



## Chapter 2

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# *Wellbeing and Illbeing: The Good and the Bad Life*

### **Summary**

*Despite the diversity of poor participants, their ideas of wellbeing and the good life are multidimensional and have much in common. Enough for a good life is not a lot, and for those with little, a little more can mean a great deal. Across continents, countries, contexts, and types of people, a good quality of life includes material wellbeing, which is often expressed as having enough; bodily wellbeing, which includes being strong, well and looking good; social wellbeing, including caring for and settling children; having self-respect, peace and good relations in the family and community; having security, including civil peace, a safe and secure environment, personal physical security and confidence in the future; and having freedom of choice and action, including being able to help other people in the community. Wealth and wellbeing are seen as different, and even contradictory.*

*Descriptions of illbeing are also multidimensional and interwoven. Experiences of illbeing include material lack and want (of food, housing and shelter; livelihood, assets and money); hunger, pain and discomfort; exhaustion and poverty of time; exclusion, rejection, isolation and loneliness; bad relations with others, including bad relations within the family; insecurity, vulnerability, worry, fear and low self-confidence; and powerlessness, helplessness, frustration and anger.*

*Wellbeing and illbeing are states of mind and being. Wellbeing has a psychological and spiritual dimension as a mental state of harmony, happiness and peace of mind. Illbeing includes mental distress, breakdown, depression and madness, often described by participants to be impacts of poverty. Children have a distinct view of the bad life. An overarching issue is how to enable poor people to diminish illbeing and enhance wellbeing, gaining for themselves more of the good life to which they aspire.*

## ***Wellbeing Is Multidimensional***

*A better life for me is to be healthy, peaceful and to live in love without hunger. Love is more than anything. Money has no value in the absence of love.*

—A 26-year-old woman, Dibdibe Wajtu, Ethiopia

The starting question posed by the researchers to the small group discussions with poor women and poor men is, “How do you define wellbeing or a good quality of life, and illbeing or a bad quality of life?” From these discussions emerge local people’s own terminology and definitions of wellbeing, deprivation, illbeing, vulnerability and poverty. The terms wellbeing and illbeing were chosen for their open-ended breadth, so that poor people would feel free to express whatever they felt about a good life and a bad life. “We are trying to present a new way of seeing wellbeing,” notes a researcher. It is the way poor people see it themselves.

Poor people’s ideas of a good quality of life are multidimensional. As explored in part I of this chapter, they cluster around the following themes: material wellbeing, physical wellbeing, social wellbeing, security, and freedom of choice and action. All of these combine pervasively in states of mind as well as body, in personal psychological experiences of wellbeing. Much of illbeing was described as the opposite of these. Part II examines these dimensions in turn: material deprivation; physical illbeing; bad social relations; vulnerability, worry and fear, low self-confidence; and powerlessness, helplessness and frustration. Part III describes the psychological dimensions of wellbeing and illbeing. In describing the conditions of their lives, poor children especially express resentment.

## **Part I. Wellbeing: The Good Life**

### ***How Poor People Put It***

Ideas of wellbeing are strikingly similar across the range of participants. Despite differences of detail, and contexts that are diverse, complex and nuanced, the commonalities stand out. The same dimensions and aspects of wellbeing are repeatedly expressed, across continents, countries and cultures, in cities, towns and rural areas alike. And they are expressed by different people—women and men, young and old, children and adults.

For women in Tabé Ere in rural Ghana wellbeing means security: being protected by God, having children to give you security in old age, having a peaceful mind (*tieru villa*), patience (*kanyir*, meaning not holding a grudge against anyone), and plenty of rain.

To have most, if not all, of the necessary basics of life is *umoyo uwemi* and *umoyo wabwino*, wellbeing as described by different groups in Malawi.

These basics include certain assets, adequate food, decent medical care, constant and regular sources of income, nice clothes, good bedding, a house that does not leak, a toilet, a bathroom, a kitchen, healthy bodies, couples being respectful of each other, being God-fearing, having well-behaved children who are not selfish, and having peace of mind.

For those in Khaliajuri in rural Bangladesh having a good quality of life means having employment for the whole year, a good house, four or five cows, a fishing net, good clothes to put on, food to eat to one's heart's content, and being able to protect one's house from flood erosion. Middle-aged women say that for a good quality of life there should be a male member of the household earning money, a son for every mother, and no husbands pursuing polygamy.

A participant from Renggarasi in rural Indonesia considers a person to be living well who can secure his family's needs with produce from his livestock and who is able to help others who need material and nonmaterial things or advice.

In Nigeria wellbeing is described by different people as being a responsible person who has a pleasurable life, peace of mind, security and independence, and who is popular with the people, is able to marry easily, is able to educate children, is able to patronize private clinics and schools, and who has money, land, a house and good clothes.

In Bulgaria the major distinctive feature of wellbeing is stable employment, which means having money as well as security. The National Synthesis Report notes that the family is another important aspect, along with being able to socialize and being in harmony with oneself. The wealthy, seen as those who have and flaunt money and power, do not necessarily have the respect and security that the community considers essential parts of wellbeing.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, "informants understand wellbeing as good life and wealth; however, they do not think that wellbeing is limited to these tangible components, and believe that wellbeing is impossible without tolerance, peace, family and children. The informants think that the basis of wellbeing is good health, peace in the family and in the society; in their opinion, wealth, which is an important component of wellbeing, can only be gained if these conditions are present." From the Kyrgyz Republic it is also reported that most of the informants define wellbeing as "stability on a household and society level and ability to satisfy one's material and spiritual needs."

In Barrio Las Pascuas in urban Bolivia, a group of youths say that those who have a good life are "those who do not lack food," and those "who are not worried every day about what they are going to do tomorrow to get food for their children. They have secure work, and if the husband does not work, the wife does." In Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in another part of urban Bolivia young men say that, besides having adequate food and work, wellbeing is to be friendly and to have friends, to have the support of family and society, and "to be patient, and above all happy."

