



Roundtable on wellbeing, inequality and social deprivation: Discussion summary

Wednesday, 20 April 2016, 09:30 to 11:00 am

At this All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics event, parliamentarians and leaders from civil society gathered to discuss the relationship between wellbeing, inequality and social deprivation and the policy priorities that lie at their intersection.

The panel members were:

- Baroness Ruth Lister – Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at Loughborough University
- Lord Gus O'Donnell – Former Cabinet Secretary and non-Executive Chairman of Frontier (Europe)
- Lord Richard Layard – Director of the Wellbeing Programme and Emeritus Professor of Economics, LSE.
- Dr Simon Sandberg – Consultant for Lambeth Council and wellbeing expert
- Dr Kimberley Brownlee – Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick
- Sir John Hills – Director of CASE, Co-Director LSE International Inequalities Institute, Richard Titmuss Professor of Social Policy, LSE

The event was chaired by APPG co-chair Baroness Claire Tyler, and attended by APPG co-chair Jon Cruddas MP and APPG member Lord Alan Howarth, as well as a public audience.

Summary

The discussion was structured around three main questions.

What does wellbeing add to a concept of deprivation?

- There was broad agreement in the room that wellbeing, inequality and social deprivation are distinct but related concepts that complement each other.
- Integrating wellbeing into discussions around deprivation enables a deeper understanding of psycho-social effects of economic deprivation and a stronger focus on drivers such as social contact. Kimberley Brownlee argued that social contact is so crucial to human wellbeing that it should be a social right.
- Wellbeing also adds an important aspirational perspective to the otherwise deficit-focussed concept of deprivation, in that it focuses on actively

supporting people's lives to go well, and not just on escaping or avoiding deficits.

- Some panellists stressed that we should be careful that a wellbeing focus does not allow government to ignore material aspects of deprivation.

Should reducing wellbeing inequality be the primary aim of government?

- While most panellists did not agree that reducing wellbeing inequalities should be the primary aim of government, they all agreed it was important.
- Some panellists stressed that a focus on wellbeing inequalities should not obscure the equally important aim of reducing of economic inequalities.

What are the policies, or policy areas, that need to be prioritised to reduce deprivation or inequalities in wellbeing?

- The discussion raised a number of policy areas for attention. These included an increased focus on mental health, rebalancing the emphasis in schools towards measuring wellbeing as well as exam results, and policies to maintain social connections in social services such as prisons and prenatal and antenatal care.

Input from audience members included:

- Middle-age groups need to be prioritised to reduce inequalities in wellbeing.
- New research by the New Economics Foundation shows that wellbeing inequalities between groups are not inevitable.
- We need to continue to challenge the dominance of Gross Domestic Product to make a space for wellbeing to become a primary aim of government.
- Social isolation amongst older people remains a key concern.

Discussion in more detail

What does wellbeing add to a concept of deprivation?

There was broad agreement in the room that wellbeing, inequality and social deprivation are distinct but related concepts that complement each other. It is important to maintain a distinction between poverty and material deprivation on the one hand, and wellbeing on the other, in order to talk about the relationship between them.

Integrating wellbeing into discussions around deprivation enables a deeper understanding of psycho-social effects of economic deprivation and a stronger focus on drivers such as social contact.

Deprivation is about much more than material circumstances.

Richard Layard stressed the importance of physical and mental health. He cited a study which showed that of those in the bottom 8% of the wellbeing distribution, only 20% are in poverty and 7% are unemployed, while 48% have been diagnosed with depression and anxiety and 22% have physical health problems. This suggests that misery is a result of not having the capacity to enjoy life, both externally in terms of economic means and internally in terms of mental resources.

Baroness Ruth Lister referenced analysis from the *Spirit Level* highlighting that in rich countries the damaging effect of poverty is not material but psycho-social. This is particularly acute in high-inequality societies like the UK, where, because of processes of 'othering' and structures of superiority and inferiority, dominance and subordination, people do not interact on a basis of equal worth.

Many of the speakers agreed that a key condition for wellbeing currently overlooked in narrower material conceptualisations of deprivation is social interaction. Kimberley Brownlee argued that as human beings we are naturally sociable; we are dependent on others not only during childhood or when we are sick, but also throughout our lives. Being deprived of social contact is akin to being deprived of food or water; we need it to survive. She outlined a proposal to enshrine social interaction as a fundamental right.

Baroness Ruth Lister added that a wellbeing lens highlights previously unseen elements of poverty, for example that people living in poverty are far less likely to enjoy culture, which should also be thought of as a right.

Wellbeing adds an important aspirational element to the otherwise deficit-focussed concept of deprivation. Simon Sandberg pointed out that deprivation is, by definition, concerned with what is lacking. Deprivation looks at what's missing, while wellbeing can help us to focus on what we have. For those using the philosophy of asset-based community development, wellbeing is a useful concept because it contains the aspirational and positive concepts of social capital, social connectedness and resilience.

