

The challenges associated with using measures of 'happiness' for public policy purposes cannot be ignored by government

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*The growing acceptance of subjective wellbeing (or 'happiness') measures for public policy purposes has proved controversial. **Ian Bache** and **Louise Reardon** review the issues and argue that the extent to which this agenda has taken hold is overstated and concerns are mostly based on a particular (narrow) interpretation of the purpose of the wellbeing agenda.*



Around the world governments and international organisations have increased their interest in wellbeing as an explicit goal of government policy. Some, like the UK government, have developed indicators to measure life satisfaction with a view to using these data, alongside others, to shape public policies. The [Measuring National Wellbeing Programme](#), which has spearheaded these developments, was launched in 2010 by David Cameron with much fanfare and received a flurry of media attention. While wellbeing has since fallen from the media spotlight, government commitment to this agenda is still very much alive. In January, at the [Environmental Audit Committee](#) hearing on the role of wellbeing in government policy, Nick Hurd MP (Minister for Civil Society) confirmed this commitment, stating: 'since we embarked on this journey, lots of other short-term pressures have piled on to the system. The fact that it is still in there, is still being moved along and is still being taken seriously tells you that a long-term view is being taken.'



Yet this agenda has proved controversial, leading to claims that the government is out to 'maximise happiness' or even '[trying to control our minds](#)'. There are 'accepted' ways of doing things statistically and, until recently at least, drawing on individuals' perception of their life satisfaction has not been one. Yet developments to date are explicitly at an early stage and no major decisions have been taken informed by subjective wellbeing (SWB) data. This point is in itself an important corrective to the feverish media reaction to the UK government's agenda

Yet this agenda does raise some serious issues that have a firm footing in long-standing academic debates around themes of *reliability*, *responsibility*, *distrust* and *distraction*. Here we try to steer a course through these debates by understanding the challenge that wellbeing measurement seeks to address as being a 'wicked problem' – one that is ill-defined, complex and multidimensional (in the UK context alone, some support the wellbeing agenda to promote happiness or life satisfaction, others to promote environmental sustainability or social policies or mental health policies and so on).

While this concept has been well used in political science we think it has particular relevance here because the original contribution (by [Rittel and Webber](#) in 1973) was developed in response to similar attempts to broaden measures of social progress in the 1960s and 1970s. A wicked problems approach – as it did in the 1970s – points to particular ways forward, but first we consider these four themes.



(Image credit: gemb1)

First is the reliability argument – that SWB data should not be relied upon to guide public policy because people

cannot be trusted to give reliable answers to questions about their wellbeing. There are important issues here about how wellbeing (or happiness) is understood differently by different individuals particularly when comparing across groups and nations. Second is the responsibility argument – that even if we agree on the reliability of data and consider wellbeing an important goal, it should not be the role of government to pursue this, but individuals.

Third is the distrust argument – that even if we agree on the reliability of data and that, in theory, this might be an appropriate goal for governments, politicians cannot in practice be trusted not to manipulate the data, and so governments should leave this alone. And fourth is the distraction argument – that even if we agree on the reliability of data, the appropriateness of government action and could trust politicians, a focus on wellbeing would distract governments from focusing on other important goals such as freedom and equality.

Of course, such debates have been around a long time and are not about to end. The question is where does this leave us in terms of the appropriate role of government? This is where the notion of wicked problems comes in. As Rittel and Weber noted in their seminar contribution on the topic, understanding wellbeing as a wicked problem points us to the conclusion that there is no clear and decisive solution, no ‘true-or-false, but good or bad.’ The route to addressing wicked problems is through participation, deliberation, and value judgement.

On *reliability*, a wicked problems approach cautions against an over-reliance on data to resolve public policy dilemmas, suggesting that data should be used that is simply ‘good enough’ (as it has been for responding to economic policy challenges, for example). On *responsibility* it infers that the range and depth of government activity inevitably impacts on wellbeing and, as such, government are part of the problem and thus part of any moves towards a solution. On *distrust* it implies that politicians are important actors (within and without government) that cannot be ignored, but points to the importance of legitimacy in the process of seeking solutions.

And on *distraction* it would not see a tension between a focus on wellbeing and other socially valued goals because wellbeing would be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon with multiple interpretations of ‘the problem’ that would include other important concerns. In the UK case, SWB indicators are placed alongside more objective indicators across ten domains (e.g., health, education, relationships, personal finance, ‘what we do’ etc.).

So where does this leave us? Our main point is that analyses of what governments are doing in relation to wellbeing: a) overstate the extent to which this agenda has taken hold; and b) raise concerns that are based on a particular (narrow) interpretation of the purpose of the wellbeing agenda (e.g., as happiness maximisation). In short, there is no ‘final solution’ to the challenge of wellbeing. There are ways forward across a range of domains that are ‘better or worse’, ‘good enough or not good enough’ – temporary and partial solutions to a wicked problem. It is a long-term agenda that requires wide stakeholder engagement, deliberation and coherent action. Yet while it is a problem that cannot be ‘fixed’, it remains a challenge that governments cannot ignore.

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About the Authors

Ian Bache is Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield and Convenor of the ESRC [Seminar Series](#) on The Politics of Wellbeing.



Louise Reardon is a PhD candidate in the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. Louise tweets @LouiseReardon1

