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**Working Paper**

## Beyond the grumpy rich man and the happy peasant: Subjective perspectives on wellbeing and food security in rural India

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**Beyond the grumpy rich man and the  
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on wellbeing and food security in rural  
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Sarah C. White

Working Paper no. 25  
August 2013

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# BEYOND THE GRUMPY RICH MAN AND THE HAPPY PEASANT: SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON WELLBEING AND FOOD SECURITY IN RURAL INDIA

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*Sarah C. White, Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath*

**Bath Papers in International Development and Well-Being no. 25**

**August, 2013**

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# Beyond the grumpy rich man and the happy peasant: Subjective perspectives on wellbeing and food security in rural India

Sarah C. White

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# Beyond the grumpy rich man and the happy peasant: Subjective perspectives on wellbeing and food security in rural India

Sarah C. White

## Abstract

This paper relates different subjective approaches to wellbeing to different traditions of economic analysis. The dominant formula of 'Subjective Well-Being' is attractive because it promises a direct measure of utility, but other approaches bring different strengths to policy evaluation. 'Inner Wellbeing,' which has affinities to Sen's Capabilities Approach, is introduced. Analysis of primary data from mixed method research in rural India explores what 'happiness' and other subjective perspectives add to understanding of food security policies at a community and individual level. This shows that subjective perceptions contribute most when considered on their own terms, rather than as proxies for objective outcomes.

**Key words:** Subjective well-being; Inner Wellbeing; Sen's capabilities approach, food security, public policy and development, India

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## 1 Introduction

The momentum behind taking wellbeing as a policy focus continues to grow. Its attractions are many. They include broader based indicators of national progress; a positive focus on strengths and aspirations rather than a potentially stigmatising emphasis on problems (White, 2010); a more comprehensive understanding of needs and indicators of policy/programme impact; plus, the promise of direct measures of 'how people think about and experience their lives' (OECD, 2013:3).

The argument for including 'objective' dimensions of wellbeing in policy is largely won. While there is still debate about *how* to go 'beyond GDP,' few would argue that GDP alone is a sufficient indicator of national development. There are already a number of well-established alternative or supplementary indicators. The social indicators movement has been working on these issues since the 1960s (see, e.g. Hagerty *et al.*, 2001). The Human Development Index was launched in 1990. This was followed in 2010 by the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (Alkire and Foster, 2011).

By contrast, the use of subjective indicators of wellbeing remains highly controversial. Basic questions remain about their reliability, their usefulness, and the politics behind their introduction and use. Political debates are particularly heated, and unusual in generating both advocacy and critique from the right and the left, reflecting very different political projects and views of the proper purpose and purview of policy (see, e.g., Sointu, 2005; Layard, 2006; Ehrenreich, 2009; Michaelson *et al.*, 2009; Booth, 2012).

While the tone is rather different, there also remains considerable technical debate about how best to measure subjective dimensions of wellbeing. This reflects serious difficulties regarding reliability and validity, with results showing high levels of variability by question wording, question order, etc. (see, e.g., Graham, 2011; Deaton, 2012). In part, these challenges reflect 'how the questions shape the answers' in any self-report measures (Schwarz, 1999). But they are made particularly acute by two issues specific to subjective perceptions of wellbeing. First, the object of investigation is essentially qualitative; people instinctively describe their feelings in words or images, not in numbers. As from one language to another, the 'translation' of feelings into numbers is not straightforward. Second, the information is essentially subjective. As the OECD (2013:47) states: "There is no way for a person other than the respondent to provide the correct answer". For statistical researchers and offices which yearn for 'hard evidence', handling data on topics that are essentially qualitative and subjective sets up a fundamental tension. As shown by the OECD's (2013) 'Guidelines on measuring subjective well-being,' they respond by seeking to authorise and standardise measures to control variability and promote comparability. This narrows the field to particular measures that do well in particular kinds of statistical tests. The focus on measurement also eclipses discussion of the conceptual content of different approaches to subjective dimensions of wellbeing, which, in turn, are linked (consciously or unconsciously) to particular understandings of the person and political/economic projects.

This paper aims to contribute to the growing debate concerning the potential use of subjective measures of wellbeing in policy contexts. It begins with theory, and a classic discussion by Amartya Sen of different ways to conceptualise standards of living. The paper builds on this to



suggest that different approaches to subjective dimensions of wellbeing map on to different traditions in poverty (and economic) analysis. While the dominant approach, Subjective Well-Being (SWB), is favoured for its promise to deliver pure utility, alternative approaches reflect different traditions of economic analysis and bring different strengths to policy evaluation. Two such approaches are introduced, one, the WeDQoL, a measure of Subjective Quality of Life, and, two, Inner Wellbeing, a form of subjective assessment with affinities to Sen's Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1983). The main body of the paper uses Inner Wellbeing to explore what an alternative approach to subjective perspectives on wellbeing might contribute to public policy and development practice. The next section describes the methodology of ongoing mixed method research in marginalised communities in India through which the Inner Wellbeing approach was developed. The following section presents results and discussion of what Inner Wellbeing adds to understanding the impact of food security policies for the community as a whole. The next section takes an individual case to explore the implications of 'happiness' for policy. The paper closes by discussing broader implications for the use of subjective measures of wellbeing in policy.

## 2 Poverty Analysis and Subjective Perspectives on Wellbeing

In 1983, Amartya Sen published an essay which became a classic discussion of different approaches to poverty analysis. In 'Poor, Relatively Speaking', Sen (1983) argues against a fully relativist approach to poverty and maintains that capabilities, rather than commodities or utilities, provide the appropriate basis to measure standards of living. For our purposes, the critical discussion is on page 160:

*'A grumbling rich man may well be less happy than a contented peasant, but he does have a higher standard of living than that peasant; the comparison of standard of living is not a comparison of utilities. So the constituent part of the standard of living is not the good, nor its characteristics, but the ability to do various things by using that good or those characteristics, and it is that ability rather than the mental reaction to that ability in the form of happiness that, in this view, reflects the standard of living' (Sen, 1983:160).*

This paper pre-dates the current wave of interest in wellbeing and so uses rather different terminology. In advocating an active, humanistic approach, 'the ability to do various things,' it clearly moves a considerable way in the direction of wellbeing as against the enumeration of commodities as a proxy for living standards. At the same time, however, it explicitly rejects the use of happiness or pleasure as a subjective indicator in poverty analysis, suggesting that this may reflect 'a cheerful disposition' (p.160) rather than offering any guide to people's economic situation.

The current excitement around subjective well-being (SWB) in economics and policy flies directly in the face of this. At its base is the view that after long having to settle for income as a proxy to the prized utility, there is at last a direct measure of pure utility that has been statistically validated. The dominant construction of SWB is a composite of life satisfaction and 'affect balance', or the presence of positive emotions and the absence of negative ones (see, e.g., Diener *et al.*, 1999). This is the model endorsed by the OECD and its forerunner, the Report of

the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, better known as the Stiglitz report (Stiglitz *et al.*, 2009).

