

From
INDIVIDUAL
WELLBEING
to
REGIONAL
PRIORITIES

*Concepts and Measures
to Assist Policy Makers*

SILVA LARSON

**From Individual Wellbeing
to Regional Priorities**

From Individual Wellbeing
to Regional Priorities:
Concepts and Measures to Assist Policy Makers

By

Silva Larson

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

**From Individual Wellbeing to Regional Priorities:
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by Silva Larson**

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TO MY SAILOR

If you observe a really happy person you will find him sailing a boat, writing a book, educating his son, growing double dahlias in her garden, or looking for dinosaur eggs in the Gobi desert. She will not be searching for happiness as if it were a collar button that has rolled under the radiator.

—W. Beran Wolfe, adapted

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development encourages policy makers to promote development that will sustain natural environments for future generations' welfare, while ensuring that the living standards of those in the present are maintained (WCED, 1987). The concept links ecological protection, economic development and human welfare. Although the concept has been equally hailed and criticised since its origin, sustainable development delivers four key notions:

- It entrenches ecological and societal considerations into economic policy making;
- It explicitly references “needs”, and therefore does not simply argue for the creation of wealth or the conservation of resources, but also for fair distribution;
- In addition to intra-generational equity, it also explicitly refers to intergenerational equity;
- It stresses the concept of “development”, rather than “growth”, acknowledging that economic welfare is about more than just the financial aspects.

The United Nations Rio Declaration (United Nations, 1992) brought further popularisation of the concept of sustainable development. Most relevant here is that Chapter 8 of the Agenda 21 (Quarrie, 1992) calls on governments to modify and strengthen planning and management procedures so as to facilitate the integrated consideration of social, economic and natural environment issues. This goal of “sustainability” sometimes presupposes a new direction for the development of society, which includes consequences for spatial patterns and consumption habits. As the development of society is a highly complex and, to a large extent, unpredictable process, the long-term effects of any policy measure are only partly foreseeable (Abaza et al, 2004). Hence the need for consistent, transparent methods of attempting to predict the impacts of policy measures.

However, before we can assess the impacts or attempt to evaluate the success of the policy, we need to determine the scope of assessment. That is, we need to be able to answer the following question: “Impacts on what?” The concept of sustainable development explicitly refers to the “needs” and satisfaction of needs of people. Thus, in order to promote sustainability, policy and decision makers need to be able to identify what “needs” are, and how these needs are distributed in society. In other words, they need to be able to answer questions such as: “What matters to people?” and “How satisfied are they with things that matter to them at the moment?” Understanding current needs and current levels of satisfaction would benefit policy assessment as it would allow mapping of the envisaged impacts of policy (negative and positive ones) against their importance to people, thus providing information about the potential of different policy options to increase or decrease human welfare.

The concept of “human wellbeing” has emerged in the literature and in practice as a concept with the potential to provide answers to such questions. As a result, human wellbeing is becoming an increasingly important aspect of investigations in planning and management (Hagerty et al, 2001; Hassan et al, 2005; Veenhoven, 2002). Evaluations of the urban quality of life and wellbeing are well documented (for example, see Ge and Hokao, 2006; Giannias, 1998; Grayson and Young, 1994; Pacione, 2003; vanKamp et al, 2003), representing either general approaches or focusing on particular domains of the urban quality of life such as health, social cohesion, safety or leisure (for example, Bell, 2006; Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Lloyd and Auld, 2002). In the rural and semi-rural context, interest in human wellbeing has been largely derived from the natural resource management perspectives, in particular through popularisation of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment methodologies (Hassan et al, 2005; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2003). Consequently, improvements in human wellbeing are increasingly viewed as being dependent on improving ecosystem management and ensuring conservation and sustainable use of resources (Hassan et al, 2005). Evidently, human wellbeing approaches that consider the paradigm of sustainable development warrant further research.

Furthermore, natural resource management agencies, regional planners and other decision makers are facing increased pressure to incorporate the social dimensions of resource management into landscape planning (Larson, 2009). However, studies set in rural regions tend to focus on particular groups, such as landholders (Bohnet and Smith, 2007; Broderick, 2005) or indigenous populations (Larson et al, 2006; Richmond et al, 2000). Little appears to be known about subjective preferences,

individual contributors and the levels of satisfaction with human wellbeing in the general population that resides in rural areas of the developed world.

Thus, the primary aim of this book is to improve our understanding of what people value and find most important to their wellbeing, at the regional scale.

