

Bas Verschuuren, Suneetha M. Subramanian and Wim Hiemstra (eds), *Community Well-being in Biocultural Landscapes: Practical Action*, 2014. ISBN 978-1-85339-838-4.

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In recent years, there have been numerous discussions about what constitutes well-being. The ongoing argument is centered on how well-being should be measured. Therefore, this text is timely, providing up-to-date, cross-continental views on what well-being is all about as well as the different approaches to measuring it. The book is a compendium of papers by several authors, focused on communities that are in close proximity with the natural environment and dependent on it for their livelihood and well-being, the book contains in 157 pages (all in medium size fonts that makes for easy reading).

The subject matter of this book is community well-being. The contributors were unanimous about the influence of culture on the formation of the elements of well-being in all the communities under review. Though there were a few common elements of well-being in some communities, no two communities had the same measure of elements that formed their well-being measurement. The integrative approach adopted in this book to explain community well-being from the poll of research material from different field practitioners provides potential explanation for what constitutes well-being everywhere. The blend of nature and culture interfaced with human well-being is what makes this book a unique contribution to the understanding of the subject matter. This book provides a new understanding of well-being with the fascinating approach that allows people in their various environments to explain what the subject matter means to them.

The first chapter by Bas Verschuuren, Wim Hiemstra and Suneetha Subramanian, is an excellent introduction to the book. It reflects on the various attempts at accessing well-being. This chapter lays out the fundamentals of the book by asking questions that need answers: How do communities know they are living well in the face of their peculiar challenges? And how can policy makers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) enable the community development processes prosper within the ecological limits of their environments? It examined the use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of well-being and then adjudged it as a weak approach in the light of the new indicators of what really constitutes community well-being as discussed in this book. The authors emphasize the misdirection of policy methods in accessing well-being at State levels while local communities are disregarded in the process, giving rise to some countries questioning the use of GDP as they seek a socio-culturally acceptable measuring scale/parameter. In this chapter, they identify well-being as a confluence of three spheres of life: spiritual life, social life and material Life. They also review community well-being within a globalized environment, highlighting what is usually left out but important to understanding well-being at local community level (the environmental cost of development and social/spiritual dimensions of well-being). Their submissions reveal a picture of a huge contradiction of this age: how economically viable but environmentally destructive endeavors contribute to the GDP without any accounting for the damaged environment. They capture an account of the history of measuring well-being using economics and also submit

that GDP is an inadequate measure of well-being. Although GDP is a measuring tool that can be easily adjusted to meet current realities, the authors fail to explore that as an option. In their assessment of the different ways of measuring well-being, two methods were explained: one with predefined indicators and surveys; the other one simply builds on community-defined indicators and participatory tools. They identify a few approaches to measuring well-being which include: human development index, gross national happiness index, happy planet index and better life index. The authors employ Anielski's (2007) model of genuine wealth as a basis for explaining the failures of material culture as a measure of true well being.

Wim Hiemstra, Suneetha Subramanian and Bas Verschuuren advocate for a more holistic way of measuring well-being; one that links community well-being to the uniqueness of the different bio-cultural landscapes. Mention was made of an endogenous development approach that includes a spiritual and worldview centric dimensions, operating within the ecological limits of the different communities. The authors did well to draw materials from existing research that made a case for the synthesis of the old methods and the new ones they are advocating for. In their proposal for a plurality of ways of knowing the measure of a community's well-being, they offered their reflections on well-being based on findings emerging from local communities in Africa, Asia, and South America, against the methods with pre-defined indicators that are forced down on the community's system.

The Authors attempted to explain what biocultural landscapes mean, but fell short of the facts by merely describing it "as the canvas where mutually dependent cultural and biological values and practices are intertwined". While this definition may be correct, it is rather too basic to define a complex marriage between natural, cultural, and spiritual components of the landscape. An examination of several other works in this book, points to the fact that community well-being is critically linked to a healthy ecosystem. Drawing examples from Ghana, Bolivia, and Sri Lanka, they examine the approaches and interventions of special programs to improve the well-being of some communities; what formed the basis of/and the areas of intervention in these communities are the pointers to what represents the new approach to assessing well-being. They went further to advance their views on the endogenous development approach by analyzing United Nations Development Program (UNDP) initiatives at helping communities reduce poverty and sustainably use their biocultural landscapes. Report of the United Nations' institutions and their efforts at capturing and aggregating well-being at community level forms most of the following chapters of this book.

Cesar Escobar's contribution to this book is focused on seven Andean communities in Bolivia. He explores the interconnectivity between spirituality and agriculture as a means of explaining what amounts to well-being in Bolivia. Escobar explained the sustainable endogenous development (SED) approach— an initiative in the rural communities that seeks to help them interface with living well, thereby achieving well-being in their lives. The Bolivian Government sees living as "being and feeling well in harmony with society and nature". Escobar also stated eight components to serve as indicators of living well. He put forward the use of participatory planning and evaluation approach as a way to get the communities to agree with new ideas. He concludes that the spiritual dimension was the single most important indicator of the people's well-being. How the author came to that conclusion was not clearly stated, but the conclusion is plausible considering the number of rituals that underpins the decision making of people in the rural communities of Bolivia.

