Assessing and improving the quality of life in Scotland

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In 2014 the Scottish Universities Insight Institute[1], Scotland's Futures Forum and partners[2] supported a programme[3] aimed at better understanding, measuring and promoting wellbeing in Scotland, it sought to address three broad questions:

- What influences individual and societal wellbeing?
- How best to measure wellbeing and what influences it to help shape and guide policy and practice? (and contribute to the development of the National Performance Framework)
- How best to promote and embed improved wellbeing?

A focus on wellbeing has a long and evolving pedigree. Over two hundred years ago David Hume wrote "The great end of all human industry is the attainment of happiness. For this were arts invented, sciences cultivated, laws ordained." Around one hundred years ago Andrew Carnegie gave his UK Trust the remit of the "improvement of the wellbeing of the masses of the people of Great Britain and Ireland". More recently Ian Marchant (outgoing chairman of Scotland's 2020 Group) described sustainable development as increasing wellbeing while reducing resources used.

In essence a wellbeing approach takes a balanced and systemic look across social, economic and environmental dimensions to understand and assess what influences the quality of life of citizens and society at large in order that it might be improved.

What influences wellbeing?

The factors that influence and shape the wellbeing of individuals and society at large are complex and multi-faceted. As Carrie Exton of the OECD put it, "We have a list of ingredients for wellbeing, but no one set recipe". This leaves a lot of scope for innovation and experiment in the kitchen. The ingredients identified in the wellbeing programme were summarised under three headings - people, participation and place, they include the following:

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[1] The Scottish Universities Insight Institute (SUII) is a joint venture between eight of Scotland's research intensive universities (Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow School of Art, Heriot Watt, St Andrews, Stirling and Strathclyde). It supports multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional teams of researchers, to come together with policy makers, practitioners, end users and overseas experts, to share knowledge and ideas to address the challenges and opportunities faced by Scotland and the wider world.

[2] Carnegie UK Trust, Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish National Heritage, The Scottish Government, Audit Scotland, SCVO, Oxfam Scotland, Volunteer Scotland and the David Hume Institute.

[3] The programme comprised of six individual projects:

- Good lives and decent societies (GLADS) – Edinburgh & Strathclyde
- Home not housing – Dundee, Stirling & Edinburgh
- The path to wellbeing – Aberdeen & St Andrews
- Walking for wellbeing – Edinburgh & Strathclyde
- Flourish (wellbeing in 'invisible' communities) – GSA & Aberdeen
- The economics of wellbeing – Scottish Institute for Research in Economics (Stirling)

More information on all the projects and a fully referenced summary paper can be found here: http://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/Wellbeing2014.aspx

- People
    - Agency - influence and control over one's life
    - Purpose – a sense of direction and meaning
    - Resources – sufficient income and wealth to have a reasonable quality of life without too much worry and uncertainty. The role of income has received a lot of attention particularly since the identification of the 'Easterlin Paradox' in the1970's, which suggested that while happiness increases in line with income at lower levels of income, as income rises beyond a certain point happiness levels off (more recent work suggests that there is a closer relationship at higher income levels between happiness and increases in income although the relationship appears to be stronger for life satisfaction rather than hedonic measures). People also seem to adapt quite quickly to increases in income and accept them as the norm and develop new wants that need to be satisfied. Relative income is also a factor.
    - Health – both physical and mental. Physical activity has a key role to play here e.g. through more walking and cycling – this also makes a contribution to helping prevent health expenditure in future and improving the environment. Recent work has also suggested a link between physical activity and more productive cities, highlighting the synergistic benefits of a wellbeing approach.
    - Skills/Knowledge – to benefit from and contribute to the economy and society
    - Sustenance – physical, cultural and spiritual
- Participation
    - Community – being part of a wider group and recognition
    - Engagement/Voice – being involved and being listened to
    - Employment – making a contribution, providing resources and status. Unemployment appears to have a significant impact on happiness on a par with bereavement or separation. Under-employment and uncertainty over employment also have a very negative impact.
    - Connections and access – family, friends and beyond
    - Giving – putting something back. Giving seems to increase the wellbeing of the giver and receiver and thus an overall culture of generosity can influence society at large through building trust.
- Place
    - Safety and shelter – home (where the influence is generally positive) and neighbourhood (where the influenced is more mixed)
    - Environment-natural/built – quality of environment and physical space and accessibility. For example, access to urban greenspace can help improve both physical and mental health by reducing stress and associated damaging cortisol levels and encouraging greater physical activity. It also provides the opportunity for increasing social engagement as well. Similar impacts have been found for access to water as well.
    - Fairness – helps build trust and community
    - Freedom – to express oneself and take part without fear or favour
    - Culture – the underlying set of social norms which guide and constrain action e.g. low levels of corruption

For individuals wellbeing combines both pleasure and purpose. There is some good news for all of us – eventually - age seems to be a factor, with happiness appearing to be U shaped with age. We start off reasonably happy (full of expectations maybe) as we move towards our fifties we become less happy (as ambitions are dashed and the cares of the world grow perhaps) but as we grow older happiness increases again.

