

PROMOTING WELLBEING IN A WORLD OF DEEP CHANGE



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Wellbeing Architects is an initiative birthed by feminist collaborators Shamillah Wilson and Ella Scheepers as a vehicle to re-imagine thriving organisational cultures.

Wellbeing Architects is committed to support social justice organisations and movements to evaluate their internal organisational culture/social field structure and help them uphold the values which they tell the outside world that they stand for. Wellbeing Architects co-creates facilitated and accompanied learning processes that build thriving and resilient organisational cultures in intentional and loving ways across the globe as part of the broader continuum of social justice across the globe.



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The world as we know it has shifted on its axis. Our ongoing global predicament of confusion, anxiety, grief, anger, and despair, invokes feelings of helplessness, which, in turn, relates to musings that the problems of our times are insurmountable. What is perhaps most significant about our current reality is an enforced 'slowing down' or pause, providing an opportunity to deeply interrogate existing paradigms, assess what we need to let go of, and to make courageous choices. In turn, this enables us to move forward and reclaim values that support justice, equity, and compassion.

This primer provides a framing for organisational wellbeing to support such a paradigmatic shift.

WHY USE WELLBEING TO FRAME THE KIND OF WORLD WE WANT?

Bluntly put, existing paradigms have exacerbated human insecurity, with enormous costs to both the environment and social connectedness. Pursuing economic prosperity that privileges only a few, has left a trail of destruction, including social inequality and the depletion of natural resources.¹ Another byproduct of our current reality is the way in which the global majority is denied access to important resources, such as healthcare, education, and jobs, resulting in deepened poverty and inequality.



The question we are left with is whether it is possible to reclaim an ideological approach (and strategies) that re-affirms dignity and fairness, as well as social, economic, and environmental sustainability. If the purpose of existing paradigms is to ensure the organisation of resources to improve the quality of lives of people, then a wellbeing framework seems best placed to support such an endeavor.²

Wellbeing is ultimately multi-dimensional with human needs, freedoms (or autonomy), and quality of life as its core dimensions.³

Most of the literature on wellbeing speak of mental and physical health, and, in some instances, they also refer to a happiness index. However, wellbeing is much more than just health and happiness; it is comprehensive and political. Wellbeing includes structural elements of how people cope, thrive, and build resilience.⁴ It is complex, contextual, spans across economic, social, health, and environmental spheres, and is intertwined with multiple domains of life.

Similarly, discourses of social justice, human rights, and feminism often use terms such as development, empowerment, equality, dignity, and justice. These terms all hold deep meaning within contexts of inequality and impact on our ways of thinking, seeing, and doing. However, all the afore-mentioned discourses can also be seen as a means to an end; the end being wellbeing. Therefore, amongst academics, policy makers, and practitioners, there is an increasing acknowledgement that it is time to put 'wellbeing' at the front and centre of these discourses. It is about unpacking the political nature of wellbeing as a means to address the unequal impacts caused by the challenges of our time.

WELLNESS, WELFARE AND WELLBEING

Wellness refers to personal health with no reference to broader social and natural expressions of life, which is most often related to the commercialization of fitness and feel good practices. Welfare is more technical and used by economists to integrate a consideration of social benefits into their approaches. Welfare, however, is founded on mainstream economic thinking, which sees individual consumption as the sources of prosperity. In contrast, a wellbeing approach is profoundly political because it draws on concepts of agency, purpose, empowerment, and deep relational connections (Fioramonti, 2017).

WHY DO WE NEED TO RECLAIM THE POLITICS OF WELLBEING?