Some panellists stressed that we should be careful that a wellbeing focus does not allow government to ignore material aspects of deprivation.

Sir John Hills stressed that although wellbeing is useful in helping us to remember that income, wealth and public services are means to ends rather than ends in themselves, such resources remain crucial to how much autonomy people have over their lives. The government's recent attempt to redefine poverty in non-material terms, focussing on aspects such as addiction or family break-down was misguided in its disregard for these material aspects.

Should reducing wellbeing inequality be the primary aim of government?

While most panellists did not agree that reducing wellbeing inequality should be the primary aim of government, they all agreed it was important. Lord Gus O'Donnell gave the example that, if we cared only about inequality, reducing everyone's wellbeing to zero would be seen as a good policy and that government should care about average wellbeing as *well as* wellbeing inequality. Unlike economic inequality, no-one would argue that the wellbeing of those with high wellbeing should be reduced. Instead, all panellists agreed that more emphasis should be placed on increasing the wellbeing of those at the lowest end of the scale. A key question posed by Lord Gus O'Donnell was 'where does this bite?' How much more value should we put for those at the bottom of the ladder compared to the top? And how does this shift as we move up the scale? A lot of thinking has been done on this question in relation to income inequality, but less so for wellbeing inequality.

Some panellists stressed that a focus on wellbeing inequalities should not obscure the equally important aim of reducing of economic inequalities, or focussing on material aspects such as poverty. Simon Sandberg stressed the multitude of evidence on the damaging effects of inequality across societies, including the finding that poverty is higher in more unequal countries.

What are the policies, or policy areas, that need to be prioritised to reduce deprivation or inequalities in wellbeing?

The four pillars of social exclusion. John Hill suggested that policy needs to focus on four 'pillar' areas – income, employment, political participation and social isolation – that underpin social exclusion.

Mental health. Numerous studies demonstrate that mental health is a key driver of low wellbeing. Lord Gus O'Donnell, Professor Lord Richard Layard and other speakers agreed that a key policy priority for reducing wellbeing inequality must be mental health, highlighting the successes of the Improved Access to Psychological Treatment (IAPT) programme, but maintaining that more needs to be done.

Children. Lord Gus O'Donnell stressed that although a great deal of resources and effort go into measuring and publishing exam results, subject knowledge is only one part of a child's development. Wellbeing in schools must be prioritised, with the development of evidence-based programmes to improve children's wellbeing, and wellbeing evaluation of schools. Baroness Ruth Lister described this process as shifting to think of children as 'beings' rather than 'becomings'.

Good jobs. Some panellists highlighted the social benefits of work on wellbeing. However, an audience member raised the concern that some work has negative

impacts on wellbeing and social interaction, for example shift work such as nursing. A distinction must be made between the quality and quantity of jobs, suggesting the need for policies that increase the number of people in 'Good Jobs' that are worthwhile, decent and without detrimental impacts on wellbeing.

Technology and the future of work. Jon Cruddas MP raised the need for further research on the impact of technology on the labour market – how will it impact income distribution? Which jobs will be automated? How will it impact working hours at each end of the income scale? Policy needs to mitigate the potentially inequality-enhancing and wellbeing-reducing aspects of this transition.

Tax credits. Given the impact of cutting tax credits on child poverty, policy-makers interested in reducing deprivation and inequalities in wellbeing must protect welfare support.

Social isolation. There was broad consensus that reducing social isolation was key to improving wellbeing and reducing inequalities in wellbeing. Lord Gus O'Donnell explained the double-dividend nature of policies in this area, whereby reductions in social isolation and loneliness reduce costs on the public sector. Kimberley Brownlee questioned how public services could be designed in a way that provides the opportunity to develop long term social connections, for example, having one point of contact who knows your story when you interact with services like midwives or the prison service.

Questions and comments from the audience

Middle-age groups need to be prioritised to reduce inequalities in wellbeing. Policies and interventions tend to focus on the youngest or oldest groups of society. However, given the context of lengthening life expectancy and the changing future of work in relation to technology, panellists and audience participants identified a need to give more attention to those in the middle age bracket. This issue is heightened given the U shape in wellbeing, where those of working age have lower wellbeing on average than the young and old. The simple 'educate, work, retire' framework is no longer tenable; efforts must be made to maintain wellbeing throughout the life course.

New research by the New Economics Foundation shows that wellbeing inequalities between groups are not inevitable. While it is true that in the UK ethnic minorities and those with less education have lower wellbeing, this is not the case in all countries. This should give policy makers hope that it is possible to reduce inequalities in wellbeing between population groups. However, we still know little about the drivers of inequality in wellbeing between groups.

We need to continue to challenge the dominance of Gross Domestic Product to make a space for wellbeing to become a primary aim of government. Despite the global financial crisis, GDP and limited concepts of economic growth continue to dominate politics and the media, which limits the impact of a wellbeing focus.

Social isolation amongst older people remains a key concern. One participant shared research finding that people in care homes have an average of two minutes of social engagement a day.