

# SEN, SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND POVERTY IN NAMIBIA

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse and describe the perceptions of poverty and subjective well-being as described by the “poor” in Namibia, using Amartya Sen’s multidimensional theoretical framework of Poverty (Capability approach). The paper utilises qualitative data and information obtained from the 13 Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) reports of the Namibian National Planning Commission (NPC). The PPAs followed a broad qualitative participatory methodology and were conducted in all 13 regions of Namibia. It offers a unique source of qualitative information on how well-being and poverty are perceived and experienced by the people themselves. The analysis focuses on matters such as the role of institutional quality, social trust in the community, religion, beliefs and people’s perceptions of poverty and well-being. Poverty is complex and multidimensional and not an economic issue only. Money and livelihoods were considered as a means to an end and not an end in itself. Well-being was rather seen as being able to foster and enlarge human capabilities, life choices and opportunities.

**Keywords:** Amartya Sen, capabilities, Namibia, poverty, subjective well-being

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## INTRODUCTION

A resident of Namatanga in Namibia's Kunene region said in 2006: *'If you are poor and are cleaning your nails with a stick and a piece of that stick sticks in your nail yet you do not have a knife to remove the stick with, that's poverty'* (NPC, 2007g, p. 42).

The link between poverty and subjective well-being has been a long-standing item on the research agenda. A large body of literature suggests a positive association between an individual's income and the person's subjective well-being (cf. Easterlin, 1974; Diener, 1984; Diener *et al.*, 1985; Diener *et al.*, 1993). Economic utility theory proposes that as individuals achieve higher levels of income and wealth, they have more purchasing power. This enlarges their scope of affordable goods, resulting in increased consumption and, in the end, higher levels of improved utility or well-being (Klasen, 1997, p. 89). Prevailing research has reached the conclusion that within each nation at a given point in time, wealthier people are more satisfied with their lives and that additional income increases satisfaction at a decreasing rate (Clark *et al.*, 2013). While the focus of the debate has shifted on the direction of the causality, there seems to be broad acknowledgement that the observed relations between economic status and subjective well-being are stronger within samples from poorer and less developed countries' samples (Howell and Howell, 2008).

The current understanding of poverty and well-being suggests a broader, multidimensional definition of both these concepts, which includes private consumption, assets, social consumption, access to services (e.g., health and education), political power and voice, relative income, religion, economic capability, security, empowerment and the level of trust in the government, institutions and society (Kingdon and Knight, 2004; Curran and De Renzio, 2006; CIFOR 2007; Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2012; Ebrahim *et al.*, 2013). Cross-cutting issues such as an understanding of psychological factors (Lever *et al.*, 2005), gender imbalances and the environmental aspects of development increasingly also form part of the current interpretation of poverty.

Today leading organisations and institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) apply broader definitions of poverty which include these issues (CIFOR, 2007; Ravallion *et al.*, 2013). As far back as 2002, the World Bank described poverty and well-being as follows: *'Poverty is much more than income alone. For the poor, the good life or wellbeing is multidimensional with both material and psychological dimensions. Wellbeing is peace of mind; it is good health; it is belonging to a community; it is safety; it is freedom of choice and action; it is a dependable livelihood and a steady source of income; it is food'* (World Bank, 2002).

To this end, all the United Nations member states, including Namibia, have signed and vowed to address the eight millennium development goals (MDGs) by the year 2015 (NPC, 2007a); *'eradication of extreme poverty and hunger'* is number

one on the list. The other MDGs focus on the development and improvement of the well-being of poor people through education, improved health, gender equality and environmental sustainability (NPC, 2007a).

