Fishers in a Brazilian Shantytown: Relational wellbeing supports recovery from environmental disaster

Cintia Gillam,⁎, Anthony Charles

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A B S T R A C T
How do environmental damages and disasters affect the wellbeing of fishers and fishing communities? How do fishers, and their communities, deal with and recover from such impacts? A three-dimensional wellbeing framework, involving material, relational and subjective wellbeing components, is applied to explore these questions as they arise in the urban coastal community of Vila dos Pescadores, in Southeast Brazil. This analysis examines the range of environmental impacts on fisher wellbeing, the cumulative effects of these impacts, and the particular case of a human-caused environmental disaster, namely a major industrial fire near Vila dos Pescadores. The analysis highlights how a pre-existing state of strong relational wellbeing was a major factor in the resilience of the community, as it recovered from the disaster. Emphasis is also placed on the important potential of conservation initiatives, carried out with the involvement of fishers, not only for ecological recovery but also for building wellbeing and social capital in the community. Based on the insights of fishers and other community members in Vila dos Pescadores, a series of recommendations to improve governmental policy are provided.

1. Introduction
Conventionally, the focus on peoples’ wellbeing in development has been on material needs ([28], p. 105). However, current global challenges require a broader policy approach than merely taking income as the sole indicator for societal development, and new conceptualizations of wellbeing go beyond material ([28], p.104). As McGregor [27], (p.1) see it, “wellbeing is a state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one’s goals, and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life”. This paper applies a wellbeing lens to analyse the state of fishers, fisheries and the local environment at a community scale, with the aim of focusing attention within policymaking on the multiple criteria to be considered in the pursuit of sustainable fisheries – including fishers’ material needs, but also incorporating their subjective and relational wellbeing.

Specifically, this paper focuses on analyzing the wellbeing of fishers and of the community overall, in Vila dos Pescadores (‘Fishers’ Village’), a highly-urbanized coastal slum area of Southeast Brazil. To begin, Section 2 describes the conceptual framework, based on the three dimensions of wellbeing, and Section 3 develops the context for a wellbeing analysis specifically for fisheries and fishing communities. Section 4 outlines details of the community of Vila dos Pescadores and the context within it is situated, while Section 5 describes the fishers and fisheries of Vila dos Pescadores. Section 6 explores several environmental impacts on fisher wellbeing, including domestic garbage, loss of mangroves, industrial pollution, and human-caused environmental disasters, as well as discussing the cumulative effects of environmental damage on fisher wellbeing. Section 7 focuses on a specific environmental disaster, in 2015, namely a major industrial fire near Vila dos Pescadores. Section 8 synthesizes the analysis with a discussion of four major factors – the role of relational wellbeing, social issues interacting with environmental ones, the important potential of conservation initiatives, and the need for suitable governmental policy. Finally, Section 9 provides a brief conclusion to the paper.

2. Three dimensions of wellbeing
According to McGregor and Sumner [28], (p. 105), human wellbeing includes three dimensions: the material, the relational and the subjective. The material dimension of wellbeing focuses on the resources of a person, household or community, and what resources are available to people to meet their needs ([16], p. 2). The relational dimension focuses on “social relationships which the person engages in to pursue wellbeing” while the subjective dimension addresses how a
person gives meanings to the goals he or she achieves and the quality of life the person achieves ([28], p. 105; [6], p. 2). All three dimensions of wellbeing need to be considered in pursuing a better understanding of small-scale fisheries and developing suitable policies to reflect the “multi-objective and multi-scale nature” of fisheries ([47], p. 258).

The material dimension of wellbeing includes “assets, welfare, and standards of living” ([49], p. 161). The lack of material wellbeing leads to poverty, which is a result of peoples’ lack of power and resources to achieve basic human wellbeing such as food and shelter, and where society’s institutions refrain from supporting or protecting its own citizens ([28], p. 109–110). Kofinas and Chapin [22] state that wellbeing and livelihoods are thus the fundamental components that allow “sustainability, resilience, and adaptability of people to change” to materialize (p. 55).

Relational wellbeing is closely linked to social capital, the ability of people to cooperate and socially organize themselves based of rules of cooperation and a culture of social support ([45], p. 124). O’Malley [34] notes that a social system has “each part individually and collectively fulfilling the system’s needs” (p. 139), producing a strong connection between wellbeing and social structure ([34] p. 139). Thus the community is an essential part of relational wellbeing and “having a sense of place” ([29], p. 356). A strong community leadership, spiritual and cultural traditions nurture a sense of meaning in life, security and identity (356). Furthermore, fishers’ relational wellbeing, through community cohesion, enables fishers to mobilize themselves against environmental shocks.

Subjective wellbeing is a key element of a 3-D wellbeing approach. The subjective wellbeing addresses how a person gives meanings to the goals he or she achieves and the quality of life the person achieves ([28], p. 105; [6], p. 2). This recognizes, for example, that many rural activities, such as fishing and hunting, are not only professions, but are also parts of the identity and culture of resource users and their communities.