On the one hand, the sustainability literature and the resulting national institutional arrangements explicitly reference “needs” and the satisfaction of “the needs” of the people; on the other hand, governments in developed countries are increasingly interested in development and promotion of rural regions. Yet, we have very little understanding of what the needs and aspirations of the people currently living in such regions are, and hence how these regions can be best developed and the welfare of their residents best enhanced. In this book, I explore two case studies set in rural north Queensland on the east coast of Australia, aiming at gaining a better understanding of the needs of the rural residents. The concept of wellbeing was used to collect information on needs and priorities, that is, important wellbeing contributors, as perceived by those people.

However, policy and decision makers do not only need to be familiar with what the needs are, but also with how they are distributed in society. Hence, I also examined various social, economic and sense of place attributes of residents, with the aim of investigating if such attributes potentially determine stakeholders’ responses.

An approach that takes into account both what people value most and how satisfied they are with the current state of affairs would assist decision makers with identifying perceived regional priorities. In this book I propose and describe one such approach, that of using a quantitative composite value that combines both types of information, and demonstrate, using two shires in the Great Barrier Reef region of Australia as examples, how this can be done.

An overview of the large body of literature relevant to this research is provided in the next chapter. Key ideas from areas that provide an interdisciplinary integration of economic, social and ecosystem concerns, as well as an integrated concept of human wellbeing, are discussed first. The literature review also presents a summary of current developments in Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) processes, legislation and literature and introduces the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Further, an overview of the assessment methods in use is also incorporated in Chapter Two.

Several research questions emerged from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and I attempted to answer the most pertinent ones in the rest of the book. But first, a brief introduction to and a comparison of the two

study areas is presented in Chapter Three. Methodological approaches to the primary data collection are also discussed in this chapter. A guide to the design of the questionnaire is presented first, followed by the details of pilot testing and full survey stage of the data collection.

A better understanding of what contributes to wellbeing, and by how much, is needed first, I argue. Thus the first aim of the book, addressed in Chapter Four, was to better understand the needs of the residents in regional Australia. In this first part of the enquiry I aimed at defining and measuring the most important contributors to individual and regional wellbeing, exploring three main sub-questions: What factors (contributors to wellbeing) are perceived as being the most important to individual wellbeing? Are the contributors to wellbeing shared by individuals within and across different regions? and, Is choice of contributors to wellbeing determined by the characteristics of the person, that is, can wellbeing choices be explained by socio-economic, demographic or sense of place characteristics of the person? Results of these investigations are presented in Chapter Four of the book. The chapter starts with the data analysis methods, and then presents results of the investigation into wellbeing contributors at both individual and regional level. Explorations of the determinants of the wellbeing choices are also presented. The chapter closes with a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

In addition to the question of “what matters to people?” discussed in Chapter Four, in Chapter Five I explored current levels of satisfaction with important wellbeing contributors: How satisfied are people with the various wellbeing contributors at the moment? How similar is the satisfaction of residents in regions to the national scores? Are the satisfaction levels shared by individuals within and across regions? To answer such questions, I compared reported satisfaction levels across the case studies, and to Australian national-level studies, with the aim of better understanding regionally specific issues. I also tested if satisfaction scores could be explained by socio-economic, demographic or sense of place characteristics of the respondents. Thus, Chapter Five starts with the presentation of the data analysis methods, followed by results at the regional level. The results are compared to the national satisfaction scores, followed by discussion and conclusion sections.

There is a clear need for an approach that would assist decision makers with identifying regional priorities, as perceived by residents. I was also convinced that a more complex evaluation and analysis is needed in order to improve our understanding of both what people value most and how satisfied they are at the moment. Levels of satisfaction with wellbeing factors provide useful insights in their own right, but they do not provide

an understanding of how important each of these factors is to the respondents overall. For example, at the policy-making level, a factor recorded as being of concern to a large majority of residents is likely to receive more attention than a factor that concerns only a few residents. Therefore, relevance of satisfaction levels to policy making could be improved by taking into account the recorded importance of each factor. In Chapter Six I thus set out to investigate the relationship between satisfaction scores and the relative importance (weights) assigned to wellbeing factors: Can we integrate satisfaction and importance into one metric? More specifically, I was aiming at answering the following question: Can this metric help identify wellbeing factors that might warrant attention from decision and policy makers—i.e. can it identify regional priorities or help develop an “action list”? Thus, in Chapter Six, I explored the approaches that would create a better understanding of wellbeing contributors and the satisfaction levels, to assist decision and policy making. Again, a summary of data analysis methods is followed by the explorations of the satisfaction and importance on an individual and regional level. A composite metric of both measures, the Index of Dissatisfaction (IDS), is then proposed and discussed.

In closing, Chapter Seven discusses key contributions of this book, as well as areas of interest for further research.