## ***Materially, Enough for a Good Life Is Not a Lot***

*I would like to live simply. I don't like houses with too much inside. To have a bit more comfort. Nothing big...I would like a simple house...not big, or luxurious...a simple house with a floor.*

—A 21-year-old man, Esmeraldas, Ecuador

**I**t is perhaps part of the human condition to aspire not for the moon, but for imaginable improvements. Participants were clear that enough materially for a good life for them was not excessive or unrealistic (see box 2.1). They hope for moderate, not extravagant, improvements. They do not see substantial wealth as necessary for wellbeing. Rather, they express the material dimension of life in terms of having enough for a reasonable level of living. And the material is only one dimension among others.

It is not just that poor people's material aspirations are modest. It is also that the worse off they are, the more a small improvement means. A little then means a lot. This may apply especially with women who so frequently have so little. For women in two Malawi rural sites part of a good life is having adequate utensils, especially pails for drawing water and a rack for drying plates. To a discussion of wellbeing in Bangladesh, a group of older women add, "Those who could pass time for the prayer of God after taking a full meal and could sleep on a bamboo-made platform live a good quality of life."

### **Box 2.1 The Good Life, Caring for Children**

*To be well is when you have money, and you have a family and children. You need to have savings in order to be able to support your children till later on in life.*

—A young man, Bulgaria

*A good life is to have enough food and clothing for my children. To educate them to be self-reliant when we get retired.*

—A man, Mitti Kolo, Ethiopia

*The rich manage to send their children to school and also...to take their children to the clinic.*

—A man, Musanya, Zambia

*To be well means to see your grandchildren happy, well-dressed and to know that your children have settled down; to be able to give them food and money whenever they come to see you, and not to ask them for help and money.*

—An old woman from rural Bulgaria

None of this justifies modest ambitions in development, accepting the horizons of poor people where these are limited, or restraining efforts to help them and to help them help themselves. To the contrary, it hugely reinforces the case for giving overwhelming priority to their wellbeing as they envisage it. Gains by poor people should come first. When the objective is to enhance the wellbeing to which poor people aspire, the benefits from small changes can be large indeed.

### ***Material Wellbeing: Having Enough***

*But at least for each child to have a bed, a pair of shoes, a canopy over their heads, two sheets—not to sleep like we do on the ground.*

—Ana Maria, a poor woman, Esmeraldas, Ecuador

*A poor person is a person who does not own anything that provides him with a permanent source of living. If a person has a permanent source of income, he will not ask for other people's assistance.*

—A poor woman from Sidkia, Egypt

Three aspects of material wellbeing that are repeatedly mentioned are food, assets and work.

**Food.** Adequate food is a universal need. In Malawi hunger is ranked as the number one problem by nearly every discussion group in the three urban and seven rural communities participating in the study. Elsewhere—across the range of countries—enough to eat every day is again and again stressed as a feature of wellbeing. In contexts as different as Bangladesh, Bulgaria and Zambia wellbeing included being able to have three meals a day, all year round. Food security too is a critical component, with the number of months of food security given frequently as a criterion for ranking wellbeing, particularly in Vietnam.

**Assets.** For those living in rural areas secure tenure of adequate resources, especially land, is another nearly universal criterion of wellbeing. This often includes ownership of livestock. In urban areas the parallel needs are savings and capital, and access to consumer goods. In urban Ghana wellbeing is identified with capital to start a business. The need for housing—as well as furniture, utensils and tools—is also a virtually universal aspect of wellbeing and sometimes poor people describe a “house that should not let in the rain.”

**Work.** Work to gain a livelihood is a nearly universal aspiration among participants. Money itself is mentioned less frequently than one might expect and, when mentioned, it is implied by other aspects of wellbeing such as the ability to find paid work to obtain money, to buy clothes and to pay for health treatment and school expenses. A poor man in Thompson Pen in Jamaica says, “Work makes all the difference in the world. I feel bad,

miserable, sick, and can't take doing nothing. My wife, at 78, is still working. My dream is a little work to make ends meet."

In rural areas work takes many forms; it is usually agricultural and linked with land. In urban areas it means a steady job, which is stressed again and again by those who are without work or who are striving to make a livelihood through casual labor or informal and illegal activities. Whether it is Malawi, where one idea of wellbeing is both husband and wife working, or Russia, where participants stress the importance of wages that are regularly paid, the desire is for productive work to provide an adequate and secure livelihood.

### ***Bodily Wellbeing: Being and Appearing Well***

Material wellbeing is rarely mentioned without other critical aspects of a good life. These include the bodily wellbeing of health and appearance, as well as a good physical environment.

Almost everywhere, health and access to health services—whether informal or formal—are important. A healthy and strong body is seen as crucial to wellbeing—not just for a sense of physical wellbeing in itself, but as a precondition for being able to work. A person who is sick and weak cannot work or cannot work well.

For some, especially for girls and young women, the importance of appearance—of both body and clothing—comes through forcefully. Quality of skin is often referred to. In Muchinka in rural Zambia the bodies of the better off are said to “look well.” For urban poor people in Jamaica criteria for wellbeing include “skin tone looks balanced” and “looking well fed.” In Gowainghat, Bangladesh clothes, oil for the hair and soap are important to young women. Across cultures and contexts being able to dress well and appear well is repeatedly stated as part of a good quality of life.

The third dimension of physical wellbeing is physical environment, with wellbeing in Accompong, Jamaica associated with, for example, “the fresh air in the hills of Cockpit County.” The aspect of physical environment, however, is more often used in a negative context and is described, for example, as the bad experiences of living in “the places of the poor.”

### ***Social Wellbeing***

Social wellbeing includes care and wellbeing of children; self-respect and dignity; and peace and good relations within the family, community and country.