While the OECD guidelines do not explicitly identify SWB as a measure of utility, this is the clear logic which drives how they suggest measures of subjective well-being may be used. The report is careful to stress that subjective measures should not replace, but can 'complement other measures' (OECD, 2013:36). Their strength is in their capacity to give a single, composite impact measure, as:

*'being grounded in peoples' [sic] experiences and judgements on multiple aspects of their life [sic], measures of subjective well-being are uniquely placed to provide information on the net impact of changes in social and economic conditions on the perceived well-being of respondents' (OECD, 2013:36).*

For the OECD, SWB measures can thus be used as 'an alternative yard-stick of progress' (*ibid.*) to show differences between groups or across countries. They can be used to judge 'the relative impact between fundamentally different outcomes' such as health versus housing, or inflation versus unemployment (OECD, 2013:39). They can aid policy evaluation, helping, for example, in cost-benefit analyses to assign a monetary value to life events such as marriage, divorce, or unemployment (*ibid.*: 40). They can be used to predict behaviour, such as the Arab spring<sup>1</sup> (*ibid.*: 37) or employees' likelihood of seeking alternative employment (*ibid.*: 43). They can help guide decision-making, giving people better information on what will actually make them happier, as against what they perhaps erroneously believe will do so (*ibid.*: 43). Critically, measures of SWB can transcend the limits of people's own understanding, revealing the inner truth of how people are *really* doing, even beyond their 'conscious' thoughts and feelings.

*'Most importantly, measures of subjective well-being provide information on the actual impact of an initiative on the respondent's subjective well-being, rather than the impact that the respondent consciously identifies' (OECD, 2013:41).*

These are extremely broad claims and many would dispute whether SWB can indeed deliver so much. The intention here is not to engage with the substance of the assertions, but to draw attention to the logic that drives them. It would be mistaken to claim that the OECD sees measures of subjective well-being as direct indicators of standards of living, which is Sen's (1983) critique of utility. This is clearly not the case. The ambition here is more modest: to point to the close identification in policy circles of SWB with utility and so open space to consider other subjective approaches that reflect different traditions of economic analysis.

### **3 Alternative Approaches to Subjective Dimensions of Wellbeing**

While happiness was the only subjective indicator that Sen considered, more recent scholarship has developed subjective measures that can be allied with all three forms of poverty analysis. Table 1 set out examples of these. This section provides a brief introduction to two alternative subjective measures, which can be mapped respectively onto the commodities and capabilities approaches to poverty analysis.

**Table 1. Poverty analysis and subjective approaches to wellbeing, building on Sen (1983)**

| Concept      | Focus  | Allied subjective approach  |
|--------------|--|---|
| Commodities  | 'Goods' people have                            | Subjective Quality of Life (WeD-QoL) - list-based measure of subjective quality of life, where 'goods' extend to non-material, such as 'being satisfied with what you have' (Woodcock <i>et al.</i> , 2009) |
| Utility      | Happiness or pleasure people derive from goods | Subjective well-being (SWB). Combination of life satisfaction and affect-balance (e.g. Diener <i>et al.</i> , 1999)   |
| Capabilities | What people can do or be using those goods     | Inner Wellbeing: what people feel and think they are able to be or do (e.g. White <i>et al.</i> , 2012a)  |

The attraction of SWB is its slimness – it abstracts a pure measurement of utility from the messiness of people's lives, based on a minimalist anthropology of cognition (satisfaction) and emotions conceived in binary (positive or negative) terms. Other kinds of researchers, however, have very different interests. Woodcock *et al.* (2009), for example, report on the work of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries Research Group (WeD), which aimed to reflect the particularities of the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in four study countries – Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Thailand and Peru (Gough and McGregor, ed., 2007; Copestake, ed., 2008; Copestake and Camfield, 2010).<sup>2</sup> This involved the development of the WeDQoL, an instrument to measure subjective quality of life, conceived as 'the outcome of the gap between people's goals and perceived resources...in the context of their culture, values, and experiences of un/happiness (Woodcock *et al.*, 2009: 137). 'Goals' were generated through asking people in the study communities what they needed to be happy or to live well.<sup>3</sup> The data were then subjected to psychometric analysis to produce a final list. Some of the items were common to all countries, while others were country-specific. Woodcock *et al.* (2009:139-140) presented 44 goals for the Thailand WeDQoL. In the terms identified by Gasper (2004), these comprise a mix of 'havings' (e.g. 'having a sewage system', 'having well-behaved children'); 'doings' ('transferring what you know to others') and 'beings' ('having compassion for others').

The items on this list constitute a mix between Sen's 'commodities' and 'capabilities' categories. The identification of these items as goals, however, constructs them as objects, which people desire, and, therefore, places the overall approach closer to a commodity focused analysis. The way the WeDQoL was applied, asking respondents to rate how necessary they felt each of these items to be and how satisfied they were with it, reinforces this object-relationship. However, the WeDQoL clearly goes well beyond a simple commodities approach in two important respects. First, the 'goods' that it identifies are wide-ranging, including not only material, but also relational and personal items. Second, the WeDQoL is much more sensitive to cultural difference

and to people's own priorities than the 'objective' commodity based analyses, which tend to rely on externally defined criteria.

The third subjective approach to wellbeing in Table 1 focuses on what people feel and think they are able to be and do. This is termed as 'Inner Wellbeing', allowing a fluid association between mind, body and spirit on the grounds that people in different cultural contexts see these things very differently (White *et al.*, 2012a). Theoretically, Inner Wellbeing draws on the 'eudaemonic' rather than 'hedonic' tradition in philosophies of wellbeing, which priorities functioning and fulfilment (a life well-lived) rather than pleasure or satisfaction (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Like the approach to psychological wellbeing put forward by Carol Ryff and her colleagues (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes, 1995), Inner Wellbeing is a domain-based model. Where it differs is in its psychosocial orientation, which emphasises people's grounding in and interaction with a particular social and cultural context, rather than internal psychological processes. Inner Wellbeing, thus, has seven domains: economic resources; agency and participation; social connections; close relationships; physical and mental health; competence and self-worth; values and meaning.<sup>4</sup>

The seven domains bring together dimensions identified as important in the psychological wellbeing literature (e.g. autonomy, competence and relationship, see Ryan and Deci, 2000) and in the literature on empowerment and social development (see, e.g., Rowlands, 1995). For example, one of the items in the social connections domain is, 'Do you know the kind of people who can help you get things done?' This reflects the fact that in many societies in the global south, people's access to key resources depends on personal brokerage (see, e.g., Devine, 2002). Two previous research projects were particularly influential in developing the Inner Wellbeing approach. The first was WeD, which identified three interlinked dimensions of wellbeing: the material – what people have or do not have; the relational – what people do or cannot do with it; and the subjective – what people think or feel (see Gough and McGregor, 2007; White, 2010). The second was the Colombo-based Psycho-social Assessment of Development and Humanitarian Intervention (PADHI) and their 'social justice approach to wellbeing' (PADHI, 2009). This provided five of the seven domains in the Inner Wellbeing Scale. We added two more (on close relationships and values and meaning), which had been shown to be important in the WeD research and in a project on religion and wellbeing, respectively (Devine and White, 2013).