Currently, definitions of wellbeing are highly contentious and embedded in power and privilege. Some examples of this include:

- » **Commercialisation of wellbeing products and services.** The most common misappropriation of the term wellbeing links it to spending money on products and services.⁵ This often results in increased consumerism, as well as feelings of meaninglessness and self-interest. Moreover feminist values such as solidarity, care, and compassion are represented merely as ways to experience feelings of comfort grounded in privilege and self-gratification.
- » **Normalising ideologies of wellbeing that privilege a few.** Media distortions also deliberately promote particular narratives of wellbeing and care that normalise forms of wellbeing that favor a privileged few. Authority figures, mental health professionals, and media agents often create an illusion that access to wellness and justice depend on personality traits, psychological health, or biological determinants. For example personal motivation, intelligence, or an individual ability to shape or control their environments.⁶ Wellbeing is also touted as exclusive to those with access to material abundance. As a result, those living in poverty are often depicted as too preoccupied with making ends meet to worry about their wellbeing.
- » **Limiting the scope of wellbeing.** There is an unspoken belief that many of the essential aspects of the human experience, such as loving relationships, care, community, a sense of meaning, the sacred, and creativity are somehow less important to pursue than other forms of wellbeing, such as financial freedom and physical health.



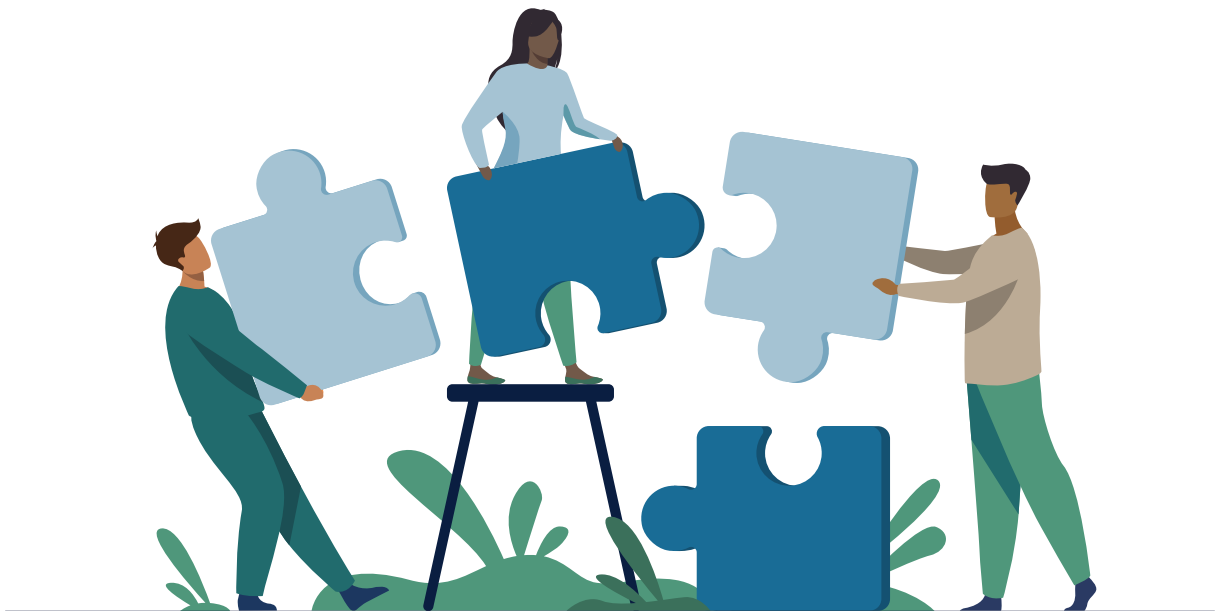


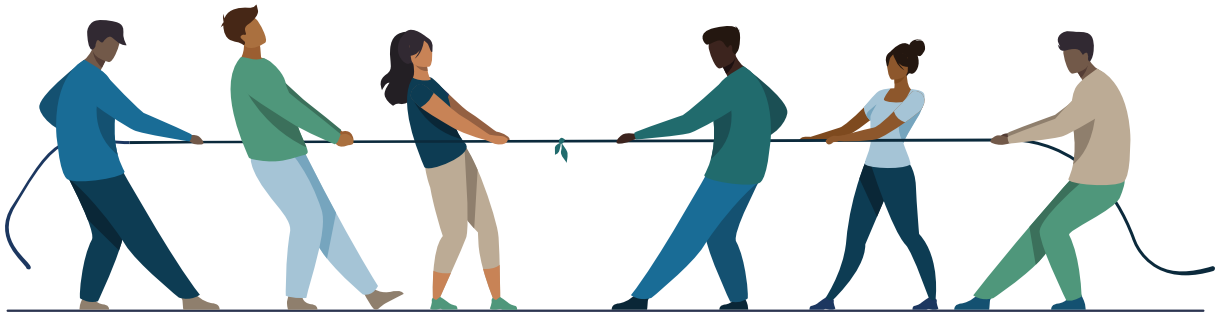
- » **Punting personal solutions to systemic issues.** Mental health professionals (such as therapists, counselors, and wellbeing coaches) often suggest personal solutions for systemic conditions.⁷ Whilst it is important not to dismiss the importance of personal solutions such as therapy and other modalities, there is also a need to think about how to ensure fair and equal access to resources and power. The overemphasis on individual choice and responsibility places the sole burden of attaining wellbeing on the individual, thus denying the multiple ways in which integrated systems of power impact on people's experience of, and ability to, achieve wellbeing. Denying these realities result in a use of power that privilege certain people while denying others access to important resources like land, healthcare, and jobs; thus, perpetuating inequality, injustice and poverty⁸, and a diminishment of their ultimate wellbeing. Increased focus on individual responsibility further creates a ripple effect creating a belief that it is up to the individual to manage their wellbeing, regardless of the greater systems of support (or non-support). It also diverts attention from the inability and sometimes unwillingness of institutions to create just and equal conditions that support and enable wellbeing.
- » **Depoliticisation of ill-being.** Focusing on wellbeing as an individual choice and responsibility often minimises very real negative experiences of poverty and inequality, as well as ignoring the unequal rights and power relationships behind these experiences. Without taking the entire spectrum of human experiences into account, wellbeing approaches may ignore or invisibilise the realities of thousands. Instead of collective action for universal healthcare or housing for all, depoliticised definitions of wellbeing further entrench inequality and relationships of power through government policy.