***Being Able to Care for, Bring up, Marry and Settle Children.*** In Nigeria, of the 48 aspects of wellbeing identified, no fewer than eight of them refer to children. Having happy and healthy children, feeding them, clothing them, being able to take them for treatment when sick, and being able to send them to school and pay school bills are common concerns strongly expressed. In Bangladesh households that are financially well off are those that can afford clothes and education for their children.

To be able to marry and settle children is a frequent aspiration. In Malawi and Uzbekistan wedding ceremonies conducted in good style are important. In Ampenan Utara, Indonesia one of the criteria for differentiating wellbeing groups is the ability to meet the costs of children's weddings: the top group has no problem; the second group can meet the cost; the third has to become indebted to meet the costs; and the issue for the bottom group is simply not mentioned. Landless women in Dorapalli in India identify a major impact of poverty as "difficulty in marrying girl children." In Eil-bil-ille, Somaliland the well off are those who can afford marriage-related costs and who always marry at an early age.

***Self-Respect and Dignity.*** Self-respect and dignity, as described by poor people, means being able to live without being a burden to others; living without extending one's hand; living without being subservient to anybody; and being able to bury dead family members decently. In Nigeria this includes being listened to, being popular, and being able to fulfill social obligations and to help others.

***Peace, Harmony and Good Relations in the Family and the Community.*** Many poor people consider the absence of conflicts essential for family and social wellbeing. In Ghana this is expressed as unity in the household or community. In Uzbekistan it means peace and calm in the family, in the country and in one's own community.

Good relations extend to social cohesion and support, and to helping one another. In Vietnam near Ha Tinh poor people state their priorities as being able to "encourage people to visit, support and give presents (show feelings in general) to households dealing with crises and during the holidays."

## ***Security***

Security includes predictability and safety in life and confidence in the future.

***Civil Peace.*** A group of elderly residents of Ak Kiya in the Kyrgyz Republic comment, "Among all wellbeing criteria, peace is the most important one. Now there is war in Yugoslavia and in other countries. God willing, it would not happen here. As they say, 'be hungry but live in peace.'" Even in contexts without recent experience of civil conflict or war, such as this one in the Kyrgyz Republic, civil peace was often ranked high. Peace—the absence of war, violence and disorder—is the most important component of wellbeing for those living in the context of recent war or disorder.

***A Physically Safe and Secure Environment.*** Wellbeing means not being vulnerable to physical disasters, threats and discomforts that are so typical of the places of poor people. These included floods in urban Argentina and rural Bangladesh, wild animals in Sri Lanka and India, water pollution from industry in Bulgaria, the disaster from the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan, and air pollution from industry in Olmalyq, Uzbekistan. These are named among many other physical, often seasonal, threats.

***Personal Physical Security.*** "Here we live with our door open," report participants in rural Argentina. A man in Jamaica says that "this is a ghetto

community, but you don't have any violence; you can walk (around) here any hour of the night and no one is going to harm you." Again in Jamaica, the relaxed atmosphere and the high level of personal safety in the countryside are valued.

***Lawfulness and Access to Justice.*** Refugees in a Russian city who survived the horror of a civil war and genocide and who were objects of constant abuses describe "peace" and "the absence of constant fear" as the main prerequisites of a good life. Lawfulness and access to justice are widely seen as aspects of wellbeing, particularly in Nigeria. Security from persecution by the police and other powers that be is a priority for many, especially for urban vendors.

***Security in Old Age.*** Particularly for older people, security and support in old age are a primary concern. An old woman in Khaliajuri, Bangladesh says that, for a good quality of life, a son must not sever the family bond after marriage and he must provide food to his mother.

***Confidence in the Future.*** The good life is also frequently defined as being able to look forward to the future. Especially in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Russia that have experienced recent national traumas participants value being able to have confidence in a stable and predictable future. They say that they once had this, but that it is now only experienced by a few rich people.

### ***Freedom of Choice and Action***

The research team from Brazil puts it like this:

*People tended to equate poverty with powerlessness and impotence, and to relate wellbeing to security and a sense of control of their lives. A woman from the community of Borborema established a connection between power and control, and wellbeing. She argued, "The rich one is someone who says, 'I am going to do it,' and does it." The poor, in contrast, do not fulfill their wishes or develop their capacities.*

Freedom of choice and action extends to having the means to help others. Being able to be a good person is a feature of the good life that poor people often highlight. A young man in Isla Trinitaria, Ecuador wants to be able to buy clothes for his sisters. In Malawi a good characteristic of one high category of wellbeing was to love everyone and help others when they have problems. Wellbeing is quite frequently linked with moral responsibility, with having the wherewithal to help others, and with having enough money to be able to give to charity or a religious organization.

What people say they wish to be able to do covers a huge range: to gain education and skills; to have mobility and the means to travel; and to have time for rest, recreation and being with people—among others. Underlying all of these—and the material, physical, social and security dimensions—



is a fundamental aspiration. Participants in many contexts say that they want to be able to make choices, to decide to do basic things without constraint, to live in a predictable environment and have some control over what happens.

## ***Diversity by Context and Person***

**F**or all of these commonalities, there are differences of aspiration and of concepts of wellbeing. They vary by continental region, by rural and urban areas, by livelihood, by age and by gender.