Each of the domains of Inner Wellbeing is assessed through a series of items intended to capture different aspects. The economic domain, for example, includes items to assess how people feel about how they are doing at present; how their economic position affects their social participation (their ability to host guests as they would wish to); their sense of economic security (how confident are they that they could manage, for example, if someone were to fall ill); their sense of how they are doing in comparison with others; and their economic confidence looking forward (whether they think their children will have a better life). These items, and the precise wording used to ask about them, have been developed through an intensive mixed method process in rural communities in two study countries, Zambia and India.<sup>5</sup> This involved consultation with NGOs and other local people; extended grounding and piloting; statistical testing and revision; and ongoing critical reflection within the team (White and Jha, 2012). Our ambition was to generate a statistically validated model for assessing subjective dimensions of wellbeing, which would reflect (something of) the way people locally think and talk and feel and act.

Respondents are asked a question corresponding to each item, and offered a range of graduated answers, which correspond to a one-to-five Likert scale. Examples agreed within the team are offered if people seek further clarification. This approach constructs people in active voice, seeking to explore the scope of what they feel themselves able to do and be. While this was not developed explicitly in relation to the capabilities approach, it has clear affinities with it. The obvious difference, however, lies in Inner Wellbeing's emphasis on people's own feelings and thoughts about their lives. In the research project as a whole, these are explored alongside 'objective' measures of how people are doing (such as occupying positions of political office or cultural status, crops harvested, education levels, access to government services, assets etc.), with the aim to explore complementarities and tensions between their 'objective' circumstances and subjective views.

The following sections use the Inner Wellbeing approach to explore the potential practical and conceptual contribution of alternative approaches to subjective perspectives on wellbeing. This section starts with methodology, introducing the location of our research in India and the different elements of our project. I then consider what findings on Inner Wellbeing might add to understanding the impact of food security policies at the collective and individual level.

## 4 Methodology

The field research on which this paper draws was undertaken in Sarguja district, Chhattisgarh state in central India, with an initial visit in November 2010 and the main fieldwork from February to May 2011.<sup>6</sup> The main research instrument was a survey, conducted with husbands and wives (interviewed separately) and women heading households. The focus on married couples reflects the widespread agreement that relationships are central to wellbeing. We included women heading households as they are commonly found to experience particular economic and social vulnerabilities. We surveyed a total of 157 married men, 156 married women and 26 women heading households. The much smaller number of women heading households reflects the social reality in the area. The mean age of respondents overall was 41 years, from a youngest of 18 to an oldest of 80. The mean age for married men was 43, for married women 38. Women heading households tended to be older, with a mean age of 54 years. They had all previously been married and were either widowed or divorced.

The survey comprised three sections. It began with demographics: who was in the household, marital history, children, education and health, followed by questions on the Inner Wellbeing items. The final section concerned economic resources and access to government services. The survey closed with two subjective economic wellbeing and one standard global happiness question. In what follows we have described these as 'overall review' questions, to distinguish them from the Inner Wellbeing items. The survey was undertaken in as conversational mode as possible, to allow scope for people to tell stories and as well as questions of clarification, which were recorded in notes. We also conducted nine in-depth qualitative interviews. 287 respondents completed all items within the Inner Wellbeing section. The Inner Wellbeing scores presented below thus relate to these respondents, rather than to the sample as a whole.

Each respondent was assigned an identification code. These are shown in endnotes alongside quotes in the text. For couples the code begins with IC (India Couple) a couple number, 01 for husbands and 02 for wives, and then a letter showing the village of residence. For women

heading households the initial code is IS (India Single) and the final number 03. Quantitative data were entered in Excel and translated to SPSS for statistical analysis. More complex psychometric analyses in validating the statistical model of Inner Wellbeing (not reported here) were undertaken in Lisrel (Gaines and White, 2012). Qualitative data were analysed through content analysis with the help of NVivo.

As academic partners in India, we were linked with the G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad. We were supported in the field by our partner NGO, Chaupal, a local organisation undertaking community mobilisation. Most of the people in our research villages were Adivasi, ethnic minority communities classified as 'Scheduled Tribes' under British-colonial administration, which have a long history of problematic relationships with outsiders (Sundar, 2003).<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that the goodwill that Chaupal enjoyed in our research villages was crucial to people's readiness to talk to us.<sup>8</sup>

With Chaupal's help, we recruited a local team of four research assistants (two male and two female), who acted as peer researchers, mediating, interpreting and interacting between the local respondents and the external team members through the grounding and piloting process and on throughout the fieldwork. While the project director could only visit for short periods, the research officer remained in the field for the entire survey period. Regular team meetings were held twice a week, to provide opportunities to share how things were going and discuss issues that had come up. The research officer spent time with all the local researchers in turn – more intensively at first but still on an occasional basis right through to the end of the fieldwork. These opportunities for ongoing support and collective reflection were vital for ensuring data quality and strengthening local researchers' skill development, as well as for sustaining spirits and identifying and addressing any problems as they arose.

Our research took place in four villages, which we have named Central, Hill, Forest and Dry Land, to capture some dimensions of the differences between them. Central is the most prosperous and most easily accessible, being close to the block (sub-district) headquarters. It is a large village surrounded by intensively cultivated fields, with a river close by. The largest community is one of the more economically secure Adivasi groups. Hill, as its name suggests, winds its way up a hill, with a road that was only recently metalled. It is made up of about 20 hamlets, which have settled into habitable nooks in the sides of the hill. The largest community is the Pahari Korwas, who are classified as a 'particularly vulnerable tribal group' (PTG) and have been the target of many special development programmes.<sup>9</sup> Forest is the least accessible village. As its name suggests, it is quite deep in the forest, and can ultimately be reached only via an unmetalled road and crossing a shallow stream. Dry Land is nearer to the district town but off the beaten track. Many people depend on day labour and the collection and/or sale of forest produce since farming is difficult, with no mechanised irrigation nor streams or rivers close by. This is the poorest village, but there is within it a hamlet of one of the more prosperous Adivasi groups where people are noticeably better off.

Differences between them notwithstanding, overall these are extremely poor communities, amongst whom hunger was commonplace until recently. Despite being formally outside the caste system, caste-type practices are followed among these communities. People are struggling to get title deeds for the forest land that they have occupied for many years, despite the Forest Rights Act of 2006 having recognised their rights to make such claims. Literacy levels are very

low, with more than half of our respondents reporting no schooling at all, and a further 20% being able only to write their own names. The mainstay of the economy is agriculture, with most people doing some farming, supplemented by casual labour and gathering of non-timber forest products. Agriculture is largely rain-fed. There is significant and problematic use of alcohol related to the fact that they brew it from some of the forest products they gather. The communities have long been the target of missionary activity – Christians during colonial times, and at present radical Hindus. Despite this, 57 per cent of our respondents still follow the Adivasi practice of Sarna Dharm.<sup>10</sup> There is a local history of strong if intermittent collective action and current mobilisation by local organisations to demand the rights promised by the state.