In applying a wellbeing approach, it is important to recognize critiques of its application. For example, there may be a tendency to identify wellbeing with achieve resilience on Western values including desired employment, high income, successful children and marriage, among others ([29], p. 355). In the West, people tend to have highly individualistic life ideologies, in contrast with other cultures’ collective orientation ([48], p. 8). Thus, the understanding of wellbeing is culturally and socially constructed ([48], p. 8). In an individualistic culture, “self-affirmation and achievement are the symbols of achievement and thus wellbeing” ([29], p. 355). In a collectivist culture, wellbeing is connected to the “fulfillment of social expectations of the community, rather than the individual” (p. 355). Brazilian society, to be explored here, shows individualistic and subjectivist traits in several aspects: its fragile and individualist institutions; the lack of ability of citizens to think of the collective; and conflicts between the public and the private sphere ([9], p. 9). Awareness of such complexities is important to a successful wellbeing analysis.

3. A wellbeing lens applied to fisheries

In a fishery context, the wellbeing lens connects multiple dimensions (social, economic, environmental and institutional) to reflect the varied reality of sustainable development, allowing a “better understanding and assessment of conflicts and tradeoffs, and improved approaches for fisheries governance to incorporate considerations such as livelihoods, poverty, vulnerability, and social capital” ([6], p. 4). The wellbeing approach has the potential to further understand the complex dynamics of fisheries, and consequently, improve fisheries management and governance ([6], p. 1). Hence, improved fisheries policy must “engage with what people feel, think and aspire to achieve through their choices of action” in order to be successful ([8], p. 459).

Weeratunge et al. [47] note that the wellbeing lens is a broad concept that includes fishers’ material and non-material needs (p. 256). It may be seen overall as a “non-analytical lens, which can help draw policy attention to the non-material benefits of fisheries” ([47], p. 256). Fishers’ love of fishing, sense of identity and pride of their profession are some of the non-material benefits of fisheries. These non-material benefits enable fishers to attain subjective wellbeing from their livelihoods. Many fishers consider the importance of their livelihood as a way of life due to their love for fishing and job satisfaction ([6], p. 2; Santos, video interview, August 2014). The subjective dimension of wellbeing is demonstrated in what it means to be a fisher - fishing is not only an occupation, but it is a way of life, intrinsically embedded in fishers’ lives. Fishers attain social and psychological wellbeing by being able to fish; and social exclusion, lack of identity, self-esteem, and sense of belonging by not being able to fish. Most fishers would not leave fishing for another occupation ([36], p. 542).

The wellbeing ‘lens’ applies as well at the community level. Notably, small-scale fisheries are intrinsic to community wellbeing, by contributing to communities’ food security, livelihoods, identity, health and social cohesion ([7], p. 4). Symes and Phillipson [42] state the “resources of family and community contribute to the “survival strategies of fishing units” in situations of adversity for fishers (p. 2); fishing communities and their networks of social relations characterize the true identity of the inshore artisanal fishing sector (p. 2). Communities have the potential to build community capacity, enabling people to recognize individual and collective capability, allowing “communities to take action around shared issues” ([50], p. 285). Community members can establish their wellbeing and resilience in facing external drivers of change (p. 285), including environmental disasters. Kral et al. [31] explain that, once communities have control of their activities, wellbeing programs may have better outcomes (p. 435). This relates to issues of legal access to fisheries. Mbatha et al. [26] note that harvest restrictions often do not take fishers’ livelihoods into consideration (p. 5). Fishers’ material and relational wellbeing, especially in developing countries, is also based on peoples’ food security. Since fishing is an important source of protein and income for impoverished communities, a wellbeing policy approach emphasizes the importance of focusing on artisanal fisheries to sustain these communities.

4. The community of Vila dos Pescadores

Vila dos Pescadores is a largely fishing-based community located in a coastal mangrove area of the city of Cubatão, within São Paulo state in Southeast Brazil. Vila dos Pescadores lies on the Santos Estuary, near the major Santos Port and the Cubatão industrial hub.

A large number of fishers in the city of Cubatão are northeastern migrants who migrated to the city since the 1960s in search of a better life and better living conditions ([41], p. 88) since the northeastern region of Brazil faced economic stagnation, constant droughts and lack of economic prosperity ([15], p. 38). Migrants were attracted by industrialization and economic growth in Cubatão, leading to strong population growth, especially in the decades from 1960 to 1980 (Alves, 2013, p. 352). Many migrants were looking for work in the petrochemical and steel industries, and since industrialization started in the 1950s, migrant workers also moved into the construction industry ([41], p. 68). Since the 1970s, with the government policy of strengthening industrial centres near the state capital (São Paulo), the area has undergone rapid uncontrolled growth, attracting low-income, low-skilled migrant labor, critical to the expansion of the Cubatão petrochemical hub ([14], p. 23).

The extensive in-migration to the Cubatão area, combined with the lack of housing affordability, led to the growth of slums and many ‘mangrove invasions’ (informal development of slum housing in coastal mangrove areas), which in turn created situations of high exposure to environmental hazards such as pollution, floods and landslides ([19], p. 187). This negative environmental situation combines with prevalent poverty, and lack of basic urban services in these settlements – sewage, drinking water, electricity and road paving are precarious and are
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