The contrasts are perhaps not surprising, but listing a few of those that are more striking can make and illustrate the point without any attempt to be comprehensive:

- ▶ In Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Bulgaria, the Kyrgyz Republic, Russia and Uzbekistan, wellbeing is frequently defined nostalgically as the “normal” condition, meaning before the end of communism. In Russia wellbeing criteria are taken from the past and not the present.
- ▶ Among pastoralists, whether Somalis in Somaliland or Kalmyks in Russia, wellbeing is often intimately linked with animals.
- ▶ Poor rural people emphasize land and livestock, farming capital and inputs for livelihood activities, and being able to farm on one’s own.
- ▶ Poor urban people repeatedly emphasize employment, a job, infrastructure, housing, security of tenure, and physical security. They sometimes have higher material aspirations for consumption goods than rural people. In one urban site in Malawi participants say that wellbeing entails leading a European (Western) life (*moyo wachizungu*), having houses to rent out to others, having decent and well-paying jobs, and having very good houses with electricity.
- ▶ Women tend more often than men to mention peace in the family; good social relations in the community; adequate and nutritious food; good drinking water; being able to bring up children in good conditions, keep them healthy, and send them to school; and not being maltreated in the family.
- ▶ Men tend more often to mention material productive goods, and time to relax. There are exceptions to these generalizations, and there is a danger of overstereotyping gendered priorities and values, especially at a time when change in gender roles in many places is rapid.
- ▶ The views of some poor children were asked. In Chittagong, Bangladesh, according to children, wellbeing means having neat and clean surroundings, with facilities for education, being able to play freely, living in a building, having good food

(fish, meat, vegetables, etc.), going every morning to *madrassa* (traditional Muslim school), and everybody living in harmony. Peace and harmony in the family and in society are important to children.

## ***Wealth and Wellbeing Are Different***

In discussions on criteria for a good life, the researchers report:

- ▶ “The group of young people underscored the need to have a family, to feel supported and understood.”—According to a youth group in Barrio Universitarios, Bolivia
- ▶ In Bulgaria, “wealth and wellbeing are not identical, for the rich have money but don’t have security, nor are they respected by the community. Illbeing is, however, identical with poverty: this is ‘our situation.’”
- ▶ In Russia, “the life of the well-to-do people was never called a ‘good life.’ Ultimately, when both the younger and older participants talked about the well-to-do people, they would never call their life a ‘good’ one.”

Good living or wellbeing in Zambia, “can mean being liked, but also can make others jealous and bring hatred and death.” Participants repeatedly distinguish between wealth and wellbeing. Those who are wealthy are by no means always in the top category for wellbeing. For example, a widow who is rich might not be put in the top wellbeing category because widowhood is a bad condition.

The wealthy can be generous and good, but often they are seen in a bad light. A 54-year-old man from Kok Yangak in the Kyrgyz Republic says:

*One can make a fortune, but if it has negative effects for the rest of the community, such wealth gives just an illusion of wellbeing, because it does not do any good for people. If somebody’s wellbeing is based on the illbeing of others, it is not a true wellbeing. There are rich people in the village. They made their fortune by selling alcohol and vodka. The community does not like these people, because their prosperity is only possible due to the growing problem of alcoholism in the village.*

In contrast, poverty and nonmaterial wellbeing can sometimes be found together. In rural Accompong in Jamaica the researchers write that “the lives of all citizens are impacted by this peace within the neighborhood. Despite hard times and obvious poverty among most of the households an open welcome and hospitality to visitors and strangers to the community gives a distinct feeling of wellbeing and a good quality of life.”

## Part II. Illbeing: The Bad Life

*The family was housed in a thatched hut and there was no way that they could have two square meals a day. The lunch would be finished by munching some sugarcane. Once in a while they would taste “sattu” (made of flour), pulses, and potatoes, etc., but for special occasions only. During the rains the water used to pour down the thatched roof and the family would go to seek cover in the corners to avoid getting wet. Their clothing would be of coarse material and they would content themselves with one or two pairs of clothes for a year. The wages then used to be paid as 1 kg of grain per day. After three years of marriage, unable to bear the harassment of the mother-in-law, both Nagina Devi and her husband separated from her.*

—A poor mother, Manjhar, India

Illbeing and the bad life bring with them different sorts of bad experience. These are many and interwoven. Some correspond to the opposites of the clusters of wellbeing: lack and want are material; hunger, pain, discomfort, exhaustion and poverty of time are physical; bad personal relations, exclusion, rejection, abuse, isolation and loneliness are social; vulnerability and fear relate to insecurity; and helplessness, frustration and anger reflect powerlessness. It is also striking, though, how much of the bad life they miss, for there are others that flow from and feed them: loss, anguish, grief, humiliation, shame, and persistent anxiety, worry and mental distress. Box 2.2 features selections from poor people’s definitions and criteria of illbeing.

### *The Multidimensionality of Illbeing*

As with wellbeing, participants describe illbeing as multidimensional. The most frequently mentioned dimensions of illbeing correspond closely to dimensions of wellbeing. The bad life is marked by many bad conditions, experiences and feelings. Box 2.3 illustrates the range of expressions that poor men and women from Ethiopia used to describe the bad life.

#### *Material Lack and Want*

**Food.** The most frequently mentioned want or lack is food. In every country poor families report that they miss meals. They often only eat once a day and sometimes have nothing for days on end. A saying in Ethiopia is, “If one eats breakfast, there is no supper.” Hunger is highly seasonal in rural areas. In urban Russia it peaks towards the end of the month, before

### Box 2.2 Expressions of Illbeing

The words and expressions used for the bad life are naturally different in different language groups, countries and continents. A selection gives a sense of the range.

Illbeing and wellbeing have close equivalents in Spanish-speaking Latin America—*malestar* and *bienestar*. *Malestar* is a common word in Spanish, meaning a sense of unease or discomfort, which can be physical, social or psychological. It is not a synonym for poverty (*pobreza*). In urban Argentina, the words *situación crítica* (critical condition), *vida complicada* (a complicated life), and *malaria* (situation where everything has gone wrong, total scarcity) are also used.

In Bolivia, *tristeza* (sadness), the opposite of *felicidad* (happiness), is used for illbeing, based on pictures of a sad face and a happy face, to which participants were invited to react.

In Malawi, *ukavu* means a state of constant deprivation. It is explained that households described in this group lack peace of mind because they are always worried about how to make ends meet. In most *ukavu* households, couples quarrel and fight a lot because they desire good lifestyles (*umoyo uwemŵi*), but they lack the means. “It is not surprising that most men from these households are drunkards because they drink to forget home problems.”