The next paper captures perspectives from Sri Lanka. K. Kahandawa makes a presentation that draws from NGO activities spanning over 20 years, being an outcome of 250 resource-poor families in nine villages. Again, this author provides a different perspective to the same subject matter. He describes a people with belief so deep and personal that it reflects on their daily socio-economic activities. In a community with Buddhist beliefs that stand against the killing of any creature, how can the sale of pesticide (for killing farm insects) become acceptable to allow their farm produce survive? It follows, drawing from chapter one of this book, that the calculation of GDP should exclude the sale of pesticide, considering the deep belief of the Buddhist against killing, since according to them, “one may be reborn as an animal or insect”. The clash between modern agro-chemical approaches and the religious beliefs of the people are some of the implications of chemical agriculture that was identified in Sri Lanka, where farmers returned to growing traditional rice due to concerns arising from high-breed rice. The author also captures well-being from the Buddhist perspective, particularly the belief system that considers farming a holy occupation and the prohibition on the accumulation of wealth. Kahandawa raises several concerns, arising from the field where NGOs are working to help improve the well-being of people in rural communities. Some of the beliefs form the basis of the failure of the interventions; but some success was recorded like achievement of community development goals, training of social mobilization teams, identification of age long practices (that agreed with the beliefs of the people) and encouraging a return to them, amongst others. All of these contributed to improving some indicators of well-being in the villages in Sri Lanka. He submits that well-being is too complex a concept to be reduced to a few static indicators.

Bernard Yangmaadome Guri and Bas Verschuuren provide the first perspective from the African continent in this book. Focus was on a rural community where the veneration of the natural environment as a means to community well-being was the order of the day. This practice was identified to have strong links to the preservation of biodiversity in the community. The initiative to improve eco-tourism in the rural environment whilst creating income for the people has created the challenge of maintaining the spiritual values of the community. How to manage this situation forms a major part of this section of the book. The authors evaluate the contribution of an NGO that introduced the endogenous development approach in the community; how this NGO assisted the community to identify its local resources—spiritual, social, material, and natural—as the base on which community development is built. They explore the challenges arising from planning to use the natural resources in a community where hitherto, well-being is in crisis. The results recorded were two-fold, majoring mostly on spiritual and material benefits to the community. They also described a self-assessing quantitative survey method—the tree seedling scoring method and how it works, focusing on six areas of capacity relevant to the community: (1) to manage natural resources; (2) to promote community livelihood; (3) to plan, monitor and assess local initiatives; (4) to manage, valorize and revitalize cultural and spiritual resources; (5) to negotiate access to external resources; (6) for effective local leadership and governance. The authors also test the UNU-IAS framework for assessing community well-being using 30 predefined indicators to measure material, socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions to community well-being. They discuss the use of the endogenous approach, with the following questions on their checklist: (1) did the assessment influence the NGO’s staff capacity? (2) Can the results be generalized? (3) Is the donor getting value for money using this approach? (4) What is the potential for mainstreaming the approach? They also discussed the result from using the UNU-IAS framework, focusing on categories of needs of the framework: that is basic needs, safety needs, belonging needs, self-esteem and self-actualization needs, and cultural and spiritual needs.

The last chapter was written by Tristan Tyrrell, Joseph Corcoran and Oliver Hughes who draw material from local communities in Asia, Africa, and South America. It is interesting how each case was presented linking them to community well-being yet sustaining a clear-cut argument for the challenges that confront communities in their efforts to achieve biodiversity conservation and sustainable livelihood. They used a questionnaire to extract information about each project under the Equator Initiative, measuring project catalyst, key activities and innovations, biodiversity impacts, socio-economic impacts, institutional sustainability, successes and challenges with replications, and the role of partnerships in project development evolution. They examine the following initiatives/projects: the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary in Ghana, Andavadoaka village in Madagascar, Pole Pole Foundation in Democratic Republic of Congo, Shinyanga Soil Conservation Programme in Tanzania, Yayasan Pengelolaan Lokal Kawasan Laut in Indonesia, Phu My Lepironia Wetland Conservation Project in Vietnam, and the Vida Verde association of Amazonia in Brazil. Lessons from each of these projects are discussed exhaustively, demonstrating how each of the projects meet or fall short of the standard of biodiversity conservation and sustainable use in their respective communities. As a means of overcoming the challenges that arose from each initiative under review, a set of mediating recommendations were made.

This chapter also recaps the key lessons from all the communities under review in the book; pointing out the advantages and challenges of assessing community well-being using the different approaches discussed in the text. The final reflections call on all local, national, and international bodies/organizations who are seeking to better understand community well-being to do so by looking beyond rational economic arguments to techniques that take into account the material, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects/indicators of community life.

This book has gone far and wide across different biocultural landscapes and continents to collect and collate the parameters of what should truly constitute well-being especially in rural communities. It has therefore contributed immensely to scholarship in this area. I fully recommend this text to scholars with interest in sustainable development, environmental sustainability, rural development studies, development studies, biodiversity conservation, eco-tourism development and geography

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