## 5 Food Security and Inner Wellbeing

In poor, socially marginal and geographically 'remote' communities like these, one might think that the issues are clear and there is no need for any subjective measures of wellbeing. In one way, therefore, such a context might seem to represent a hard case for exploring the value added of considering inner wellbeing. There is, however, a major consideration to recommend it. Over the past ten years, the Chhattisgarh state government has made significant moves to increase the spread and efficiency of food security programmes, in particular the delivery of highly subsidised Public Distribution System (PDS) rice. The remarkable success of these programmes has attracted national attention (see Dreze and Khera, 2010). It has been complemented by other forms of significant state-level investment, in particular, in the construction of new roads and schools. Food security has also been increased by the nationwide job guarantee programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), which guarantees 100 days of unskilled manual labour a year at the minimum wage for all adults in rural households.

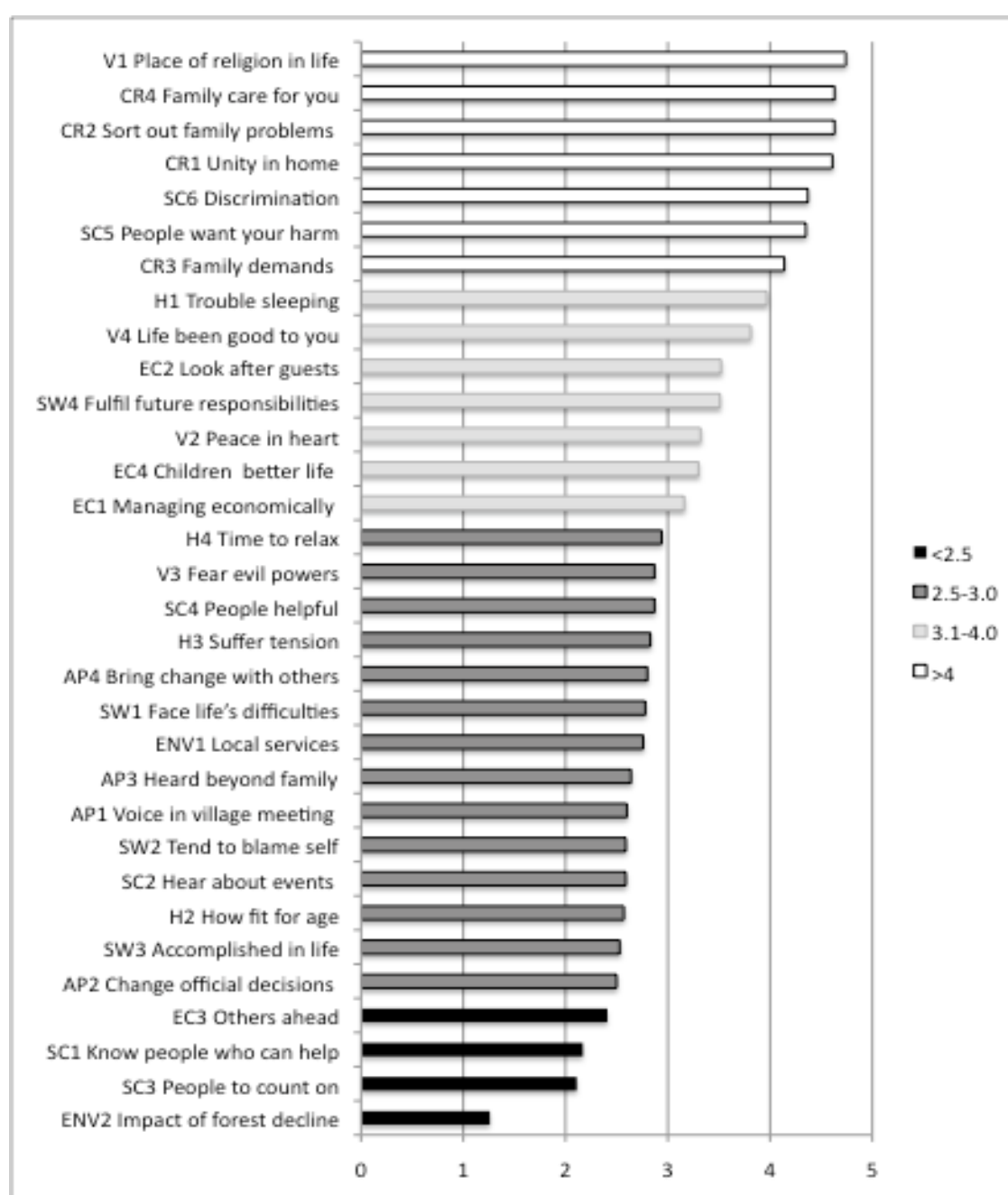
What is unusual is not the existence of these programmes, but the fact that they are working so well. This reflects a combination of political will from the state government and active participation of citizens to lobby, monitor and report abuses (Dreze and Khera, 2010). Our survey thus shows over 80% of respondents were receiving PDS rice at Rs 1 or 2 per kilo. 97% of eligible school children were getting their free mid-day meal. 94% of those eligible were receiving the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) health and nutrition scheme for pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children. 97% were eligible for MGNREGA and 92% of these had registered for the scheme and received a job card. 82% said they were able to gain work at an appropriate time, and 90% said that they received the correct payment. The only disappointing figure regards the timing of payment – only 4% said that they received pay on time. The combined effect of all these programmes is that people no longer have to go hungry. This constitutes a major difference compared with earlier experience, which people frequently commented on without prompting. As one respondent put it: "Now we are getting rice from the government and so we are able to live our lives".

The question, then, is: can we see any impact of these combined programmes in Inner Wellbeing scores? Ideally, of course, we would have longitudinal data to assess this, but we do not have any pre-programme base-line for comparison.<sup>11</sup> Figure 1 presents a graph of the mean item scores which are also shown in Table 2. These include the data for all respondents who answered all questions, with scores from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5. Both the graph



and the table are organised in order of magnitude by item means and divided into four bands on the basis of this. They include all the items in the survey, including those which did not make it through psychometric analysis to test the fitness of our seven domain model. Most notably this means that they include items for an 'environment' domain, which could not be statistically validated (see Gaines and White, 2012).<sup>12</sup> It is appropriate to include all items here because what we are seeking to explore is the overall Inner Wellbeing approach, rather than the more restricted statistical model that is based upon it. As they present total mean scores for all respondents, they obscure differences by economic and gender/marital status.<sup>13</sup> Where items were phrased negatively (do you have trouble sleeping?) the scores have been reverse coded so a higher score always signifies higher wellbeing. In the graph and the table that follows, the item label begins with the domain to which the item belongs, and the number of the item within that domain.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 1. Inner Wellbeing Items in Order of Magnitude of Mean Scores<sup>15</sup>





Note: The domain codes are: EC, economic wellbeing; AP, agency and participation; SC, social connections; CR, close relationships; H, physical and mental health; SW, competence and self-worth; V, values and meaning; and ENV, environment.