Women from Mbwadzulu village in Malawi say that they consider it illbeing when “people sit on the floor...people going to their gardens without taking any food...they have no latrines; they cook under the sun [have no kitchen], have no pit latrines, no change house [bathing place outside the house, constructed from grass] and no plate drying rack.”

In Buroa, Somaliland, extreme illbeing is defined as the experience of war and famine.

In India, the word *dukhi* (and in Bangladesh *asukhi*), the opposite of *sukhi*, is close to illbeing, unhappiness, a bad condition of life in terms of experience, whether material, social or psychological.

In Chittagong, Bangladesh, illbeing is *asukhi* (unhappy) or *kharap abস্থা* (bad condition), the opposite of *bhalo abস্থা* (good condition).

In Bulgaria, one aspect of illbeing is a pervasive sense of loss, of moving backward in time to an earlier century—from cultivation by tractors to having to cultivate by hand, from buying soap and bread to having to make and bake your own. This is described as going wild (*podivavane*), being obliged to work in a manner considered humiliating, uncivilized and inefficient.

pay when there can be days with an absolute lack of food. In many rural areas the poorest people rely on wild foods. Provision of food for children is a constant worry for parents, who themselves stint and starve. A mother in Nuevas Brisas del Mar, Ecuador says, “In the last two years our children leave for the school without having coffee. Sometimes I have some money but if I fix them some breakfast there is not enough for lunch.” Urban starvation is less dramatic or obvious than that in rural areas, but poor people in Jamaica say it is more prevalent. In urban areas in countries that have

### Box 2.3 The Bad Life in Ethiopia

The following are literal translations of phrases used by poor men and women in Ethiopia to express their state of illbeing.

*“We are left tied like straw”*

*“Our life is empty; we are empty-handed”*

*“Living by scratching like a chicken”*

*“What is life when there is no friend or food”*

*“Life has made us ill”*

*“We are skinny”*

*“We are deprived and pale”*

*“We are above the dead and below the living”*

*“Hunger is a hyena”*

*“The poor is falling, the rich is growing”*

*“A life that cannot go beyond food”*

*“We simply watch those who eat”*

*“Difficulties have made us crazy”*

*“We sold everything we had and have become shelter-seekers”*

*“It is [like] sitting and dying alive”*

*“My relatives despise me and I cannot find them”*

*“Life is like sweeping ash”*

*“From hand to mouth”*

*“A life that is like being flogged”*

*“A life that makes you look older than your age”*

*“Just a sip and no more drop is left”*

*“If one is full, the other will not be full”*

*“Always calf, never to be bull”*

*“We have become empty like a hive”*

undergone severe restructuring crises, study teams were shocked to learn of a quiet, hidden urban starvation. Some who starve are too proud and decent to beg or steal. In Ivanovo, Russia, “a woman told us that sometimes she did not have food for several days and was only drinking hot water and lying in bed so as not to spend energy.” In Ethiopia a 30-year-old married man in Kebele 10 says, “We eat when we have, and we go to bed hungry when we don’t.”

***Livelihood, Assets and Money.*** Uncertainty of livelihood sources and employment is virtually universal. Returns to work are low. Casual labor is both uncertain and badly paid. Insecurity from lack of assets and money is often mentioned, but more often implied. Money is needed for access to many services, especially health, education and transport; for bribes and fines; for daily necessities and often subsistence; for social occasions; and for clothing. Poor, ragged, secondhand and worn clothing is repeatedly given as a mark of being badly off. High-interest debt is common. Many needs and wants trace back to the lack of money.

***Housing and Shelter.*** Virtually everywhere, shelter and housing are a source of discomfort and distress. Shacks, huts, houses or tenements are small. Many people crowd into small spaces. Possessions are insecure. Huts and shanties leak and flood, fall down, blow down, burn down or are knocked down. People have to stand when the ground gets wet. Dirt, filth and refuse are always there. Urban sanitation is often nonexistent or disgustingly bad. Sewers—where they exist—sometimes overflow and flood into huts, and health suffers as a result.

### ***Physical Illbeing***

***Hunger, Pain and Discomfort.*** The physical illbeing of hunger and sickness, and the pain, stress and suffering they bring, are a common theme. Women in a group in Nigeria do not have sufficient breast milk to feed their babies. In Bedsa, Egypt an older man says, “Lack of work worries me. My children are hungry and I tell them the rice is cooking, until they fall asleep from hunger.” In Ethiopia there is “burning hunger” and “fire of hunger.” Poor people are more often sick and injured, and are often sick for longer, and treated, if at all, later than the nonpoor. The reasons are many. Sickness itself is a frequent cause of suffering and impoverishment, leading to physical weakness, dependence and disability. Finally, poor people live in discomfort, in unhygienic, dangerous, dirty, badly serviced, and often polluted environments where they are vulnerable to many physical shocks, stresses and afflictions.

***Exhaustion and Poverty of Time.*** The sheer exhaustion and lack of energy many poor people experience is easily overlooked. For many, their body is their main or only asset. It is uninsured. Shortage of food and sickness not only causes pain, but also weakens and devalues the asset. Those short of food are badly stressed by hard work. There are “lazy” poor people, but inactivity is often conservation of energy. Poor people are often described as tired, exhausted and worn out.

The increasing burdens of their expanded roles are driving many women deeper and deeper into physical exhaustion. These burdens also expose them to “time poverty,” meaning that they have little or no time to rest, reflect, enjoy social life, take part in community activities, or spend time in spiritual activities. Whereas men are often increasingly out of work, women are under more pressure.

### ***Bad Social Relations: Exclusion, Rejection, Isolation and Loneliness***

Exclusion takes many forms. Ignorance of or lack of fluency in a dominant majority language can be excluding. Minority groups around the world share the linguistic exclusion of women in Guadalupe, Bolivia who do not participate in public community activities because they feel embarrassed to speak their native language, Quechua. Denial of education can be excluding. The parents of Um Mohamed, a girl in El Gawaber, Egypt, forced her to leave school: "They sentenced me to death when they did that." In Brazil there is exclusion when parents try to enroll their children in public schools and are unable to find places for them.

