Community wellbeing: Concepts and questions

A brief explanation of the conceptual review from the What Works Centre for Wellbeing (September 2017), and questions to help you assess community wellbeing in your area.
The Community Wellbeing Evidence team at the What Works Centre for Wellbeing have carried out a conceptual review of how community wellbeing is currently defined and used in theory and practice.

This set of slides include the key findings from that review, and sets out some questions that might help you think about what community wellbeing means in your area.
What is community wellbeing?

It’s something more than the sum of peoples’ individual wellbeing (which can be though as ‘population wellbeing’).
What is community wellbeing?

There are two ways we can think about community wellbeing:

1. How aspects of the community impact on an individual’s wellbeing. This concept is concerned with how the way that we live together (whether that be crime rates, or local heritage) affects our own personal wellbeing. The end-point of interest is the individual. Most current uses of community wellbeing use this concept.

2. The wellbeing of the community itself. This concept looks beyond the individual to a sense of being and feeling together. It fits with social theory which rejects the idea of autonomous, independent individuals and sees people instead as relational and inter-dependent. Both of these concepts are valid, and which one is most appropriate will depend on ideology, politics and the community itself.
Our working definition

We have chosen this broad, working definition to guide our thinking, which includes both the ways of looking at community wellbeing outlined in the previous slide:

“Community wellbeing is the combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfil their potential.”

[Wiseman and Brasher, 2008: 358]
Community wellbeing can be assessed according to different aspects of life, but usually includes health, economy, social relations and security. In our review, we found some important aspects that are often left out.

These include:

- sustainability
- inequality
- considerations of intangible cultural heritage
- inter-generational relations.
How can we assess community wellbeing?

Community wellbeing could be measured through:

1. Individual assessments of community scale domains (e.g. trust, safety, aesthetic) which can describe an aspect of wellbeing beyond the individual.

2. Information at the community scale on local life such as crime rates or availability of local resources (these will often be available already).

3. Capturing subjective aspects of local life that are not simply individual but reflect the ways in which people function and feel together. Capturing this ‘extra something’ may be tricky and require approaches to collecting information beyond counting things, such as discussion groups, story-telling and analyses of local media or visual outputs.
Developing your own framework for community wellbeing: guiding questions (part one)

**What is the end-point of a community wellbeing framework?**

- **Individual wellbeing of community members**
  - Aspects of community wellbeing are determinants of individual wellbeing
  - 'Population' wellbeing comprising aggregated individual wellbeing scores

- **Community wellbeing in its own right**
  - Individual scale aspects as components of community wellbeing
  - Community wellbeing understood as something more than the sum of the individual parts

**Which components make up a community wellbeing framework?**

- **People**
  - eg. Forms of social support through friends, neighbours, membership of organisations, available formal support through services and facilities.

- **Place**
  - eg. Emotional attachments such as a sense of belonging, memories, cultural heritage, aesthetics; available opportunities such as employment and earning potential, education, transport, housing, leisure, shops, personal safety, crime rates, secure futures, sustainability.

- **Power**
  - eg. Political voice and participation, inclusion, inequalities of access to local resources and opportunities, a sense of collective control and influence.

These are best determined in relation to local circumstances and challenges but typically will cover a range of domains usually characterised as social, political, economic, cultural. It may be useful to think simultaneously about the people, the place and the power relations.
Developing your own framework for community wellbeing: guiding questions (part two)

How can we capture the inter-personal nature of subjective wellbeing that constitutes community wellbeing?

**Quantitative**
- Individual assessments of community scale factors (e.g., local government, provision of services, available green space, etc.) can be aggregated.
- If the community is understood as something that thinks, functions, feels in some way ‘together’ rather than as individuals who share individual experiences of the same things, then group data collection may be more appropriate.

**Beyond numbers**
- Individual stories, narratives, or case studies of particular institutions in the community or of interventions provide more nuanced and detailed information on local processes and pathways to community wellbeing.
- Group discussions allow deliberation, possible consensus or identification of points of disagreement around community wellbeing. Different group discussions can be held with different constituencies in the community (e.g., different age groups, neighbourhood groups, gender groups, etc.).
- Local media, social media, other cultural fora, and local policy documents all shape and reflect local values; these sources about local collective life can be used as sources of information.
thank you!

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