**Table 2. Inner Wellbeing Items in Order of Magnitude of Mean Scores**

| Item                                     | Mean | St. Dev. | No. |
|--|------|----------|-----|
| <b>Strong Positive: Means &gt;4</b>      |      |          |     |
| V1 Place of religion in life             | 4.74 | 0.66     | 287 |
| CR2 Sort out problems                    | 4.63 | 0.77     | 287 |
| CR4 Family care for you                  | 4.63 | 0.75     | 287 |
| CR1 Unity in home                        | 4.61 | 0.78     | 287 |
| SC6 Discrimination                       | 4.37 | 1.1      | 287 |
| SC5 People want your harm                | 4.35 | 0.89     | 287 |
| CR3 Family demands                       | 4.14 | 0.99     | 287 |
| <b>Marginal Positive: Means 3.01-4.0</b> |      |          |     |
| H1 Trouble sleeping                      | 3.97 | 1.09     | 287 |
| V4 Life been good                        | 3.81 | 1.04     | 287 |
| EC2 Look after guests                    | 3.52 | 1.04     | 287 |
| SW4 Fulfil future responsibilities       | 3.51 | 1.27     | 287 |
| V2 Peace in heart                        | 3.32 | 1.22     | 287 |
| EC4 Children better life                 | 3.3  | 1.26     | 287 |
| EC1 Managing economically                | 3.16 | 0.86     | 287 |
| <b>Marginal Negative: Means 2.5-3.0</b>  |      |          |     |
| H4 Time to relax                         | 2.94 | 1.27     | 287 |
| SC4 People helpful                       | 2.87 | 1.34     | 287 |
| V3 Fear evil powers                      | 2.87 | 1.66     | 287 |
| H3 Suffer tension                        | 2.83 | 1.52     | 287 |
| AP4 Bring change with others             | 2.8  | 1.28     | 287 |
| SW1 Face life's difficulties             | 2.78 | 1.05     | 287 |
| ENV1 Local services                      | 2.76 | 1.1      | 287 |
| AP3 Heard beyond family                  | 2.64 | 1.41     | 287 |
| AP1 Voice in village meeting             | 2.6  | 1.5      | 287 |
| SC2 Hear about events                    | 2.59 | 1.08     | 287 |
| SW2 Blame self                           | 2.59 | 1.3      | 287 |
| H2 How fit for age                       | 2.57 | 0.86     | 287 |
| SW3 Accomplished in life                 | 2.53 | 1.03     | 287 |
| AP2 Change official decisions            | 2.5  | 1.43     | 287 |
| <b>Strong Negative: Means &lt;2.5</b>    |      |          |     |
| EC3 Others ahead                         | 2.41 | 0.8      | 287 |
| SC1 Know people who can help             | 2.17 | 1.24     | 287 |
| SC3 People to count on                   | 2.11 | 1.13     | 287 |
| ENV2 Impact of forest decline            | 1.26 | 0.78     | 287 |

Figure 1 and Table 2 show a wide spread of scores, from a low of 1.26 to a high of 4.74. The median, however, is rather low at 2.87, below the mid-point of 3. While the mean is just above the mid-point (3.2) the median is considered the more reliable figure given the small number of variables, since it offsets the impact of outliers. The band with the largest number of items (fourteen out of thirty two) is in the marginally negative range, between 2.5 and 3.0.

There are some clear patterns in the spread of item scores. The strongly positive scores, those of more than 4, are all relational. They concern how happy people say they are with the place of religion in their lives; close relationships; and (the absence of) negative social relationships. The qualitative data suggest that this high scoring may at least in part reflect what people feel they ought to say (for example that they should project family unity), even if their experience of close relationships is not in fact so positive (White and Jha, 2012). This apart, these are the areas of life that may be least directly affected by policy change, so it is difficult to relate these high scores back to the food security policy.

At the other end of the scale, the most negative scores (those below 2.5) concern economic status relative to others; dependable social connections; and environmental vulnerability. The lowest of all is the item 'If the forest resources decline how big an impact will it have on your life'? The score is extremely low at 1.26. The low standard deviation of only 0.78 reconfirms the convergence on very negative views. At its simplest, this reflects these communities' continuing livelihood dependence on non-timber forest resources. It is also, of course, the clearest area of conflict with outsiders, including the state. But beyond this, the forest offers an important entry point to understanding local constructions of wellbeing. In addition to concerns for individual livelihoods, the qualitative data suggest a collective dimension – the sense that the communities' relationship with the forest is threatened, that the forest itself is 'running away.' This has broader implications for the physical environment – that if the forest disappears so will the rain – but the way people talk about it suggests that it is also the integrity of their way of life that feels under threat. The following comments from Central village express different aspects of this:

*'The jungle is finishing and nobody tries to protect the forest. Once the forest is gone how will we survive? Our life is linked to the jungle'. BR<sup>16</sup>*

*'Where will our children get shade and cool breeze in the hot weather?' R<sup>17</sup>*

*'If people keep on cutting the forest how will the forest be saved and how will we carry on living when there is no bamboo, how will the flute play?... ' SA<sup>18</sup>*

The larger context that these comments point to is the wellbeing ecology of Adivasi thought, which is a collective vision in which people's caring for nature is a form of devotion, a necessary part of sustaining the cosmic balance. For these people, therefore, individual wellbeing belongs within this broader relational context, in which culture, community and place are intertwined with the political economy of rights and resources.

Next to their anxieties about the forest, people feel least confident in having others beyond the household to whom they can go for help (2.17) or on whom they can depend in hard times (2.11). Less heavily weighted, everyday social connections score better, but still fall within the marginally negative range. As mentioned above, this is in fact where the largest number of items

comes, including most of health, most of self-worth, and all of agency and participation. The agency and participation items tend towards the lower scores even within this range. It should be noted, however, that the agency and participation domain shows the most significant differences by gender/marital status. Very low scores for women on some of these items bring the overall averages down.

The marginally positive scores (3.1-4.0) comprise a mix of economic and more general life evaluation items. All but one of the economic items is positively scored. The one that is negative is quite low (2.41). This asks people how they feel they are doing in comparison with their neighbours. In the qualitative data, several of those who say they are worse off than others mention that they do not have ration cards and a few relate their exclusion from benefits to not having a particular 'Scheduled Tribe' identity. They also point to other issues, however, such as a shortage of people in the household (especially if there has been a recent division), illness, disability, lack of land, and being recent arrivals in the village. The largest number of qualitative comments, however, suggests that within their own neighbourhood people's economic situations are all pretty similar.

As Table 3 shows, the overall subjective review items also fall in the marginal positive range.

**Table 3. Overall Review Items in Order of Magnitude of Mean Scores**

| Item                      | Mean | St. Dev. | No. |
|---------------------------|------|----------|-----|
| O1 Standard of living now | 3.40 | 0.91     | 287 |
| O2 Compared 5 years ago   | 3.82 | 0.81     | 287 |
| O3 How happy              | 3.89 | 0.97     | 287 |

In the absence of longitudinal data, it is impossible to say definitively whether these more positive economic and overall review scores bear any relation to the food security policies. However, in the vast majority of cases where people compare the past with the present in the qualitative data, they say things are easier now. The only exceptions to this concern the happen-chance of individual lives, such as illness and household division. In addition, the high number of times that people mention PDS rice or MNREGA employment in describing how they are managing supports the view that these policies have helped to increase their sense of economic confidence.

