast</i>	26,755	28.1
North	39,402	12.2
West	59,021	6.1
East	166,916	5.2
<i>South</i>	53,966	11
<i>Kingdom</i>	78,783	14.2

Source: 1. National Accounts Office, Office of the Economic and Social Development Board
(NESDB 2004b).

From Table 2 the Northeast scores worst of all regions on all but two key human development indicators (maternal mortality rate and percent with no formal education), and in these two it is the South that scores worst. The Northeast also has both the highest incidence of poverty and the greatest number of poor people (four million, according to the UNDP [2007]), while the South is one of the wealthiest regions of the country. As we will note these aggregate outcomes are an important consideration when seeking to understand the wellbeing prospects of different men, women and children, but we must also note that they obscure the fact that there is great diversity within the regions. In the South the three most Southerly provinces are amongst the poorest in the country and they account for a range of poverty incidence amongst provinces in the South from zero to 23 percent (UNDP, 2007).

Table 2. Regional differences on selected welfare indicators

Regions	Maternal mortality per 100,000 births	% 1 st degree malnutrition in under fives	% Households in slum conditions	% workforce with social security	% no education	Mean years of schooling	% higher secondary enrollment
Kingdom	12.9	7.36	26.9	17.1	5.5	7.3	52
Bangkok	10	4.01	12.7	47.5	4	9.6	58.2
Central	11	3.26	33.5	24.6	4.8	7.1	61.5
Northeast	9.8	10.26	48.8	3.4	2.8	6.7	45.7
South	19.9	6.55	24.8	9.4	7.7	7.1	54

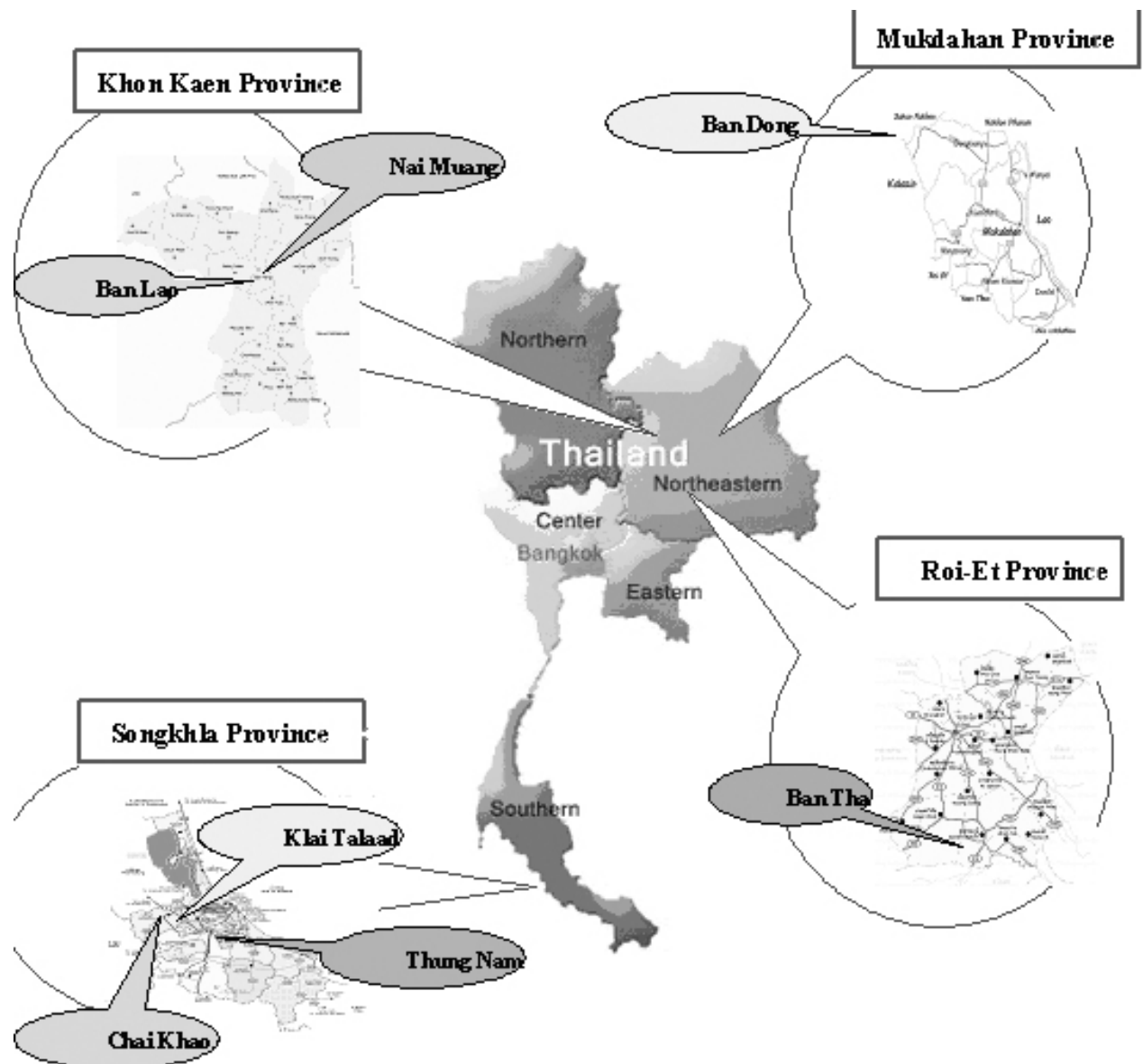
Source UNDP, 2007.