If one only looks at statistics at a national level, such as that depicting per capita income, an underlying reality is masked of abject poverty and deprivation, which affects the majority of people in both rural and suburban settlements across many developing countries, including Namibia. Many governments and organisations devote their policies, money and time to improving the lives of poor people. However, Chambers<sup>1</sup> (1983, 1994) asserts that if we want to improve the poverty levels or well-being of the poor, we should listen to the perceptions of the poor, and how they view poverty and well-being, and what they believe makes them vulnerable, before formulating and implementing policies for the poor. In particular, 'well-being as people themselves see it differs from economists' crude indicators of per capita income' (Chambers, 1994, p. 91) (see also Schenck *et al.*, 2010; Swanepoel and De Beer, 2006). In addition, Rojas (2008, p. 1078) urges the exploration of what is referred to as 'experienced poverty' as opposed to income poverty, as this gives us a broader and richer description of poverty and well-being.

Limited data are currently available on subjective well-being in low-income countries (Kingdon and Knight, 2004; Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2012). As such, limited research has been conducted on matters such as the role of institutional quality, social trust in the community, religion, beliefs and people's perceptions. The role of perceptions in terms of people's experience of poverty is accepted as an important element in the study of their well-being. It questions the equivalence of traditional poverty indicators with well-being (Rojas, 2004). This demands alternative approaches in the discussion of subjective well-being and the link to poverty.

The aim of this article is to analyse and describe the perceptions of poverty and well-being as described by the 'poor' in Namibia, using Amartya Sen's multidimensional theoretical framework of poverty (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005; Sawyer, 2007; Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2012). By listening to the voices of the people of Namibia and their perceptions of poverty and well-being, the researchers were able to gain a better understanding of these complex concepts, which could serve as a preamble for any policy considerations.

The remainder of the article provides a brief discussion of the Namibian context, Sen's capability approach, the source of the data, as well as the methodology used, the results and tentative policy implications based on these results.

## UNDERSTANDING THE NAMIBIAN CONTEXT

Namibia had a population of 2 104 900 in 2011 and occupies 824 269 square kilometres (NSA, 2011). Population density is very low, at roughly two people per square kilometre. Although only one per cent of land is arable, 58 per cent of the population live in rural areas. They are directly dependent on the land for subsistence

and cash crop farming (NSA, 2011). Being rich in mineral deposits lifted Namibia into a middle-income country (MIC) category according to the World Bank classification system. Namibia's sustained track record of economic growth and macroeconomic stabilisation has, however, not translated into appreciable reductions in poverty, unemployment, inequality and vulnerability (World Bank, 2013).

The Namibian 2013 *Interim Millennium Development Goals Progress Report* calculates that 28.7 per cent of households are classified as poor,<sup>2</sup> while 15.3 per cent are classified as severely poor<sup>3</sup> (NPC, 2013). In the rural areas, poverty is calculated at 27 per cent, with the highest level of poverty calculated at 43 per cent in the Kavango region. The unemployment rate is on average 39 per cent, with rural areas worse off than urban areas. The main source of income for almost half (48 per cent) of Namibian households is a salary or wage; 23 per cent live from subsistence farming, while 11 per cent of households depend on old-age pensions. A further five per cent depend on a variety of state grants like child maintenance, disability grants and veteran subventions (NSA, 2011).

According to the NSA (2012a), the rural/urban divide is reflected in data on access to water and sanitation services. In 2010, 75 per cent of Namibian households had access to piped water as their fresh-water supply. The urban average was 99 per cent. In contrast, the rural average is 57 per cent. Whereas 80 per cent of urban households use electricity as a source of energy for lights, only 14 per cent of rural households do so. Rural households do not have easy access to healthcare facilities – over 12 per cent have to travel more than 40 kilometres to reach a hospital and 49 per cent of Namibians still use the 'bush toilet' (NSA, 2012a). The literacy rate of Namibians over 15 years of age is 89 per cent, while 16 per cent of the population over 15 years of age never attended school (NSA, 2011). This brief background provides the context for the findings of the study.

## SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sen's perception of well-being is used in this article, as it provides a holistic and multifaceted theoretical framework for conceptualising poverty and well-being (Neff, 2007; Burgess, 2009). Sen rejects exclusive preoccupations with economic indicators and rather explores the barriers that prevent the individual from engaging in the five basic freedoms illustrated in Figure 1.