INDIVIDUALISM

Individualism is a western ideology which suggests that the subjective state of people can be separated from their relationships and the greater collective, rather than being formed by them. Each person is seen as independent and self-reliant, and the importance of individual choice and responsibility is stressed. However, assigning the responsibility of wellbeing to the individual neglects the impact of greater global forces over which the individual has little control, despite their inherent capabilities. This approach distracts our personal and collective attention away from the ways in which injustice and unequal distribution of power and resources are at the root of many societal problems, such as discrimination, inequality, inadequate health care, and poor transportation and education. Conversely, if human beings are unable to find collective ways of organizing and structuring their relationships it is unlikely that they will develop sustainable and just wellbeing approaches.⁹

All of the above, leads us to acknowledge that despite its best intentions, unless current definitions of wellbeing are interrogated and unequal uses of power and justice are addressed, wellbeing will continue to be a hit or miss affair that at its best maintains the status quo, rather than chipping away at systemic patterns of inequality.





AN INTERSECTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROMOTING WELLBEING

Covid-19 has forced us to acknowledge the value of freedom for ourselves and for those around us; our inherent human need to move, to be with those we love, and to live with dignity and security. In terms of wellbeing, it has brought to the forefront the realisation that we are interdependent, that one individual cannot succeed without the cooperation of others, and that this cooperation occurs at many different scales – local, regional, and international. On the one hand, it clearly reveals that all of humanity is in the same boat, and on the other it shows how some are able to more easily maintain their wellbeing within these circumstances because of access to resources (such as online platforms and medical care). The pandemic has also highlighted the danger of ignoring our interdependence and the importance of global cooperation. Since the virus can be defeated in one place only when it is defeated everywhere, it shows us the terrible folly of pretending that we can achieve security in isolation, within the borders of our nation, culture, class, or religion.

Beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, it will remain important for us to confront paradigms that sustain institutions, social hierarchies, ideologies, and governance principles that can easily be exploited by a privileged few to the detriment of broader human needs and purposes. It is in this context that we centre a paradigm of wellbeing for all, that is neither about pure individualism nor pure collectivism. Instead, it encourages the mobilisation of our efforts – individual and social – at the scale that our challenges demand. It seeks to empower each of us to step up and contribute to the fulfillment of our fundamental needs, many of which are social. A paradigm of equal wellbeing invites a freedom that creates a prosperous, secure, inclusive, and sustainable world.