There is, however, need for caution. While many people say things are better now, they also say that things are still hard, that now they are just able to manage without going hungry, whereas before they were not. There is repeated emphasis, from both wealthier and poorer people, on intergenerational transmission, that the level of your own resources – especially land – will determine your children's prospects. Not only are their lives materially still difficult, but also many continued to bear the psychological scars of their earlier experience. The quotation below shows how N<sup>19</sup>, a 30 year old woman from Forest village, responded to being asked if she believed her children would have a better life than she had done. The narrative structure in itself conveys her questioning and uncertainty, as she moves to and fro between education and land,

between what you can do for your children and it all being in God's hands, between her attempts to make things better and her experience of failure, between her longing for a better future and her fear of allowing herself to hope.

*'I have very little confidence that their life will be better. If they are able to study only then they will do well. Who can say what will happen in the future. It is all up to God what will happen to them. They can do well if...when do children do well? They do well if you are able to leave some fields to them. If you are able to do some good farming and leave some wealth to them, or you are able to educate them and then they are able to get a job or something, then they'll be able to do well. But I have very little confidence that they will do well. Every time we have tried we keep losing everything. So how can I say that things will become good for them? I have dreams for them, it's entirely up to them if I'm able to educate them then they'll do well. But every time that we've tried to become better off, everything has just got shattered, so I have no faith now, I'm scared to hope even, because I know that hope will just come to nothing.'*

While the policies seem to have had some impact on economic confidence, politically, people are still rather negative. One of the lowest scores (2.5) is assigned to their confidence in changing official decisions. The qualitative data amplifies this score. Despite the efficient conduct of the food security programmes, there are many accounts of corruption in other encounters with the state. Examples include the need to offer bribes to get land registry deeds or electricity connections. People also expressed doubt about the communities' ability to take collective action. While they were confident that collective action could bring about change, they had little confidence that they would be able to get people to work together. This is despite some extremely impressive instances of past collective action – such as the people from Hill village getting together to construct a seven kilometre road down the hillside.<sup>20</sup> A number of people also express frustration at seeing other parts of the village benefit and not their own area. As one middle-aged woman remarks:

*'I am tired of hearing [politicians'] speeches. I'm hoping that something will come but now I will only believe it when something actually happens.'* J.B.<sup>21</sup>

This section has shown that research into Inner Wellbeing at the community level suggests that people have grown somewhat in their sense of economic confidence as a result of the food security programmes. This is shown first in the fact that – while objectively they remain very poor communities – they rate items in the economic domain in the marginally positive range. Given that the median of their responses across all domains remains marginally negative, this means that they rate their economic confidence more highly than many other aspects of their lives. The association between these positive scores in the economic domain and the food security programmes is supported by the qualitative data. However, while the expansion and improved delivery of these programmes may be seen also as signalling a form of political empowerment, this is not supported by the Inner Wellbeing data. Both qualitative comments and quantitative scores tend to be negative in their assessments of respondents' political agency at both individual and collective levels.

## 6 The 'Happy Peasant' and Inner Wellbeing

In the final section of this paper, we move on from looking at the respondents as a whole to considering a particular individual. The question is the same – what is the added value of looking at Inner Wellbeing? In addition to considering this in relation to the food security policies, however, we also consider the contrast between approaching the same person through a poverty or a wellbeing 'lens'. We call the woman 'Sukhi'.<sup>22</sup>

We begin with a poverty perspective. Sukhi lives in Dry Land village. She is an elderly widow living alone. Her husband died many years ago. She has no schooling. She owns a small amount of land but has no labour to farm it, so this past year it has lain fallow. Because she came originally from another village where her son lives on their land she has no ration card or widow's pension. She lives on the edge of a marginalised community, where she is the only person of her caste. She has one son remaining, the other died after developing mental illness in early adulthood. While she cooks and keeps house for herself, she is completely dependent on provision from her son.

Now, let us continue from a wellbeing perspective. Sukhi says she is happy with her son's care but has chosen to remain living separately. She has good relations with her neighbours. She is content with her economic position, though asked to compare her standard of living with those around she jokes: 'I must be doing better, since they are getting welfare benefits and I am not!' She is proud of what she has achieved. 'I planted these trees!' 'I built this house!' With this comes a strong sense of ownership, of identification with this as her place. This is why she chose not to go and live with her son. Also people had said to her that because her husband had died here it was a respect to him for her to stay. She felt this too:

*'This is where my husband died, and from where God will also call me. Until God calls me I will stay here. After that my son can do with it all what he wants.'*

As so often with wellbeing, Sukhi's case can be read at least two ways. One might argue that Sukhi is a great example of the value added of looking at wellbeing, because the contrast of considering her through a poverty or wellbeing 'lens' is so marked. Alternatively, she could be the paradigm of Sen's 'happy peasant', whose cheerful disposition is at odds with her material situation. Considered more closely, however, the reality seems a little more complex.

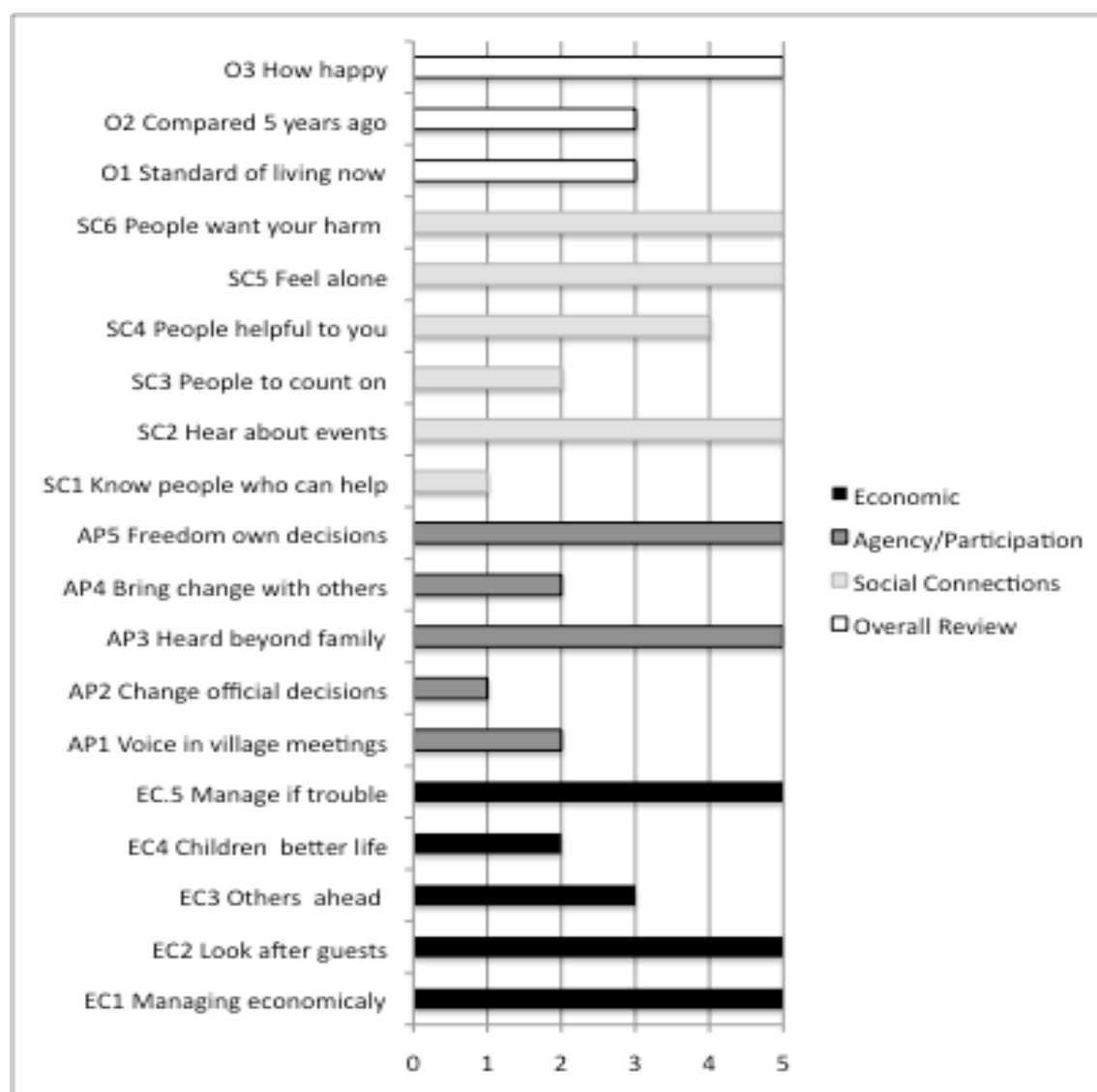
First, both the qualitative and quantitative data show something more discerning than simply a happy disposition, although that may indeed be present.<sup>23</sup> Taking the quantitative first, she begins the subjective section of the survey by pronouncing herself 'very happy' (5) to the global happiness question.<sup>24</sup> She similarly answers all of the values questions at 5. As mentioned earlier, these can be seen as proxies for an overall life evaluation, as they ask about the care given by gods and goddesses; luck in life; fear of evil powers; peace in heart and whether life has been good. As is evident from this list, however, in this case life satisfaction is not aligned to an economic appraisal, as it is in many of the measures used in 'universal' SWB or happiness polls (Diener *et al.*, 2010; Graham, 2011; White *et al.*, 2012b).<sup>25</sup>