As with any good recipe the wellbeing of a society is more than the sum of its individual parts. It is complex, combining elements of security, cohesion, inclusion and empowerment, in particular there appear to be links between levels of inequality and happiness and the impact that this can have on a sense of trust between individuals and groups in society. Fairer societies tend to be happier societies, with lower crime, better health.

Societies that have developed more inclusive political and economic institutions also tend to be the most innovative, productive and prosperous, in contrast to those in which a small elite focus on extracting value in the short term. The development of social capital has been identified as an important contributor to growing prosperity through, for example, the role it can play in facilitating innovation and the development of trade - this was highlighted recently by the Bank of England's Chief Economist. While recent work by the OECD and IMF shows that widening inequality has a detrimental impact on the level and durability of economic development.

Another key feature of healthy and happy societies appears to be the importance of dialogue between different interests, groups and communities. To be effective this dialogue must be: inclusive, empathetic, empowering, creative, systemic, asset based and multi-generational.

How can wellbeing best be assessed?

Given the influences on individual and societal wellbeing are multi-faceted, complex and interrelated, so too is its assessment (assessment is a broader concept than measurement and became a preferred term during the course of the programme). In thinking about this aspect it's worth remembering that there is a danger that overly focussing on what can be measured might distract attention from the underlying purpose of adopting a wellbeing framework (as Joseph Stiglitz has reminded us - "Our metrics will never be a substitute for public dialogue and thinking about what constitutes a good society.").

It's now widely accepted that the assessment of a society's progress goes beyond the measurement of economic performance and in particular the growth in GDP. Many places are developing processes to measure progress on a broader front using broadly similar domains and it's generally recognised that Scotland through its Government and NGOs is one of the world leaders in the field.

A number of issues were highlighted in developing a wellbeing measurement framework:

- How can citizens be effectively engaged in development and monitoring of measures?
- How can the qualitative 'spirit of wellbeing' best be captured?
- What's the right balance between surveys of subjective wellbeing and objective measures?
- How can synergies between different domains best be captured?
- Are dashboards of indicators a better approach than the construction of an index?
- How can proxy measures obscure a focus on the desired outcome?

During the course of the programme a number of suggestions for development of the National Performance Framework were made. These included:

- Reframe the overall purpose statement to provide a more explicit wellbeing focus
- Give greater emphasis within the NPF to:
    - measures of distribution,
        - income and wealth, health, geography, inter-generational
    - asset based measures
    - measuring progress over the life course

- unemployment (particularly long term and youth)
- qualitative assessment
    - social quality/quality of relationships
    - home/neighbourhood quality
    - quality/flexibility of work
- access to natural environment
- ethical business practices
- volunteering

Volunteering was used as a case study for indicator development. Volunteering is a powerful tool for change and brings wellbeing benefits both to those who receive and those who give (the economic value of volunteering in Scotland is estimated to be over £2.6 billion). Volunteering can be both formal and informal and it is proposed that both are captured in the NPF.

It's easy to keep on adding measures and there is a risk that the exercise could become too complex and confusing, thought should therefore be given to a 'one in one out'.

Embedding and promoting wellbeing

Using a wellbeing framework to guide policy and practice has a number of important benefits, including:

- Helping enable citizens to actively engage in policy and practice development and evaluation
- Providing a focus for assessing and evaluating strategic direction, budgets and specific policies and improving accountability - in both a parliamentary and wider context
- Helping policy makers and practitioners stimulate dialogue and engagement, identify gaps and pose questions, focus on prevention and join up action

The one overriding conclusion which emerged from the programme was the importance of actively enabling, empowering and engaging citizens to be more actively involved in setting direction, deciding priorities, developing policies, identifying measures and monitoring progress. This involves moving away from the more traditional approach of deciding, designing and delivering towards what the Carnegie UK Trust has termed an "Enabling State".

This will have a double benefit, while at the same time as improving policy and practice by making it more relevant to people's needs, it will directly enhance wellbeing by making people feel more in control of their own destiny. It will also help develop a stronger more participatory democracy and build on the energy generated by the referendum campaign. What's more there is growing willingness and ability in Scotland in the public, private, third and academic sectors to help develop and embed such an approach.

Conclusions

- A wellbeing approach takes a balanced look across social, economic and environmental dimensions at understanding and assessing what influences the quality of life of citizens and society at large.
- The wellbeing of individuals and society is influenced by a wide range of factors that are interrelated and often self-reinforcing - there are subjective and objective aspects to how happy individuals and societies are.
- Fairer societies tend to be happier, more prosperous and have fewer social problems.
- A wellbeing approach provides an opportunity to actively engage citizens, join up policy and practice and prevent the need for remedial action.

- Measurement can help in assessing progress and focussing resources, but must be used carefully and a number of issues need to be taken into account to avoid distraction.
- While Scotland is one of the leading countries in the world in measuring wellbeing there is always room for improvement.
- Actively engaging, enabling and empowering citizens will improve policy and practice, strengthen democracy and improve wellbeing.