The economic differences between the regions are partly environmental: the Northeast is predominantly semi-arid plateau, which hitherto has been used to cultivate rice and low-return field crops such as cassava, while the South has an agricultural base of rubber and fruit production which have been more rewarding. It also has large coastal areas which have benefited from fishing and the development of international tourism. The two regions also have distinctive histories and as a result have particular social and cultural identities. The Northeast is referred to as *Isan*, and while this collective identity is contested and incorporates groups with different ethnic and language histories, it is nevertheless a culturally and politically important label that distinguishes Northeasterners from the rest of Thailand. The South contains a large proportion of Thai Muslims and people who are ethnically Malay. This gives the region a distinctive feel and character, and was a factor which was taken into account in WeD's choice to study a number of communities which had both Thai Buddhist and Muslim populations.

The seven WeD communities span rural, peri-urban and urban locations, thus providing insight into an illustrative range of settings in contemporary Thailand where different aspects of the challenges of Thai development manifest themselves. Five rural sites were selected to represent the impact of proximity and connectedness to urban centres, degree of infrastructural development, ethnic composition, and dependence on agriculture and natural resources. These

were supplemented by two rapidly growing provincial centres (Khon Kaen in the Northeast and Had Yai in the South) to explore the persistent disparities between rural and urban areas. Figure 1 below gives some indication of the location of the study sites

Figure 1: Map of the sites



The communities studied can be briefly described as follows:

Baan Dong – is a remote village in the Northeast with plentiful natural resources, due to its location in a national park. Baan Dong is economically poor with low grade agricultural land and is more distant from key centres of development; consequently it is characterised by high levels of youth migration

Baan Tha – is another village in the Northeast, which has equally plentiful natural resources, but which has better quality roads and agricultural land. Agriculture is supplemented by circular labour migration to Bangkok

Baan Lao – is a peri-urban village in the Northeast, which is well connected to the urban centre, but has few natural resources. Aside from commuting for employment, its main activities are subsistence farming and making fishing nets

Nai Muang – is a relatively new urban settlement in Khon Kaen. The majority of people work in the city, outside the community. The combination of ethnic diversity, congestion, and poverty reduces the quality of community relations here.

Baan Tung Nam – is a traditional village in the South. Although originally a mixed community, it recently divided into separate Buddhist and Muslim administrative areas. The main crop is latex and it has many young families.

Baan Chaikao – is another wealthy village in the South, which is well connected to the urban centre. The inhabitants produce latex or work in factories, and the majority of school age children are in secondary and/or higher education

Klai Talad – is an area of Had Yai and is a mixture of relatively new urban settlement, containing people working as daily labourers or petty traders, and a prosperous, settled community, with people in salaried employment and small business owners. Klai Talad has the highest asset ownership and lowest community participation of any site in the study.