Sukhi also gives a 5 to all but one of the items on self-worth (the remaining one she gives a 4). Again, she gives a 5 to all but one of the items in the physical and mental health domain. She gives the remaining one a 2, explaining that she sometimes feels too weak for the work she

would like to do. The close relationships domain she scores similarly, all 5s but a 2 when asked if she has someone she can talk to if she feels low.

A much more mixed picture appears in the economic, social connections and agency and participation domains, however. As it is these domains that are most relevant to the questions of policy impact and standards of living, we discuss them in a little more detail. Figure 2 presents a graph of her item scores for these domains, plus the three overall review items.

Figure 2. Sukhi's Inner Wellbeing Domain Scores (3 Domains Plus Overall Review Items)



Considered item by item, it is clear that Sukhi gives a carefully calibrated set of responses according to the particular questions asked.

Confirming the general pattern noted above, her scores for social connections vary. On the questions about everyday neighbourhood relationships (SC2; SC4; SC5) she scores at 4 or 5. But she gives a 2 to the question about having people outside the family she can depend on, and a 1 to whether she knows people who she can go to for help. She relates this to the fact that she has

repeatedly tried and failed to get a ration card: 'If they do not help me, in what sense can I say that I know them?' Her scores on agency and participation step down another notch. While she scores 5 for freedom to make her own decisions and being listened to in the community, she says she goes but never speaks at village meetings (2); she has little confidence that the community can get together to take action (2); and she has no power to change official decisions (1). The economic items she scores more highly again, but with a 3 to signify that her economic position is on a par with her neighbours', and a 2 for confidence in her son's future. This is, because, she says, he has no education. Interestingly, she scores both of the economic review items at 3. This shows that she clearly distinguished the IWB question about how she *felt* about how she was doing economically (5 – very good) from the overall review items, which asked her to rate how she was doing economically (3 – neither well nor badly). As she explained it, the base of her positive feeling about her economic position was in fact a mix of relational and material. She had enough for her needs, but most importantly she was happy with the caring relationships she had with her son and daughter-in-law.

The overall pattern in Sukhi's Inner Wellbeing profile is that she is happy with the areas over which she has direct control – herself, her family and neighbourhood relations. She is not happy about her exclusion from state benefits, nor with her inability to get this changed, nor does she have an unrealistic assessment of her economic situation. Sen's (1983) critique of happiness as a measure of standard of living is thus vindicated. Sukhi herself rates these items differently, and her criterion for the judgement of how she was doing economically was clearly given in relation to the standard of her (very poor) neighbourhood. While this contextuality – the particularity of her frame of reference – might be seen as a weakness from some perspectives, it is in the nature of subjective perspectives (and it is far more characteristic of many supposedly 'universal' approaches than they would like to admit). Similarly, since Sukhi is both one of the relatively few non-beneficiaries of the food security programme, and explicitly comments at several points on her dissatisfaction about this, it would clearly be a mistake to attribute her happiness to success of the policies.

Where we would differ from Sen (1983), however, is in wanting to make space for subjective approaches which go beyond a utility perspective on happiness or SWB. It is valuable to shift from the monochrome of poverty to the colours of wellbeing so that we can better understand Sukhi's own perspectives. We learn more from engaging with Sukhi than simply observing her, from seeking to understand how she makes sense of her life, what she feels able to do and be, and why.

There is a further point to this story. It is not that Sukhi has had an easy life, but at some level she seems to have made a decision to be happy. Asked whether she feels tension, she replies: 'I don't worry, if I did I would not still be here! I remember God and don't worry about anything.' Asked if she has someone she can talk to if she feels low, she smiles and announces with pride: 'Silence!' Small sorrows she may talk about to others, she explains; large sorrows she will keep to herself. This shows that subjectivity is not simply 'there', but actively (and interactively) constituted in relation to local discursive constructions with a richness, vitality and depth that is altogether different from the thin abstracted composite of 'subjective well-being'.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper began by noting the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the move to bring subjective wellbeing into policy: the mis-match between statistical measures which aspire to 'hard evidence' and the essentially subjective and qualitative nature of people's thoughts and feelings. The understandable response – which the OECD Guidelines can be seen to epitomise – is to seek to resolve this technically, to formalise and standardise, and to reduce anxiety by rendering the strange familiar, quantifying the qualitative and objectifying the subjective.

This paper has argued for a different approach, which seeks not to regulate the subjective but to explore it more on its own terms. It began by considering Amartya Sen's critique of happiness as an indicator of standard of living. This reflects an underlying contradiction that the subjective indicator is taken as evidence of an objective condition (albeit a relative one, reflecting what is held to be a good standard of living for a particular place and time).<sup>26</sup> Building on Sen's analysis, however, we can see that while the dominant interpretation of subjective well-being (SWB) is allied to utility, other subjective approaches have affinity with rather different economic traditions. In these cases, the subjective is not construed as a proxy for an objective condition, but is seen as of intrinsic interest in its own right. Two such alternatives were introduced. The WeDQoL measure of subjective quality of life assesses how satisfied people are with their achievement of a wide range of personal, social and material goals which are identified as valued in particular local contexts. In its construction of 'goals' as objects that people seek to achieve, this follows a similar logic to measuring standard of living on the basis of commodities that people have. Its contribution, however, lies in breaking out of the materialism that binds this tradition and pointing to the broad range of 'havings', 'doings' and 'beings' (Gasper, 2004) that people value and seek to achieve. The final subjective approach considered here is that of Inner Wellbeing. This emphasises people as subjects, and seeks to understand what they feel and think they are able to do and be. In this it has clear affinities to Sen's own Capabilities Approach. Again, its value lies not in any potential to offer a proxy measure of capabilities or 'functionings', but rather to draw attention to the distinctive character of people's own thoughts, feelings, and reflections on the possibilities and constraints they face.