The ultimate vision of social movements is the advancement of social justice, yet beyond social justice there exists wellbeing and a world where everyone thrives. As noted already, the attainment of wellbeing for all requires not simply one element, but a combination of components as illustrated in Figure 1. In other words, in our utopian visioning, centering wellbeing means we have transitioned from our stuckness of responding/reacting to what happens, to actively pursuing the future we want.

As such, we can consider an intersectional approach to wellbeing as explained below.

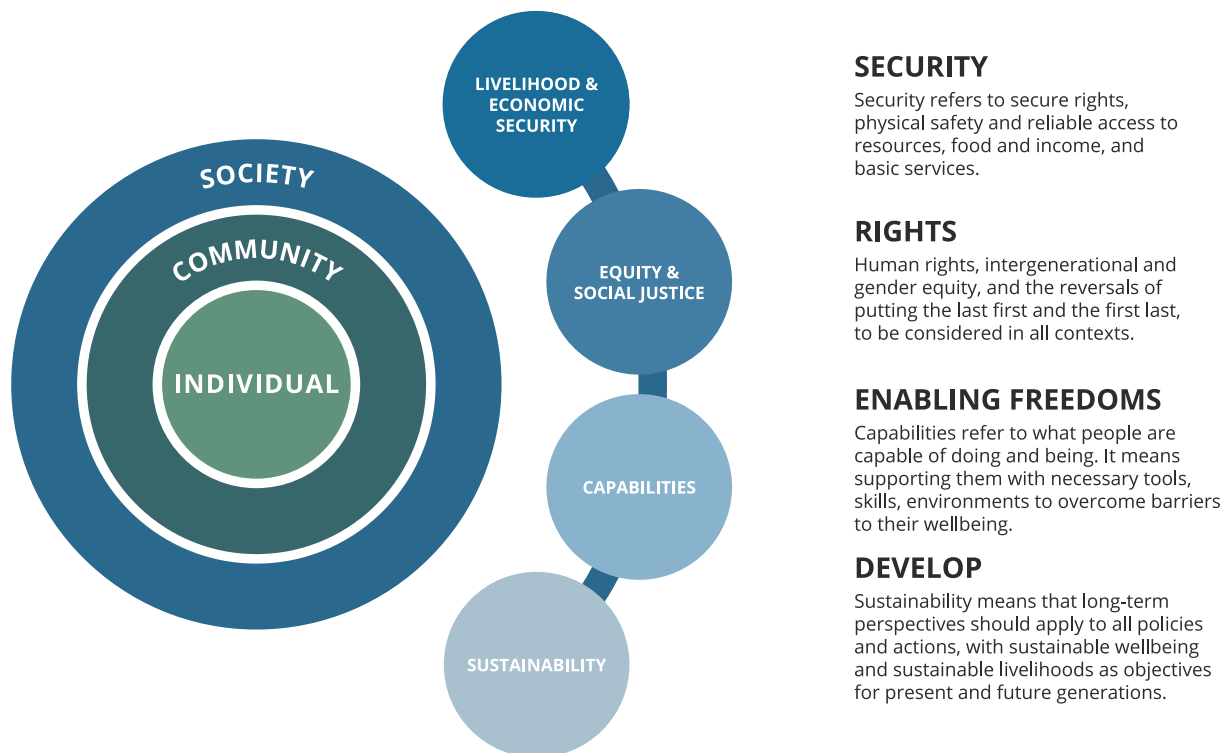


Figure 1: An Intersectional Approach to Wellbeing¹⁰

Fundamentally, we see wellbeing being grounded in the politics of care: this revolves around the use of power, transparency, attention to different members' needs, allowing room for constructive criticism, opening the space for mutual peer learning, reducing hierarchies, and using a bottom-up approach.

At the societal level, interventions would look at institutional arrangements and infrastructure that individuals and communities need to achieve their wellbeing aspirations. These could be provided by any of a range of actors (such as governments, institutions, the business community, media, civil society organisations, and local communities) who contribute and/or collaborate to achieve a climate that supports wellbeing. For example, policies as well as interventions that address economic, social, and environmental wellbeing.