A Wellbeing Research Methodology

A comprehensive exploration of development processes and outcomes in Thailand requires different levels of investigation which must seek to comprehend the interplay of local realities and global forces. For this reason, the WeD research in Thailand spanned consideration of the macro-level (the “big structures”), and integrated that analysis with micro-level investigation of the wellbeing strategies of households and persons in particular communities. Since the ostensible aim of development is to increase people’s wellbeing, it is important to understand how this has been affected by the rapid changes that have taken place in recent Thai history. This involves establishing what people perceive as wellbeing and then exploring how they have been managing change in order to maintain or improve their wellbeing.

The WeD methodology consists of six inter-related research components. Conceptually these six methods can be grouped in three pairs dealing with *outcomes*, *structures* and *processes*. Following the definition the three main types of outcome that we gathered data on were the needs that had been met, the resources that people and households had available to them in their efforts to achieve their desired goals and the level of satisfaction or Quality of Life that people were able to achieve. The *RANQ* and the *WeDQoL* deal with *outcomes* and involved both objective and subjective traditions of study. Structures are addressed by the *Community Profiles* and the *Structures and Regimes* work. The Community Profiles deal with local dimensions of social, economic, political and cultural *structures*, while the Structures and Regimes work deals with wider scale phenomena. Finally, *processes* are dealt with by the *Income Expenditure* work and the *Process Research*. The former explores the ways in which resources are translated into incomes and expenditures over a year, and the latter deals in more detail with how different persons and households, in different community contexts engage in processes that are key to their wellbeing. The methods were used in a sequence which allowed the accumulation of understanding about the people, communities and nation-states included in the study, and also sought to build trust between the field researchers and the people of the specific communities in which detailed and extended fieldwork took place.

The six research elements are described in some detail in the Toolbox section of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries website (see www.welldev.org.uk/toolbox/):

1. ***Community Profiling***: the production of a community report compiled using secondary data and ethnographic and participatory methods.
2. ***Resources and Needs Questionnaire*** (RANQ): a specifically designed household survey administered to 1,183 households by a team of local interviewers.
3. ***Quality of Life***: open-ended exploration of Quality of Life with approximately 350 people (Jongudomkorn & Camfield, 2006), followed by development and administration of the WeDQoL measure (Woodcock et al, 2007), which explored “the outcome of the gap between people’s goals and perceived resources, in the context of their environment, culture, values, and experiences”.
4. ***Income and Expenditure***: monthly diaries collected over one year with a purposive sample of 72 households from different socio-economic backgrounds.
5. ***Process Research***: largely qualitative research focusing on a selection of key themes identified as important for wellbeing in the communities. In the case of Thailand these studies included Livelihoods (Masae, 2006), Collective action (Promphakping, 2006), and Health (Camfield, 2006).
6. ***Wellbeing Regimes***: an exploration of the big structures of political-economy, policy and society, within which the communities, households and persons studied, can be located. Regional and national data was collected and analysed using a wellbeing regimes framework (Newton, 2007)

Findings

We will now outline some of the main observations that arise from the WeD research in Thailand. The differences in site composition described earlier enable identification of inequalities in the opportunities for people to meet their needs, pursue their goals, and experience

subjective wellbeing. It illustrates that a person's primary location of residence is an important factor in the wellbeing that they experience as a result of Thailand's development. But it is not just that 'uneven development' is visible in different locations, but that different locations enable different conceptions of wellbeing and enable differing opportunities for its pursuit. The unequal distribution of public goods, such as schools and health centres, and economic opportunities plays an important part in shaping people's definitions of wellbeing and the resource strategies that they are able to pursue. The Thai development process creates spaces where some people can better pursue wellbeing, and uneven development leads to uneven achievements of wellbeing.

