



## What is a good life? Selecting capabilities to assess women's quality of life in rural Malawi



Giulia Greco <sup>a, \*</sup>, Jolene Skordis-Worrall <sup>b</sup>, Bryan Mkandawire <sup>c</sup>, Anne Mills <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Health Economics and Systems Analysis Group, Department of Global Health and Development, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH, UK

<sup>b</sup> UCL Institute for Global Health, 30 Guilford Street, London WC1N 1EH, UK

<sup>c</sup> Parent and Child Health Initiative (PACHI), Amina House, Paul Kagame Road roundabout, P.O. Box 31686, Lilongwe 3, Malawi

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### ABSTRACT

There is growing interest in using Sen's Capability Approach to assess quality of life and to evaluate social policies. This paper describes the formative stages of developing a quality of life measure: the selection of the relevant capabilities. This measure is intended to provide a more comprehensive outcome measure for the evaluation of complex interventions such as Maimwana women's groups, a community based participatory intervention to improve maternal health in rural Malawi.

Fifteen focus group discussions with 129 women were conducted to explore relevant concepts of quality of life in rural Malawi. Data collection started in October 2009. Findings were elicited based on framework analysis.

The findings portray a complex and highly nuanced perception that women in rural Malawi have of their life and wellbeing. Quality of life was described using a variety of dimensions that are highly interconnected. Quality of life emerges to be not only shaped by the realisation of basic material needs such as being sufficiently nourished and adequately sheltered, but is also highly dependent on complex feelings, relations and social norms. The full exposition of wellbeing with its domains was organised into a framework constituting six different spheres of wellbeing: physical strength, inner wellbeing, household wellbeing, community relations, economic security and happiness.

Despite the list being developed in a specific context and for a specific group of people, the similarities with lists developed in other contexts, with different methods and for different purposes, are considerable. This suggests that there are a number of core aspects of wellbeing considered a minimum requirement for a life of human dignity, that should be included in any attempt to assess quality of life and human development across populations.

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### 1. Introduction

MaiMwana Women's Groups (WGs) are a community participatory intervention, organising and mobilising women of reproductive age in rural Malawi (Rosato et al., 2011). During their meetings, women discuss, prioritise, develop and implement local strategies to overcome maternal and neonatal health problems. The intervention emphasises health promotion activities that rely on community engagement and participation aimed at changing behaviour. The groups promote agency, social capital and knowledge. Effectiveness of the MaiMwana WGs was tested with a cluster

randomised controlled trial design that estimated a 74 percent reduction in maternal mortality rate, and 41 percent reduction in neonatal mortality rate (Lewycka et al., 2013). However, given the nature of the intervention, its effects are likely to be felt on various aspects of quality of life, and not only on mortality rates. Thus there is a need to develop a more appropriate outcome measure that captures changes in quality of life more broadly defined.

There is growing interest in using Sen's Capability Approach to assess quality of life and to evaluate policies (Sen, 1993; Verkerk et al., 2001; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Gasper, 2010). A crucial normative argument of Sen's approach is that quality of life should not be measured as opulence or utility, and should not be assessed using people's preferences or desires, but it should concern people's capabilities: the abilities to achieve those "beings and doings" that

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [giulia.greco@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:giulia.greco@lshtm.ac.uk) (G. Greco).

people have reason to value in life (Sen, 1985). These valuable “beings and doings” can range from basic functionings, such as being well nourished and living in a decent house, to more complex functionings such as being in control over personal decisions. The Capability framework distinguishes itself from other conventional approaches, which have a narrower evaluative space, such as utility, income or basic needs.

In order to improve people's quality of life, social and public policy should therefore aim to protect, restore and expand people's capabilities (Sen, 1999, 2003).

The multidimensional nature of quality of life increases the complexity of evaluation and raises a number of methodological challenges that need to be considered when constructing a composite measure (McGillivray, 2012). The different steps for creating a multidimensional measure are (1) development of a theoretical model: selection of dimensions, (2) development of an empirical model: selection of indicators, (3) aggregation of dimensions into one single measure: selection of relative weights and (4) validation of the instrument.

The aim of this paper is to describe the first step for developing a quality of life measure based on Sen's Capability Approach: the selection of the relevant dimensions of quality of life. This measure is intended to provide a more comprehensive outcome measure for the evaluation of complex intervention such as the MaiMwana WGs.