Sen (1999) identifies five key kinds of freedom which contribute to the general capability of individuals to live the life they value (see also Robeyns, 2005; Neff, 2007; Sawyer, 2007). The five freedoms, which will be used to contextualise the Namibian people's perception of poverty, are broadly described as follows:

*Economic facilities* are the opportunities people have to utilise economic resources for the purpose of consumption, production or exchange;

*Social opportunities* refer to the measures society takes to ensure the provision of essential services (e.g., education and healthcare);

*Transparency guarantees* deal with social interactions and how individuals relate to one another;

*Protective security* refers to creating safety nets for people who, for various reasons, are vulnerable so as to prevent them from falling ‘from the frying pan into the fire’; and

*Political freedoms* refer to people’s the need to have a voice and to be heard.



**Figure 1:** Sen’s multidimensional capability approach (CA)

*Source: Authors’ compilation*

Sometimes economic, social and environmental changes can gravely affect people’s lives, and without institutional and social arrangements such as grants, unemployment benefits and social support systems, people may find themselves in dire straits (Sen, 1999; Clark, 2007; Neff, 2007; Sawyer, 2007). The basic (but very important) aim of the CA, according to Neff (2007), is not to equalise the income of people and to reduce monetary inequality, but to equalise opportunities and capabilities for every person. The CA argues that well-being will be promoted with the expansion of capabilities and freedoms (Sen, 1999; Clark, 2007; Neff, 2007; Sawyer, 2007; Burgess, 2009).

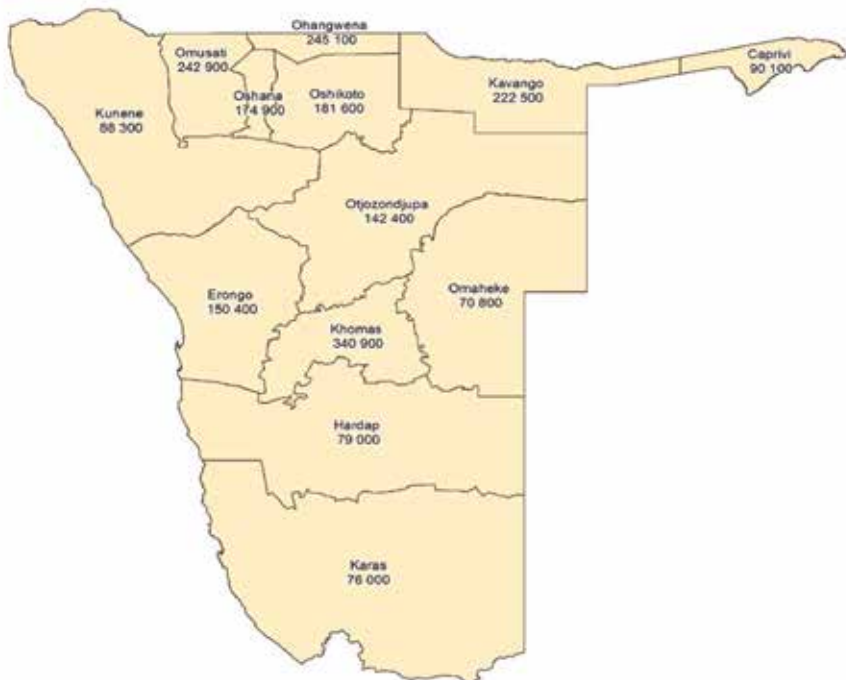
What is of importance for this particular study is the fact that participatory methods are regarded as important tools for contextualising and operationalising Sen’s CA and for ensuring that the people are in the ‘driving seats’ (Frediani, 2007,

p. 138; Sawyer, 2007). This informs the analysis of the data from the qualitative participatory research methods.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

The article utilises qualitative data and information obtained from the Namibian National Planning Commission (NPC), from whom the authors received permission to use their 13 Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) reports. These assessments were conducted in all 13 regions and offer a unique source of qualitative information on how well-being and poverty are perceived and experienced by the people themselves. The aim of compiling the PPAs in Namibia was to solicit the views of Namibians living in poverty, in order to contribute to information on and the implementation of effective poverty-reduction strategies and plans.