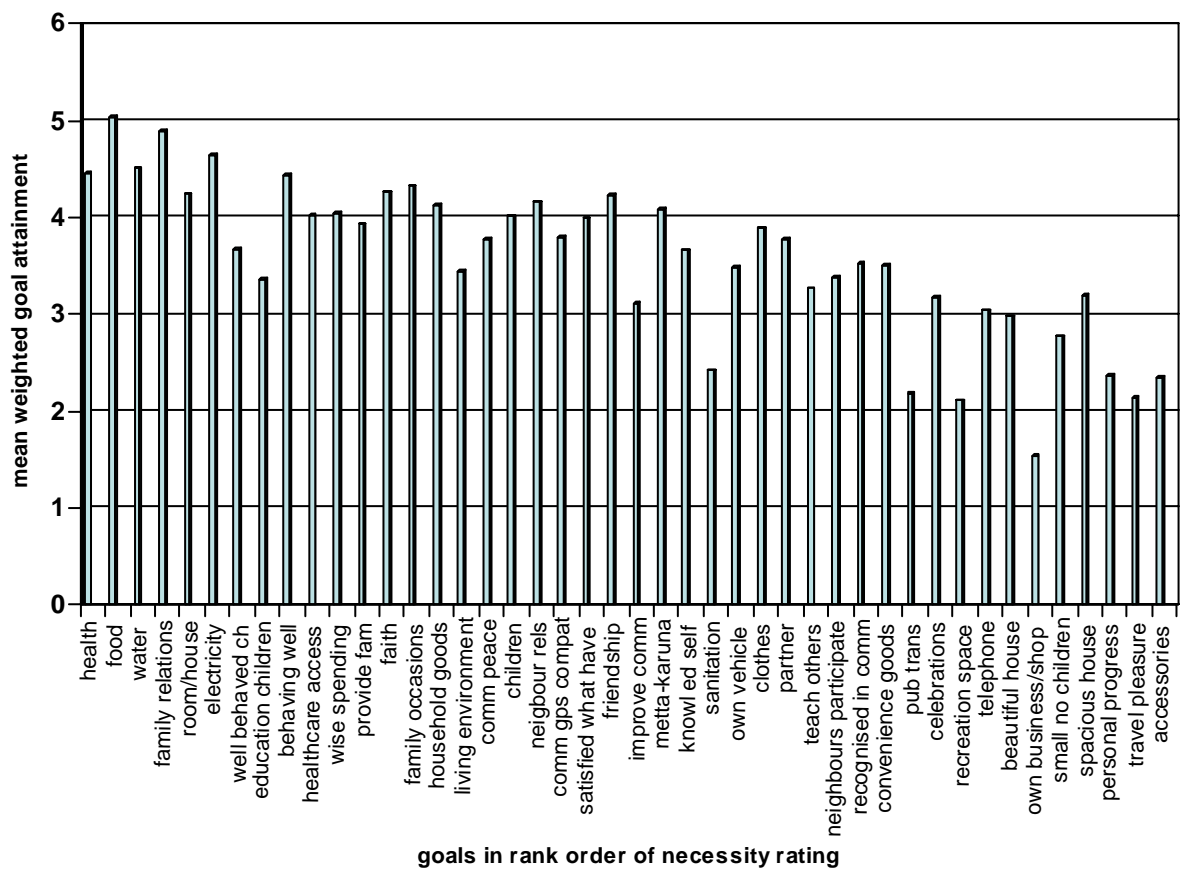
As might be expected the headline differences from the studies are most apparent in comparisons between more remote rural communities and those that are better connected to urban centres. The research indicates, however, that these differences do not always turn out as a simple modernisation story might suggest. In more 'urbanised' communities a range of important but predictable changes are confirmed. In terms of simple demographics, for example, household composition changes; the number of female household heads increases, while the household size and number of children decreases. People's social networks outside the household also tend to diminish; for example, regular contact with friends and relatives reduces, as does involvement in community activities. More interestingly, however, the likelihood of a household member or relative holding government office also decreases, indicating that most people surveyed in the more urbanised communities were less substantially connected to the structures of formal governance and politics. Access to educational facilities and educational outcomes improve in more urban communities, (indicated by the fact that illiteracy is lower) and the likelihood of speaking Thai and English is higher. Unusually though our studies find that, in more urbanised communities the use of government healthcare and other government services decreases, despite their greater availability. Poorer participants in the research reported this to be because they could not afford to lose a day's labour or trade to access these services, while wealthier people prefer private alternatives. Nevertheless, perceived health status remains broadly the same across all locations, while in the more urbanised communities satisfaction with family healthcare increases.