The main part of the paper used the IWB approach to explore how attention to people's subjective perspectives might be of value in public policy and development practice. It drew on ongoing research in northern Chhattisgarh state, India where there has been a highly successful food security programme. For the respondents as a whole economic items showed mean scores that were higher than the median for items across all domains. Qualitative data supported interpreting this as a positive outcome of food security policies, but also cautioned that any growth in economic confidence was still tenuous, and strongly mediated by individuals' own experience and histories. Similarly positive indicators were not found in either the quantitative or qualitative data on people's sense of their political agency, despite the fact that the successful delivery of the food security programmes is seen to depend on effective citizen mobilisation (Dreze and Khera, 2010). The lowest IWB item score reflected people's anxieties about forest decline. Qualitative analysis suggested that for these people at least, understandings of wellbeing go beyond the individual level to a collective ecology, arising from a cycle of care between their communities and the earth. Beyond subsidised food and employment



programmes, this points to the fundamental grounding of wellbeing in culture and the political economy of rights over resources.

The final section took analysis to the individual level, following Sen's (1983:160) suggestion that high scores on happiness might simply reflect a 'cheerful disposition'. The contrast between an elderly woman's objectively poor position and her high happiness score supported Sen's rejection of happiness as a proxy for standard of living. Nor was it a valid indicator of the food security policy's success, since the woman was one of the relatively few non-beneficiaries. This case did not, however, support a rejection of subjective perspectives as a whole, since Sukhi's dissatisfaction with her exclusion from the welfare programme and her realistic appraisal of her economic situation could be read from her subjective responses themselves. As with the analysis of the respondents' scores as a whole, the value of a multi-domain, multi item approach was clear in the variegated picture these were able to provide. In addition, considering one single individual in more depth provided the opportunity to begin to build up a deeper appreciation of her as subject, and so to connect to the rich seam of intellectual analysis dedicated to the study of subjectivities (e.g. Hall and Du Gay, 1996; Mama, 2002).

In sum, this paper has found that the complexity of people's lives means that there are many intervening variables which complicate the impact even of a very significant policy. This must raise questions about the magic bullet of pure utility imagined by some advocates of Subjective Well-Being. It has also demonstrated the value added of a multi-item, multi-domain approach to subjective perceptions, which can give a more nuanced picture than simply general economic review and happiness questions. Most critically, perhaps, the paper has sought to value the subjectivity of subjective data and to re-instate the people concerned as authorities on their own lives. This draws attention to how vital it is to complement quantitative with qualitative data to add depth and texture and to ensure accuracy of analysis and interpretation of results.

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## Endnotes

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1 There is no discussion of the political implications of this. The analysis is also very thin. For Egypt and Tunisia for the years leading up to 2011 declines in scores on life satisfaction from the Gallup world poll are contrasted with rises in GDP. There is no mention, for example, of indices of inequality over the same period.

2 For more information on this study see [www.welldev.org.uk](http://www.welldev.org.uk).

3 A somewhat similar process is described by Clark (2003) in the context of South Africa.

4 The contrast with the framework of Carol Ryff and her colleagues is evident by the contrast with the six domains they identify: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth (Ryff, 1989:1075).

5 As far as possible we have used items that have resonance in both contexts, despite the obvious differences between them. For more information on the development of this model, see the following section, plus White et al., 2012a. For information on its statistical validation, see Gaines and White, 2012.

6 The respondent to whom the second section is devoted, whom we have called 'Sukhi', was part of this first round of fieldwork. The particular survey interview on which that section is based, however, occurred in the section round of fieldwork, in February 2013.

7 The term 'Adivasi' came into use in post-colonial times (Sundar, 2007) and literally means 'dwellers from the beginning,' though the legitimacy of this as a historical fact is disputed (e.g. Bates, 1995). It provides a common identity and claim to resources against the division into separate 'tribes', and is often preferred because the term 'tribes' is seen as carrying both inaccurate and pejorative associations. However, the Scheduled Tribes are not entirely coterminous with Adivasis and there are at least some Adivasi groups which are not classified as ST (Bijoy, 2003).

8 We did not set out to locate our research within Adivasi communities. The link came first with Chaupal as a like-minded organisation, and it happens that they work primarily with Adivasi people.

9 PTG earlier stood for 'Primitive Tribal Group'.

<sup>10</sup> Sarna Dharm is the traditional form of worship amongst these communities, associated with sacred groves of sal trees. They have no images of God, believing God to be formless and inhering in nature.

11 A second round of fieldwork is being undertaken at the time of writing, so some panel comparisons may be possible in future.

12 There were a number of reasons for this. One was low variability of scores. For example in Zambia almost everyone reported lack of safety due to wild animals roaming freely in the Game Management Area. More substantially perhaps, we struggled to find ways of phrasing environmental items that reflected inner wellbeing, rather than simply rates of satisfaction with various environmental factors. The answers thus related primarily to those factors and so were very diverse, rather than to how the person felt in him/herself. This led to an absence of correlations between items which meant that we were unable to construct an inner wellbeing scale for that domain and so had to remove it from the model. This does not mean that the environment was unimportant for Inner Wellbeing. As indicated briefly later in the paper, it was extremely important for both communities. However, we were unable to devise a scale of items that successfully captured this importance in quantitative terms.

13 These will be discussed in later papers.

14 There is no significance to the numbering of items within a domain.

15 Our initial classification had four items in each domain. However, based on the way people answered, taking into account both qualitative comments and statistical correlations, we shifted two items ('how helpful are people to you' and 'do you suffer any discrimination') from the local environment to the social connections domain. This is the reason that the social connections domain is shown as having six items, and the environment only two.

16 Central village. IC097-01.

17 Central village. IC109-01.

18 Central village. IC089-02.

19 IC016-02

20 The road was subsequently metalled under the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (Prime Minister's rural roads scheme).

21 Central village. IC099-02.

22 IS 50-03.

23 Her age may also be a factor. Wellbeing studies generally show higher subjective scores amongst older people. In the India sample 2011 as a whole age was significantly and positively correlated with IWB scores.

24 The survey interview on which this is based was conducted in the second round of fieldwork, February 2013. The ordering of some questions in the survey, and some of the Inner Wellbeing items, were thus different from those described earlier in the paper.

25 A prominent example of this is the influential Gallup world poll, which uses economic categories – 'struggling, thriving and suffering' to describe how people rate their lives <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153818/nearly-one-four-worldwide-thriving.aspx>)

26 As Edwards (2013) argues, some intellectual traditions would dispute the whole notion of 'objective' wellbeing. But that is an argument for another day.

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