To gather the data, the PPAs followed a broad qualitative participatory methodology. The same research methodology and techniques were used by the research teams in all 13 regions in Namibia (NPC, 2005). Figure 2 shows the 13 administrative regions in Namibia from which the information was sourced.



**Figure 2:** Administrative map of Namibia

Source: NSA (2012b)

The research methodology included participatory techniques such as focus group discussions, village resource maps, transect walks, ‘problem trees’ and well-being ranking. These participatory research techniques, developed during the 1970s, are all well established, widely used and recognised (Chambers, 1994; Schenck *et al.*, 2010). The motive for developing these participatory research methodologies was to change the belief that professionals and researchers have superior knowledge which undermines local people’s knowledge and capabilities. Chambers (1994, p. 98) further explains that ‘for local people confidently and capably to express their own knowledge, to conduct their own analysis, and to assert their own priorities, outsiders have to step off their pedestals, sit down, “hand over the stick” and listen and learn’.

To enhance the reliability of the data, the researchers of the PPAs applied a variety of participatory research methods, and involved a cross-section of people within the communities (e.g., males, females, the elderly and youth). The reliability of the data was further enhanced by triangulating it with Sen’s CA (Sen, 1999; Sawyer, 2007) and other relevant literature that either supports or contrasts with the findings (Krefting, 1991; Creswell, 2009).

In each region, six villages (78 in total) were selected in two stages: the first-stage selection was based on statistics about the communities, e.g. the Human Poverty Index (HPI), infant mortality rates, life expectancy rates, unemployment, the existence of child-headed households, and access to services such as safe drinking water. The sampling process and measurement tools were left for the research team to decide on, as all the regions had different characteristics to be considered. In the Oshikoto region, for example (NPC, 2007l), the team collaborated with the chiefs to determine which vulnerable communities, like the San, should be included and which marginalised voices should be heard.

The second stage of the sampling process focused on the accessibility and availability of the villagers and villages. Where possible, the teams visited the same number of rural villages and urban informal settlements so that valid rural and urban aspects of poverty could be covered. A single research team was deployed in the region and fieldwork took six weeks to complete in each region. (See Amato and Zuo [1992] who assert the importance of researching the potential differences in subjective well-being and poverty in rural and urban areas.)

The data used in this article are the result of the focus groups and well-being ranking techniques. Furthermore, the information gathered during these interviews within the communities was documented and compiled in extensive and richly descriptive reports on each region (NPC, 2007a–m). The data from the 13 comprehensive PPA documents were analysed into themes and stories<sup>4</sup> using Tesch’s framework of systematic qualitative data analysis, before being linked to Sen’s capability framework (Creswell, 2009).

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Different communities perceive and understand poverty and well-being in different ways. The reasons for this are the locality, specific contexts and reference points or benchmarks used to define well-being.

Two proxies provide an indication of the communities' definitions of well-being and poverty, namely the characteristics of those they regard as better off or poor, and the things that are required to help one move out of poverty (NPC, 2004, p. 37). Synthesising the research information reveals differences in perceptions of what constitutes well-being and poverty between rural communities that mainly make a living from subsistence agriculture, and those in urban areas. Although the perceptions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there are clear differences (Amato and Zuo, 1992; Frediani, 2007; NPC, 2007a; Rojas, 2008).

As an introduction to the themes the participants gave the following definitions of what poverty is. These descriptions may give the reader a glimpse of the devastation of experienced poverty:

A poor person has '*two legs and a soul and nothing else*' (NPC, 2007h).

'... *is like a springbok; he dies while running*' (NPC, 2007h).

'*[It's] when you can't afford anything, when you wake up in the morning and you cannot make tea or go to the kraal because you don't have anything*' (NPC, 2007i).