Rejection is associated with poverty in many ways. The extremely poor are often rejected, even by those who are also poor. Two other forms of rejection are the abandonment of children and of old people. The feelings of rejection, isolation and loneliness are most often cruelly inflicted on those who suffer most in other ways.

Loneliness and lack of social support are no longer an uncommon experience of poor people generally, particularly the elderly. Those with little social support are described as being "poor in people." In rural Bulgaria, an old woman says, "Young people have nothing to do here. You can't imagine how I feel, as lonely as the dawn, but I was the first to prompt them to move to the city. I would have felt even worse watching them waste their lives here." Old men in Mbamoi, Nigeria say, "We poor men have no friends. Our friend is the ground." This isolation is most acute for those who are very poor indeed and for those who are too weak to be able or to wish to assert themselves, especially the old. In Nuevas Brisas del Mar in urban Ecuador, where the team shared a meal with participants, an old man who had been present for three days and had hardly taken part at all was identified as "the voice of those without voice, the voice of hunger."

Self-exclusion occurs when inclusion is seen as dangerous or bad, and is a cost of a violent or abusive environment. Says a woman in Dock Sud, Argentina, "Now I am with my grandson. He is seven and the teachers in kindergarten tell me I have to let him be with other boys, but what for? To be a drug addict when he grows up? Here there are kids that are eight years old who do drugs, and after that they start to rob. No, I'd rather see him alone, isolated, like they say in school, but I'd rather have him at home with me; I take care of him."

Self-exclusion also occurs for reasons of shame. A poor person may not be invited to a wedding. If invited, a poor person may decide not to go because of being unable to appear and behave appropriately. Many of the self-excluded are the "invisible poor," especially the "new poor" who will not confess that they are poor. In a city in Bulgaria a poor man comments, "There was a man in our apartment building. A silent, shy fellow, always very neatly dressed. They found him dead in his apartment. The doctor said that he had become so feeble that he died of a common cold; they found just a piece

of stale bread in his flat. It's a pity we never spoke with him. He had dignity, that fellow."

### ***Insecurity, Vulnerability, Worry and Fear***

*There's great insecurity now. You can't make any plans. For all I know, tomorrow I might be told that we'll be laid off for a couple of months or that the factory is to shut down. We work three days a week even now, and you're in for a surprise every day.*

—Participant, discussion group of men and women,  
Kalofer, Bulgaria

*I am going to be poor and even hungry if I cannot labor in the coming years due to old age.*

—A resident, Ha Tinh, Vietnam

Insecurity and vulnerability are deeply embedded in the bad life. Insecurity comes through exposure to mishaps, stresses, and risks—to dangers in the physical environment, in society, in the economy, and in the administration and legal systems. Vulnerability comes because poor people are defenseless against damaging loss. Together these generate worry and fear: of natural disaster, of violence and theft, of loss of livelihood, of dispossession from land or shelter, of persecution by the police and powers that be, of debt, of sickness, of social ostracism, of the suffering and death of loved ones, of hunger and of destitution in old age.

Lack of confidence is frequently mentioned as a result of poverty. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the inability to find a job makes people feel worthless to themselves and their families.

### ***Powerlessness, Helplessness, Frustration and Anger***

Again and again, powerlessness seems to be at the core of the bad life. In Russia it is articulated as a complete sense of political impotence. More generally, powerlessness is described as the inability to control what happens, the inability to plan for the future, and the imperative of focusing on the present. In Zawyet Sultan, Egypt the condition known as *el-ghalban* and *ma'doom el hal*, words used for the poorest, mean helplessness and having no control over sources of one's living and therefore no control over one's destiny.

Time horizons are then short. Young people in Kalofer, Bulgaria say, "Each day is unpredictable—you can't make any plans, don't know what you're in for tomorrow." The sense of impotence is compounded when the future is seen as getting worse. Urban youth in Esmeraldas, Ecuador are reported as saying, "You can't think of the future because you can only see how to survive in the present." The report continues to say that everybody



in the group agrees that in the future there is only going to be more poverty. At this stage the facilitators had to stop the meeting because the youth got fed up.

Poor people want to be able to take the long view, but they cannot. Having to live “hand to mouth” is not a choice, but an immensely frustrating necessity. The experience is daily anxiety, and having to eat the moment they receive food or money.

Worry about the future, especially the future of children, coexists with concerns for the immediate present. According to the report of an interview with a woman in Pedda Kothapalli, India, “She is worried about the future of her children and the struggles they have to face once they grow up. Her immediate concern is to which house she should go for a loan of some food grains for their food that day.”

## **Part III. Psychological Experience of Wellbeing and Illbeing**

**T**he experience of wellbeing and illbeing is inextricably psychological. The dimensions of good and bad quality of life contribute to and are part of good and bad states of mind and being.

### ***The Experience of Wellbeing: Peace of Mind, Happiness and Harmony***

*Being well means not to worry about your children, to know that they have settled down; to have a house and livestock and not to wake up at night when the dog starts barking; to know that you can sell your output; to sit and chat with friends and neighbors. That's what a man wants.*

—A poor man, Bulgaria

**I**nterwoven with other dimensions of wellbeing—material, bodily, social, insecurity, and freedom to choose and act—is psychological wellbeing. This is variously expressed as happiness, harmony, peace, freedom from anxiety, and peace of mind. From Novi Gorodok, Russia comes, “Wellbeing is a life free from daily worries about lack of money”; from Gowainghat, Bangladesh, “to have a life free from anxiety”; from Nova California, Brazil, that quality of life is “not having to go through so many rough spots” and “when there is cohesion, no quarrels, no hard feelings, happiness, in peace with life”; from Nigeria, “wellbeing is found in those that have peace of mind, living peacefully. It is to be filled with joy and

happiness. It is found in peace and harmony in the mind and in the community.”