At the community (relational) level, wellbeing is shaped by diverse social collectives, and these often also provide non-material resources for wellbeing, whether in the context of families, faith-based institutions, or community.¹¹ Hence, it is important to make contexts visible because many families, communities, and social networks invoke a strong sense of social identity and, thereby,

establish a sense of being well in the world. It is in this space that collectives, including social purpose organisations, would focus their efforts towards crafting the appropriate structures, norms, and cultures needed to counter destructive power dynamics within the broader societal space. Organisations are challenged to build inclusive work cultures that foster co-creation with principles such as reciprocal understanding, multiple standpoints, and mutual trust, accountability and integrity. At the community level, we are also encouraged to celebrate different forms and expressions of wellbeing, and the multiple or diverse ways that individuals or collectives may choose to pursue them. These contribute to a space where the support and nurturing of wellbeing is collective, and the organisation is in motion and iterative.

At the individual level, wellbeing covers the entire spectrum of human experience – social, psychological, and spiritual – not just the material. It therefore, requires a deep understanding of the different layers of individual and group experiences and how these relate to the personal, relational (social and cultural), and contextual (economic and political). Additionally, it requires an interrogation of the reasons why individuals (based on their own unique experience) aspire to, and desire, wellbeing.

Hence, to address the multiple levels of our lived experience, as well as our possibilities of engaging with our wellbeing as a shifting and changing process, the diagram above is unpacked as follows:

- » **Livelihood and economic security are basic to wellbeing.** Livelihood is related to our most basic needs. Security refers to secure rights, physical safety, and reliable access to resources, food and income, and basic services. It includes tangible and intangible assets needed to offset risk, ease shocks and meet contingencies. Sustainable livelihoods maintain or enhance resource productivity on a long-term basis, and equitable livelihoods maintain or enhance the livelihoods and wellbeing of others.
- » **Capabilities** are means to livelihood and wellbeing. Capabilities refer to what people are capable of doing and being. They are the means to livelihood and fulfilment; and their expansion through learning, practice, training, and education are the means to better living and the attainment of wellbeing.
- » **Equity and social justice** include human rights, intergenerational and gender equity, as well as the reversals needed to shift the equality gaps and should be considered in all contexts. The reversals are not absolutes but should rather aspire to create balance and leveling. Additionally, an intersectional lens to wellbeing can improve responses when it pays attention to multiple forms of oppression and structural violence.

An intersectional approach wellbeing considers the following:

- ✓ Oppression exists in various forms (e.g. sexism, racism) and across many levels (e.g. institutions, policies).
 - ✓ Different forms of oppression interact and shape an individual's sense of power, resilience, and wellbeing.
 - ✓ Advantages and disadvantages in the distribution of social resources (e.g. income) affect individuals' mental health and wellbeing.
 - ✓ The effects of trauma accumulate over time and how it interacts with other life experiences, impacting health and wellbeing.
- » **Sustainability:** conditions and change must be sustainable - economically, socially, institutionally, and environmentally. Sustainability means that long-term perspectives should apply to all policies and actions, with sustainable wellbeing and sustainable livelihoods as objectives for both present and future generations. When wellbeing is qualified by equity and sustainability it becomes responsible wellbeing, with the overarching end being to correct inequalities and balance the playing field in the longer term.

An intersectional approach to wellbeing is a reminder of how unequal the current experience of wellbeing is. The approach highlights that those with greater access to power and privilege have to become more conscious and accountable for their actions or inactions.

What does this mean for our practice?

CHALLENGING IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE

At an ideological level, it is important to expand the discourse of wellbeing away from 'objective measures' (such as indicators of income, life expectancy, and nutrition) and towards an exploration of power in the forms of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalisation (including racism and patriarchy) and how these, in turn, limit current responses to wellbeing.

