

Dr. J. Allister McGregor

Chairman, thank you very much, colleagues, it's a pleasure to be here and be able to speak to you. I am told I speak better when I get a bit passionate so I'll try to get a bit passionate and see how it goes. But what I am certainly faced with are challenges. Challenges to speak in 10 minutes about the findings of the work of a research group which has studied in 4 different countries, 4 different developing countries, and has involved over 100 researchers in research partnerships in Peru, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Thailand. That's the challenge and it's an even bigger challenge because if any of you heard the speech, the pre-conference speech by Sten Jorgensen, you might have thought like me, well what am I going to say now, because I think he said most of it. Or this morning the presentation of Prof. Max-Neef and also Jiang Zhenhua. So I am going to have to challenge you, I am going to have to turn that challenge around, from challenge for me to challenge to you. And the challenge is that we need in international development, a practical concept of wellbeing, not only if we are going to reach the Millennium Development Goals, but if we are going to reach beyond them and to confront the major and interlinked challenges of poverty conflict and sustainability that confront us all, globally, whether in South Africa, Bangladesh, here in Austria, the UK, or the US.

A simple proposition: the objective of international development is to create the conditions in societies around the world where all people are reasonably able to pursue wellbeing in socially, politically, and environments sustainable ways. Fairly innocuous. Not obviously contentious and certainly not new. In December 1986, the United Nations adopted a Declaration on the Right of Development. The second paragraph of the declaration recognizes that development is a comprehensive process which aims at the constant improvement of the wellbeing of entire populations and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development, and the fair distribution of the results therefrom. What is the term wellbeing? It's bounded about, I don't know about you, but weekend newspapers in Britain have got wellbeing sections. You can find adverts for wellbeing in essential oil shops, you can find it in telephone booths, we need, however, in the social sciences and also in international development a concept that we can work with. A concept that we can research, and a concept that we can also base policy upon. So after our five years of detailed empirical work and also trawling through the vast array of work across the social science disciplines in moral philosophy, in economics, and social psychology we decided that this is the definition that we are working to. Well-being is a state of being with others. It occurs where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one's goals, and where one is able to enjoy a satisfactory quality of life.

This is a hybrid definition; it is a definition that recognizes that we need to combine both objective and subjective approaches to the notion of wellbeing. But it also seeks to transcend both of these by recognizing the ways in which we make the societies we live in. We live in relationships, we live in frames of meaning which shape our aspirations

and also shape the extent and the abilities that we have to work toward those aspirations. And here in Austria I am arguing against the tendency, a tendency that I found too often and throughout my whole work difficult. That is to see poverty as a framework through which you understand poor and developing countries, while wellbeing is a framework for the wealthy and for developed countries. We have rejected that notion. We also reject the notion that there is some kind of hierarchy of needs whereby in developing countries it's good if we can meet basic needs, the higher order needs of self actualization, a sense of confidence, those are things from more wealthy countries. What we find precisely in our research is that people are constantly trading off different aspects of these needs. The needs for a sense of competence or the ability to actually feed yourself. The need for a sense of autonomy and ability to self actualize or the ability to provide shelter.

For it to be a practical definition I would argue, in the context in the area of my work in international development, it must better explain why poverty exists, and it must better inform policy choices and how we tackle poverty. Following the inspiration of writers such as Manfred Max-Neef this involves placing the social human being at the center of our analysis. International development and indeed more than academia has an inclination towards goal displacement. We become specialized; we think about development in relation to economic growth and we then specialize so much in what are the conditions for economic growth that we forget actually that the point of economic growth is to provide the conditions within which people can achieve wellbeing. Growth does not automatically deliver it; there are different paths to growth and growth creates the conditions within which people are or are not able to pursue their wellbeing. We believe in the context of today, while there have been many words written about wellbeing—much more philosophy, quite abstract work—it is necessary also to study it and to that extent we as a group, and I mean with a cross disciplines with social sciences in between academic institutions in Peru, Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Thailand, have developed a methodology in which we have worked in rural communities and urban communities to actually begin to explore what is it within these particular communities that helps us understand why some people stay poorer, why poverty persists, and what is it that enables some others to escape it?

It is a challenge in ten minutes to tell you all the results so I am not going to tell you, but what I will tell you is that of course the studies reveal inequalities within countries between what needs are being met and importantly for whom. It is necessary in terms of thinking about needs to break down the aggregates and look in detail about whose needs are being met and which of those needs are being met. We also find quite evidently differences [in terms of] who is and who is not able to act meaningfully in respect of their value goals. And then the work on value goals and the work where we took on quality of life methodologies and used those and elicited people's own lists of what their goals were, we found considerable differences in what people were able to aspire to and differences certainly in the levels of satisfaction that they then express in achieving their aspirations.

In Thailand for example the great development success story: you work in the northeast and you will find a large proportion of the people who are stressed, who are indebted,

who have reached the point where they say we can no longer aspire to live in the Thailand that we see on our televisions, the Thailand of Bangkok. And what they have done is begun to search for movements and self-help groups that help them re-orientate their aspirations. And it is no longer that they perceive themselves in the same space of aspirations as many of their fellow citizens.

What the concept of wellbeing, I think, however, does most forcefully is illustrate the micro foundations of conflict. It can seem a very woolly and fuzzy and a nice concept and it's great. But what it reveals when you look at it in detail is, of course, that not all visions of wellbeing are compatible with each other. And not all strategies that people wish to adopt to achieve what they regard as wellbeing are compatible with each other. The analysis of the way that some people's notions of wellbeing succeed over others, and some people's strategies for wellbeing succeed over others reveals, exposes, the micro foundation for conflict. And in this sense we can think of conflict, we can think of poverty as an outcome of latent conflict. It being a struggle for wellbeing for many people in the countries we are looking at, to avoid ill-being. And it's manifest not just in the lack of material possessions, not just in the lack of being able to meet needs, but also in the interlinkage of those lacks with forms of social exclusion, with forms of aspirational deprivation, and in many situations actually the overt exercise of violence.

One of the hazards of the concept of wellbeing is its association with the notion of the individual. The definition of wellbeing I am arguing for here, that international development needs, that we need in our work, is a definition that is not preoccupied with the individual. It is a definition and a form of analysis that emphasizes the importance of the social human being in the context of social relationships, social meanings, and cultural values. Wellbeing here is not happiness that economists, as Max-Neef reminded us, have just discovered. Or rediscovered. It's not focused only in the individual but it highlights the connection between our personal choices and the question of how we are to live together in society. As Linda [Yueh] has expressed in her work on institutions, it's about the detail of those institutions in society. It also helps us, hopefully to move away from the notion of which growth or human development, it's either one thing or the other, the market or the state. It is neither; it is about institutional conditions within which the social human being is able to reasonably pursue objectives, goals, in the way that is meaningful to them. You are very familiar, in the work of this institute, and this association with the question of how are we to live together. It seems to me that is a question we are all asking and we feel we need to ask ever more urgently. And the question of how are we to live together, of course, is on the political and policy agenda at the moment very high in terms of the environmental challenges in terms of environmental sustainability. How are we to share the resources of the planet? But what the concept of well-being does, I believe, is extend the notion of environmental sustainability to emphasize its interconnections with broader issues of social and political sustainability. It forces us all, and it should force us all here in this room and in our work, to examine our structures of governments, both in our villages and our towns and also nation states and our global community. To consider whether those structures of governments effectively take heed and pay cognizance to the aspirations, hopes and strategies of the poorest people in the poorest countries and finds a way to negotiate those, to debate those, in a

global and international forum. So I hope you will take this challenge and find it stimulating. Thank you very much.