Unsurprisingly in less remote communities dependence on agriculture decreases, employment and income increases and labour migration decreases. Access to natural resources also reduces, alongside land and livestock ownership. While this decreases household food self-sufficiency, the likelihood of experiencing food shortages also decreases (only four households in the Southern urban site had experienced any kind of food shortage), and the reported satisfaction with their food supply increases. People also reported themselves as being materially better off: in particular, the levels of reported debt decreased, while ownership of consumer goods and perceived consumption opportunities increased. Housing quality increases (for example, having a tiled roof and an inside toilet), as does the quality of people's transportation. People in more urban communities were found to be less vulnerable to 'shocks' that adversely affect income or asset holdings, indicating greater levels of socio-economic security. Despite all of this, however, research participants in more urbanised communities were more likely to perceive their household as poorer than five years ago. This phenomenon is increasingly observed across developing and transforming countries and Graham and Pettinato (2001) refer to these as 'frustrated achievers'; that is, sections of the population whose expectations of a more urbanised life have exceeded their reality.

Looking in more detail at the subjective data produced by the research, Figure 3 presents some starkly illustrative results. This figure shows the goals that study respondents across all of the communities reported as important to them and the mean score of satisfaction reported in achievement of those goals. As might be expected the goals reported as most important correspond fairly well to a range of particular human needs, such as achieving good health or having adequate food, that are theoretically proposed. What is comforting for our evaluation of the Thai development process is that by and large most respondents were also relatively satisfied in their achievement of the goals that they ranked highly. So in most people's own minds the Thai development process is delivering them expected levels of needs satisfactions. However, what this figure most usefully illustrates are the goals that were also ranked highly but that respondents reported being much less satisfied with their achievement in. This is particularly evident for the

goal of ‘having a good education for their children’ and to a lesser extent ‘sanitation’. The issue of the behaviour of children is also highlighted, echoing a common and popular concern of the Thai media.

Figure 2 Mean weighted goal satisfaction ratings in rank order of necessity ratings



Source: Woodcock, 2007

When all the above differences are mapped to the different types of resources that households may command, it is apparent that while urban households are found to have higher human and material resources, this is accompanied by lower levels of social, cultural and

environmental resources. The change in the resource profiles of households has considerable effect on the ways in which their lives are lived and in which they pursue their wellbeing. The peri-urban and better connected rural sites show higher objective and subjective needs satisfaction and greater satisfaction with life.

The research framework advanced here is not anti-growth or anti-income and the results confirm that levels of human and material resources are important for the generation of wellbeing in all locations in contemporary Thailand. Regional location is in general an important factor in this, as are profitability of agriculture, and the local availability of non-agricultural employment. However, while location is an important general consideration it is not the determining factor for either meeting needs or satisfaction with life. The research reveals that differences in identity, wealth, gender, and generation are important in explaining differences both in what people aspire to as wellbeing and their degree of success in achieving that.

Wellbeing and Contemporary Development Discourses and Policy

The conception of wellbeing that has been used in this research is one which is profoundly social in character. By contrast, the main contemporary development discourses that focus on economic growth and human development are founded in a focus on ‘the individual’. Both approaches arrive at a view of society through the aggregation of individual conditions and neither, we argue, provides a convincing basis for the analysis of the relationships between development, social change and wellbeing. This preliminary analysis illustrates some of the ways in which patterns of social change in turn change the nature and quality of social relationships, which shape how we experience wellbeing.