## 2. Approaches to the selection of capabilities

Sen has deliberately refrained from providing a list of relevant capabilities necessary for policy evaluation, claiming that different capabilities are relevant to different contexts (Sen, 2005). Thus, philosophers, political scientists, and economists have made several attempts to develop sets of dimensions either for a specific context or for universal use.

There are a range of different approaches for the selection of capabilities. Robeyns (2003) proposed a methodological process for selecting capabilities. This includes: to make the selection transparent and sensitive to the context; to justify the method used; to distinguish between different levels of generality; and to aim for the most exhaustive selection possible. The selection should then be scrutinised and endorsed by the general public or by relevant interest groups.

To date, few studies have attempted to directly measure capabilities (or perceived capabilities), (for example: Burchardt et al., 2002; Anand and van Hees, 2006; Grewal et al., 2006; Alkire, 2002b; for a review see Robeyns, 2006). The vast majority of available studies are built upon existing datasets – this might be why they deal mainly with achieved functionings.

In many studies the selection of functionings/capabilities is done by reference to the researchers' own values (Chiappero-Martinetti, 2000; Klasen, 2000). Empirical use of participatory planning processes and public debate for developing a capability list is limited (Alkire, 2002b; White and Pettit, 2004; Grewal et al., 2006; Vizard and Burchardt, 2007; Kinghorn et al., 2014; Al-Janabi et al., 2012).

One programme of work has fully developed and tested a capability index for use in economic evaluation: the ICECAP (ICE-pop CAPability) measures (Flynn et al. 2011; Al-Janabi et al., 2012). However, these have not yet been validated for a low-income setting.

### 2.1. Lists of dimensions of quality of life

Five lists of dimensions are presented in [web table 1](#) and discussed here as an illustration of the variety of methodologies

adopted for generating them, the types of analysis they are used for and the different disciplines they are rooted in: political science, development studies, social policy, health economics and economics.

#### 2.1.1. Doyal and Gough's needs

Doyal and Gough developed a normative concept of need that would theoretically and practically inform the debates in social policy. They conceptualised universal needs as “preconditions for social participation, which apply to everyone in the same way” (Doyal and Gough, 1991, p.5). They argue that needs can be specified without public consent and because these needs are understood to be the “preconditions” of a fulfilled life, there is a normative duty to satisfy them (Doyal and Gough, 1991).

#### 2.1.2. Nussbaum's Central Human Capabilities

Martha Nussbaum made the first attempt to develop a universal list of capabilities (Nussbaum 2001). While her contribution has its foundation in Sen's capability theory, and they did collaborate on some work, she adopted a more political and normative approach. Her proposed list of ten Central Human Capabilities aimed at establishing a foundation for basic political principles. Although these dimensions were identified and put together by the researcher herself, she argues that her list is open and flexible, and it has since been revised several times. In addition, she notes that the proposed capabilities have a broad cross-cultural consensus (Nussbaum, 2003). However, the list raised questions over the extent of its prescriptiveness (Alkire, 2002), academic legitimacy and lack of consistency with Sen's central idea of pluralism (Robeyns, 2005). Her list is intended for political use since it provides those basic principles that should have constitutional guarantees for all citizens (Nussbaum 2001).

#### 2.1.3. Narayan's voices of the poor

Research led by Deepa Narayan in 2000 for the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Group aimed at eliciting people's values on poverty and ill-being, using a participatory methodology. This is considered pioneering because it is the only cross-country and cross-cultural study of this scale which was based on the active participation of people from poor, low literacy and marginalised backgrounds. The policy implications that result from this work are to design and to implement poverty reduction strategies that can succeed because they are rooted in people's values and expectations.

#### 2.1.4. Al-Janabi and Coast's ICECAP-A measure

The ICECAP measures are an on-going project that aims to develop an outcome measure for use in economic evaluation of health and social care for the general adult population (ICECAP-A), for the older population (ICECAP-O) and for end of life care (ICECAP-SCM) in the UK and other high-income countries. Qualitative methods have been used to develop the ICECAP-A measure descriptive system: in-depth semi-structured interviews to define conceptual attributes in a meaningful terminology for the adult population (Al-Janabi et al., 2012). The attributes are structured into a ready available questionnaire ([www.icecap.bham.ac.uk](http://www.icecap.bham.ac.uk)).

#### 2.1.5. Commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress

The aim of the Commission, chaired by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, was to identify those objective features that lead to an expansion of people's opportunities and should thus be considered in the assessment of quality of life (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Based on academic research and various concrete initiatives developed around the world, the Commission identified eight key dimensions that are

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