For many, too, a spiritual life and religious observance are woven in with other aspects of wellbeing. Poverty itself could get in the way. An old woman in Bower Bank, Jamaica says, “I got up this morning and all I want to do is read my Bible, but I share a room with my son and my grandchildren and all they do is make noise, I can’t even get a little peace and quiet.” In Padamukti, Indonesia, being able to make the pilgrimage to Mecca means much, as does having *sholeh* (dutiful and respectful) children who will look after their parents in old age and pray for them after they are dead. In Chittagong, Bangladesh, part of wellbeing is “always [being] able to perform religious activities properly.” For older women in Cassava Piece, Jamaica, their church gives them a spiritual uplift and physical support. The importance to poor people of their sacred place—holy tree, stone, lake, ground, church, mosque, temple or pagoda—is repeatedly evident from their comparisons of institutions in which these frequently ranked high, if not highest.

### ***The Experience of Illbeing: Humiliation, Shame, Anguish and Grief***

Experiences of illbeing can be seen to combine and to compound each other in bad states of mind and being. Some connections stand out strongly. It is striking how often participants raise aspects of mental distress when describing the effects of poverty. Women in Tabe Ere, Ghana, for example, connect poverty, anxiety, begging, shame, isolation and frustration. They explain that poverty creates “too much pressure on individuals and often renders a person mad with worry and anxiety.” Begging is seen as a degrading activity, which brings about insult and disgrace to the family. This results in shyness within the community that in turn leads to frustration in life. Participants in different countries speak of mental stress and breakdown, depression, madness and suicide, together the antithesis of the wellbeing of peace of mind.

### ***Humiliation, Shame and Stigma***

The stigma of poverty is a recurring theme. As a consequence, poor people often try to conceal their poverty to avoid humiliation and shame.

One deeply felt deprivation is not being able to do what is customary in the society. Frequently cited, for example, is not being able to entertain visitors or enjoy social life. In Malawi, there is shame from not having toilets for visitors, or money to buy a coffin for burying a relative. In Beisheke in the Kyrgyz Republic, an elderly village man says, “In the Soviet times we had no idea what poverty was about, we were equally wealthy, and now we feel humiliated because we cannot afford to receive guests in our houses, or

visit friends and relatives. It was for that reason that we could not invite you [the study team] to our house when we first met.”

Poor people sometimes feel shame and anger in accepting or having to accept alms or special treatment. In India this does not appear to apply to programs that give poor people well-recognized rights, like the government ration shops. Similarly in Viyalagoda, Sri Lanka, those who are poorer say it is a great help that their children are getting school books and uniforms: earlier their uniforms had been yellowish in color after several washings and they were ashamed. Now their children can sit together with others without any shame. By giving books and uniforms instead of money, the government has done a great thing.

By contrast, in Novy Gorodok, Russia even the most needy are humiliated to take poor quality goods provided for them by the welfare office. One participant commented, “[The food] is spoiled, and at prices higher than in the shops. I took a sack of flour once, and there were worms.” Sexual abuse, with its physical violence as well as humiliation, is a greater threat for those in poverty, especially for women, given the places in which they live. In Dock Sud, Argentina most rapes are not reported because of shame. The same applies with sexual abuse, harassment and exploitation. In Bulgaria, a participant in a discussion group of women says, “Only young girls aged under 20 or 22 can find a job. If they are 25 or older, nobody wants them. I can do the job of a waitress perfectly well, but the boss wanted somebody who’d do another job for him just as well.”

Poor people often experience humiliation in their encounters with officials and those delivering services. In Chittagong, Bangladesh discussion groups report that “*thana* [administrative unit between the village and district level] officials are corrupt, unaccountable ‘to anyone’ for their dishonest acts and only show ‘special respect’ to the rich.” Color prejudice is mentioned in Brazil and Ecuador.

Appearances and clothes, as well as being an important part of physical wellbeing, are mentioned as important for self-respect and, conversely, they can be a source of shame. In Etropole, Bulgaria “people who cannot afford warm clothes for the winter go to work. Then they come back and stay at home under a pile of blankets, shivering with cold. They don’t go out. They are ashamed to meet other people. If they run into a friend and are invited for a drink they must refuse. So they would rather not go out at all.” In the Kyrgyz Republic a middle-aged woman says, “My daughter came from school crying. Somebody at school called her a beggar, because she was wearing the jacket that we received as humanitarian aid. She refused to go to school.”

### ***Anguish, Loss and Grief***

Anguish, loss and grief are implicit in so many life histories of poor people, and these speak through the pages of the case studies. Sickness and death are

very frequent. Anguish, when loved ones are sick and treatment is known but cannot be afforded, is found in all societies, and not only among poor people. For many participants, though, this experience is common, acute and agonizing, and for many it comes more and more often. Especially in Africa, the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS and malaria has combined with shrinking access to affordable treatment.

Psychological illbeing is marked where there has been a sharp decline in the levels of living and wellbeing, and where people from former middle classes have become impoverished. This is most notable among the former middle classes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, the Kyrgyz Republic, Russia and Uzbekistan who are now the “new poor.” The Bosnia and Herzegovina National Report speaks of “psychological ill health” in all the communities. In one, the psychological effects of economic misery are listed as “one’s psychological health, distancing oneself or withdrawing from others, tensions between people, irritability, insecurity, apathy, nervousness, monotony, and dissatisfaction.”

The burden of war and civil disturbance for those caught up in them is expressed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, in Bijeljina, especially by anguished women whose husbands and sons were fighting. The trauma of refugees and others who have suffered from violence is an extreme form of mental distress. Instant impoverishment often combines with fear and the anguish of loss, especially when family members are at risk or have been killed. Just how terrible the effects can be is expressed by one older woman in Bijeljina: “I had to send a husband and two sons to the front lines and wait for them to return—or not. I did not think about eating, sleeping, dressing or anything. I would lie down and awake in tears. What have we lived to experience?” For her, spiritual poverty is more devastating than her material poverty: “You can never recover from spiritual impoverishment.”