In other words, we must reclaim the term wellbeing, shatter the existing myth that wellbeing rests solely on the shoulders of individuals and start practicing our political more holistic approach. Putting power at the centre of our thinking, unraveling its construction, and naming what is really happening will enable us to understand the diverse experiences of people (individually and collectively) and it will also allow us to understand people's capabilities, i.e. their constraints and opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value.¹² The capability approach affirms that justice and wellbeing should focus on ways to expand the freedoms of all people in order to develop their capabilities and agency. This freedom includes political freedom; economic facilities and resources, such as education, health, and property; and protective security.¹³ However, an approach that focuses only on facilities and resources is too linear and masculine. Feminist

approaches, on the other hand, expand on the capabilities approach so as to align efforts to change society with support for the full health and wellbeing of communities, especially through acknowledging the role that love, respect and joy play generating energy, humanity, and audacity.¹⁴

Reclaiming the term wellbeing means understanding the current experiences and constraints of people because these relate to their needs and aspirations. To do so we also need to encourage broader engagement with for example education and healthcare and all social nets needed for a thriving society. This would create enabling environments where people can flourish. When we adopt such a lens, we are able to see the diversity of experiences and possibilities for wellbeing, we are also able to reimagine how to build interconnectedness in new ways and across societies, organisational formations, and in a larger ecology of change.

BUILDING ORGANISATIONS THAT ARE WELL AND THRIVING

“Sustainability of organisations and the ability to thrive and survive rests equally on well-being of individuals and their relationships in bringing organisations to life and in implementing their work and visions.”¹⁵

For social justice organisations, the continuum of wellbeing starts with the individual (this is often referred to as self-care). Many individuals in social justice organisations are committed to work that is often traumatic, demanding, and challenging; however, this work often leads to burnout and ill-health as individual wellbeing is not seen as a central strategy for organisational sustainability.

Social justice organisations, in the current context, should take individual wellbeing seriously and interrogate their own roles in perpetuating systems of oppression within the workplace, especially through promoting behaviours that sustain toxicity, rather than promote wellbeing, inclusivity, and justice. Previously hidden, but ever-present structural violence, within our social and economic structures are reinforced by state power. It was already exposed and challenged in many places before COVID. The #MeToo movement and #BlackLivesMatter, pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, India, and Brazil, and #StandingRock have created a global reckoning, which reshapes our consciousness with regards to the many ways that inequality is historic, structural, and violent.¹⁶ Yet, how this violence plays out in social justice organisations is often not named.

For example, previously, the social contract between organisations and their employees focused on compensation and management. However, the expectations of the social contract have evolved, especially within social justice organisations whose purpose is to make a more just and equal society. To live this purpose internally, as well as externally, in addition to economic

compensation, organisations are expected to engage in efforts to create a nurturing and inclusive work environment where people from diverse backgrounds feel respected and recognised. Thus far, though many social organisations struggle creating nurturing environments while also focusing on the injustice calling to be addressed in the world.

To change this status quo requires a strong organisational commitment to wellbeing as a means to support individuals and teams and improve organisational outcomes, while still contributing to build healthier societies. In other words, to ‘walk the talk’ social justice organisations have to be willing to invest in building whole organisations where there is a shared sense of belonging and practice.¹⁷ To do so requires doing the tough work of interrogating organisational practices, and being courageous enough to work through the wounds that exist within our own organisational eco-systems. It means taking greater cognisance of both the formal and informal ways the organisation promotes wellbeing (physical, emotional, and social). At the practical level, leadership must step up and be willing to engage with difficult issues and to own up to their own complicity or inaction in addressing the emergent issues of our time. At the same time, it requires collective responsibility so that different members of the organisational ecosystem do not place all the burden on leadership and, instead, are willing to engage in their own complicity (whether intentional or known) with the status quo.

For real social change to occur organisations have to answer the collective call for greater accountability to wellbeing, fairness, and transparency within their own organisational cultures.

This work of building resilient, thriving, and well organisations (in words and deed), requires a commitment to putting in place institutional arrangements (policies and resources), and also a willingness to journey, to do the deep work to surface difficult dynamics and to collectively try out new strategies and learn from them. In turn, as microcosms of the greater field of social justice, organisations can bring their reflections and learning to strengthen the system as a whole.