The unevenness of Thailand’s development has been noted by many commentators and some of the detail of that unevenness both within particular locations and between the regions of the country is explored in this study. Thailand’s development transition has been marked by periodic economic and political crises but throughout there have been vibrant and rich debates across society over how development has been and should be affecting the cultural and social

values that prevail. Many different voices have contributed to these debates: the royal family, the modern business sector, secular politicians, musicians, journalists and others artists, the army, NGOs, academia, the *sangha* and external development agencies. In these debates the significance of the notion of wellbeing for Thailand has been increasingly recognised. At the level of casual observation, the pursuit of wellbeing could be regarded as a national pastime in Thailand. At a more formal level, notions of wellbeing (from *yoo dee gin dee* to *yoo dee mee sook*) have now found themselves a place in national policy discourses and documents (NESDB 1997).

In any processes of development and social change there will be winners and losers. What this research does is encourage us to disaggregate the winning and losing: some people may win in terms of material improvement but only at the cost of other dimensions of life that contribute to their wellbeing, for example, losses in terms of the quality of their close relationships. One way to think of the role of the type of wellbeing analysis illustrated here is that it can be used to identify who is winning and losing and in which particular dimensions of their wellbeing. It is then possible to seek to provide some explanation of the mechanisms and processes that are at work to produce the observed adverse wellbeing outcomes.

The WeD study in Thailand identifies inequalities in terms of what needs are being met and in what levels of resources people and households are able to command, but they also highlight inequalities in the goals that they are able to aspire to. The recognition of differences in both what people aspire to and in the strategies that they choose to adopt to pursue their vision of wellbeing leads to the recognition that not all of these will be compatible with each other. It suggests that policy-makers must give careful considerations to trade-offs between different visions of wellbeing that operate within our societies.

This paper begins to reveal for the case of Thailand some of the policy challenges that arise when one takes a wellbeing perspective in the study of development. Wellbeing is a utopian concept but is far from being a fuzzy one. It is a concept that helps us better understand some of

the trade-offs that are to be confronted in development processes. It forces us to consider how we are to live together at all levels of human society.

In facing this challenge, however, a major hazard for both the study of and policy for wellbeing is that it is strongly associated with the pursuit of personal individualised goals. There has been decades of ideological campaigning by politicians, academicians and by corporations that we can and all should have whatever we want, when we want it. We have been experiencing the American Dream writ large on the global public stage (Friedman 1994). However, the distinction between wellbeing as a profoundly social phenomenon or as a vehicle for individualism must be regarded as a major fault line in contemporary national and global political discourses.

In 'The Challenge of Affluence,' Avner Offer studiously charts a number of the different dimensions of this challenge (Offer 2006). As an economic historian he explores the corrosive effects of affluence on both wellbeing and societal arrangements in developed countries. Offer critically examines how affluence undermines institutions of commitment such as marriage that are essential for the coherent functioning of our societies. He also draws attention to the need for mindfulness where as individuals we strive to distinguish between short-term wants that provide immediate gratification and longer term needs that will make authentic contributions to our wellbeing (see also Max-Neef 1991).

At a global level the current challenges of climate change and environmental degradation are high on the political agenda and as such our discussion brings us to ask what an environmentally sustainable wellbeing might look like. It is certainly not a wellbeing that is focused on the individual but rather one that is concerned with connecting our individual choices with issues of how we are to live together. The notion of sustainability that is mobilised here and in the sufficiency economy discourse is not one that is concerned only with the natural environment but one that encompasses ideas of social and political sustainability. It resonates with Chambers' call for a notion of 'responsible wellbeing': where we are able to recognise and

take responsibility for our individual behaviours and the outcomes they produce in our local, national and global society (2005).

This highlights fundamental questions about what type of economic growth and social change we want in our societies. A concept of wellbeing and a methodology for studying it offer the possibility of undertaking an ex-ante analysis of the wellbeing consequences of different proposed patterns of growth. It can provide evidence for us to consider as a society as to whether we regard the consequences of particular patterns of growth and social change as desirable. As the 'sufficiency economy' thinking suggests this would involve asking questions such as whether the predicted outcomes are just or sustainable or, at a more basic level, whether they are likely to be good for us and our societies.

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