In the former Soviet region, participants express a profound sense of loss regarding their earlier level of living, when they had guaranteed jobs, free education and health care, social safety nets and recreation. Nostalgia is too weak a word to describe what they feel. At the same time, as with other loss and bereavement, they know it has gone forever. “Those who don’t feel sorry about the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart, but those who think that it may be restored have no brain,” says an elderly man in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Bald figures of life expectancy do not show what they mean in human terms. The horrors, separations and losses in war and civil disorder have become the commonplaces of journalism and television. The avoidable loss of loved ones in the quiet crisis of poverty is on a much larger scale, but unseen. The experience is worse when the bereaved are denied the last rites, grieving and consolation, which are customary and due in their society, because of the simple fact of their own poverty.

**Table 2.1 Dislikes and Fears of Children in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam**

Girls	Boys
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Having to drop out of school, special classes closing down</li> <li>▶ My forthcoming school exams</li> <li>▶ Fighting in the community</li> <li>▶ Homeless people being cold during storms</li> <li>▶ Drug addiction in the neighborhood</li> <li>▶ Gambling</li> <li>▶ Loan sharks</li> <li>▶ Leaking roofs in the neighborhood</li> <li>▶ Flooding of the neighborhood and houses</li> <li>▶ A dirty and polluted neighborhood</li> <li>▶ That our house might collapse</li> <li>▶ Friends being too poor to afford new clothes</li> <li>▶ Neighborhood children dropping out of school and working hard</li> <li>▶ Drunken men beating up their wives and children</li> <li>▶ Quarreling between my mother and father</li> <li>▶ That my mother works too hard</li> <li>▶ That my family might break up</li> <li>▶ Having no money to buy rice</li> <li>▶ Having no money to pay for rent or medical treatment</li> <li>▶ Having nobody to look after me if my parents are sick</li> <li>▶ Being robbed, break-ins and theft</li> <li>▶ Having our house and neighborhood cleared away</li> <li>▶ The rich looking down on the poor people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Sickness of teacher, causing class to close down</li> <li>▶ Failing to move up a grade; having to repeat a class</li> <li>▶ Sniffing heroin, drug addiction, young drug addicts stealing and robbing</li> <li>▶ Gambling</li> <li>▶ Fighting and quarreling in the community</li> <li>▶ Robbery, especially of dogs</li> <li>▶ Street accidents happening to children</li> <li>▶ Neighborhood fires</li> <li>▶ A dirty and polluted neighborhood</li> <li>▶ Prostitution among young people in the community</li> <li>▶ Spread of AIDS</li> <li>▶ Sickness of my family members or mother</li> <li>▶ Fights and conflict between my mother and father</li> <li>▶ Divorce of my parents; family splitting up</li> <li>▶ My mother running off with another man</li> <li>▶ Sale of our house to repay a debt</li> <li>▶ Having our house demolished and cleared away</li> <li>▶ Having a roof that leaks</li> <li>▶ Having no house of our own; having to share a room with other families</li> <li>▶ Having no money</li> <li>▶ Being unable to get a job</li> <li>▶ Rich people scolding the poor people they hire</li> <li>▶ Richer families not allowing us to watch their TV</li> <li>▶ Rich people living in luxury, not helping poor people</li> <li>▶ Richer people looking down at us</li> </ul>

## *The Illbeing of Children*

Parents are again and again preoccupied with securing a good life for their children. So the children's own experience and view of the bad life have a double importance: for themselves as children and for adults as their parents and guardians.

In Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnamese children summarize their feelings about the consequences of being poor as deprivation and resentment (see table 2.1). They resent that they cannot go to school or to the school they want, and that their parents have neither the time nor the money to take them on outings. Boys and girls over 10 resent being scolded because of indebtedness and the failure to repay loans. The boys say that everyone in the family is working, but there is still not enough to eat; that they have to accept beatings from others and can do nothing in return; and that they are always blamed when something is stolen. Boys under 10 cannot have a birthday party like other children. Girls under 10 are teased by richer children because they are poor. And girls over 10 resent having to agree with richer people and act as their inferiors, even if what they [the rich people] say is wrong.

The vivid directness of what girls and boys see and experience as the bad life is revealing. The Ho Chi Minh City report concludes that "what the young emphasize more than any other group...is the effect of poverty on the family itself. They see poor families as tense, conflictual and subject to breakdown." It is perhaps no surprise that family harmony matters much to children, but worthy of note that they see a link between poverty and bad relations in the family. Also, both girls and boys mention the behavior of the rich, and being looked on badly and being treated badly by them—something that adults, perhaps through prudence, mention only occasionally.

For their part, the parents' pain when they cannot provide for and look after their children is shown to be a big part of adult illbeing.

In Muynak, Uzbekistan in the extreme of distress, there is an ultimate way out: "There are families who do not eat and drink in three days. People die of hunger. For example, Ayagan was a good guy. He could not provide his family with food, his children cried and then he shot himself."

## *Reflections*

**I**n understanding what a good experience of life is, there is perhaps no end, no final answer. But if development is to enhance the wellbeing of poor people in their own terms, there is much to reflect on in what they say.

The discussions in Ethiopia generated the list of dire statements in box 2.3. Yet one of the team leaders in Ethiopia, on approaching a very poor, remote community, heard singing and dancing. This can jolt us into recognizing that there are many good things, each in its own culture, which contribute to wellbeing: not only singing, dancing and music, but also festivals, ceremonies and celebrations; good things in their seasons; love,

kindness and sacrifice; and religious and spiritual practices and experiences. But to many of those who are most deprived, these fulfillments are diminished or denied.

The overarching questions are then whether, where and why human well-being is being enhanced or eroded; whether for many millions the singing and dancing are dying or renewing; whether the conditions for material, bodily, social, mental and spiritual wellbeing are improving or getting worse; and above all how to enable poor people to gain for themselves more of the good life to which they aspire.