SUPPORTING COLLECTIVE WELLBEING THROUGH OUR MOVEMENTS AND ORGANISATIONS

Why do we need to start with calling for more supportive collective wellbeing in our organisations and movements?

The quest for wellbeing is both a personal and collective (relational) endeavour. All aspects of wellbeing (individual, family, community and societal) are dynamically constructed through the interplay of actors, circumstances, locality, activities, and resources. Research illustrates that people who are active in their communities, who have meaningful, mutually supportive relationships with friends and family, and who maintains a sustainable connection to the ecosystem in which they live, enjoy higher levels of wellbeing.¹⁸ In addition, collective care is deeply connected to self-care as the individual's capacity to see themselves allows them to see the other and affirm their presence and role in the world. This requires creating spaces and opportunities for the relational aspect of wellbeing, as well as acknowledging issues of hierarchy and power. In other words, for social activism to become a lived reality we need to go beyond the romanticisation of collective wellbeing towards actively engaging with how misappropriation of power can lead to exploitation, misuse of privilege, or even abuse, within unequal relationships. Without collective and individual wellbeing within an organisation, social justice workers might not only lack the resilience needed for their work, they might also miss out on the richness that 'walking their talk' within the organisation can bring to those they wish to serve.

A key focus of collective and organisational wellbeing should be to identify how collectives can leverage their strengths together to facilitate self-organisation, wellness, and agency, which then contribute to a collective process of overcoming challenges and adversity and to, ultimately, thrive.¹⁹ While strengths vary between groups, here are a few structures that could support solidarity, and collective wellbeing:

- » Social networks and support groups
- » Community problem-solving
- » Education collectives
- » Co-housing
- » Skill-sharing and mutual aid
- » Worker-owned cooperatives
- » Rotating savings groups or credit unions
- » Freecycle groups



ENABLING INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING

Although it may seem intuitive that the best way for Individuals to take care of their wellbeing is through self-care, in reality (and particularly in social justice organisations) this is not always the case. It is, therefore, important for individuals to also take responsibility for their own wellbeing in order to bring grow wellbeing within their organisations and the people they serve. The following areas are ways in which individuals often fail to prioritise their own wellbeing:

- » Overwork, burnout, and high stress levels
- » Poor management of physical health (poor eating habits, inadequate physical exercise, lack of information on appropriate physical nutritions, poor management of minor ailments, and no real monitoring of health status in general)
- » Emotional wellbeing is placed on back burner (lack of emotional intelligence, difficulty in expressing emotions, and not processing of past and present traumas)

When supporting individuals in the attainment of their wellbeing aspirations, what is most needed in organisations and movements includes:

- » Listening, being present and honest, and learning from individuals' stories while also acknowledging their pain
- » Promoting interpersonal relationships, attachments, and connections between people within a community or society
- » Encouraging people to view themselves as part of a society, and a valued member of it; and
- » Modeling resilient behaviors, such as dealing with job stresses in healthy ways.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen wellbeing is both deeply personal and profoundly political. At this moment in time there exists the possibility to take advantage of a global slowing down to reclaim values that support justice, equity, and compassion and this primer provides a framing for wellbeing to support such a paradigmatic shift.

To do so we invite you to consider that wellbeing is much more than just health and happiness, it is comprehensive and political, it includes structural elements of how people cope, thrive, and build resilience. We also suggest that in order to reclaim the politics of wellbeing we need to name and resist the commercialisation of wellbeing and the normalising of ideologies of wellbeing that ignore the unequal rights and power relationships inherent in the languaging and responses to current realities.

Ultimately, for many of us, beyond the attainment of social justice, there is a wish for a world where everyone thrives. This means we have to step up and deepen the lens through which we view multiple realities and experiences, especially if we are truly serious about moving towards a thriving just world! In this primer, we offer an intersectional approach to wellbeing as a way to bring together wellbeing at the societal, community and individual levels. We propose that this framework of wellbeing is applicable to ideologies and discourses around wellbeing (wellness in most cases), wellbeing in organisations, and wellbeing at the individual level. This may contribute to different ways of being and doing, that at the end of the day support our aspirations of social justice at all levels.



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