According to Robeyns (2005, p. 95), the CA views well-being, justice and development in terms of 'people's capabilities to function; that is, their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities'. Clearly, the above descriptions refer to people not experiencing any capabilities or freedoms to function.

### Theme 1: Economic facilities

*Economic facilities* are seen as the opportunities that people have to utilise economic resources for the purpose of consumption, production or exchange. Opportunities depend on the resources that are available or owned, as well as the 'conditions of exchange' which are defined by markets and prices (Sen, 1999; Sawyer, 2007).

#### Subtheme 1.1: Consumption

Well-being or a good quality of life was mostly seen by the urban participants as someone in the household having formal employment, and was regarded as even better if both husband and wife are employed. Owning a store or mini-market (self-employment) or being employed by the government or a big company was seen as a high level of well-being. Being employed and having a stable income enabled people to eat every day, usually three times a day. They could also buy large amounts



of food at a time. The participants said that well-off people lived in sturdy, secure houses, could afford school fees and paid for services such as electricity and water supply to the home.

There was further agreement, in particular by the urban participants, that poverty was equated with unemployment and/or an inadequate income, and insufficient access to goods and services, e.g., poor access to water, shelter, health facilities and food: *'Not having a house, no food to eat and not having employment'* (NPC, 2007f). It was further mentioned that a person may have employment but *'it depends on the kind of employment. If you work and get only N\$150 you cannot satisfy all your basic needs'* (NPC, 2007f).

### Subtheme 1.2: Production

CIFOR (2007, p. 10) explains that poverty is not only 'having no fish' but also 'not knowing how to fish', 'not knowing where to fish' and 'not having a net'. In Sennian terms this implies not having (or not having access to) opportunities and capabilities to function. Productive skills and resources (opportunities and capabilities) emerged as a dominant theme in the rural participants' descriptions. The enabling factor in their description of well-being is significant, as the participants did not view well-being solely as 'having' or 'owning' assets (static perception).

Productive resources were mobilising agents that enabled them to move forward in life. They perceived it as having access to enough productive skills and resources to ensure a stable and reliable livelihood for the household, and being able to cover all basic needs and expenses throughout the year. For the San communities in particular, as hunter-gatherers, well-being entailed access to natural resources, being able to hunt game and gather wild foods.

In rural Namibia, poverty is termed *uuthigona*, it is taken to mean *'having nothing to produce with...'*, and having *'... no oxen, [working with] agricultural implements [that] are rudimentary'* (NPC, 2007k). This then results in *'[t]he poor almost always plant[ing] too late'*, as they have to wait until those who own oxen and a plough are done before they can borrow their implements to plant. *Uuthigona* also refers to a 'lack' of those resources which create opportunities needed to be able to function (NPC, 2007k).

An insufficiency in terms of productive resources also contributes to poverty: *'You may have maize meal but no matches, no access to water, no firewood and no pot to cook with ...'* and *'poverty is when I am married and have young children who can't work in the field yet. I may not have enough food and can't afford school fees because I can't sell omahangu. So I pay for one child to go up to Grade 3. He then sits at home. Sometimes I have a big field and no manure, I can't produce much. If the Grade 3 child comes home, I send the other so they can learn to read and write'* (NPC, 2007m). Further important enabling resources were seen as having livestock, transport (either oxen, donkeys or a vehicle), and employing other people who make

gardens and mend fences, thereby contributing towards food security (see Kingdon and Knight, 2004).

According to the rural participants, well-being further referred to being in a position where livelihoods are protected and enhanced through sufficient rain and fertile land. Such households had money and means of production, such as fields, livestock, ploughs and enough labour. People who owned livestock used the manure to fertilise their fields and thus increase production. Hard work and a sufficient number of people in the household to help cultivate large fields were important for producing more *omahangu* (mealies). Owning many storage bins (*omashisha*) for *omahangu* was regarded as a sign of well-being, as this indicated that a household had enough maize to eat and perhaps even to sell – this would bring in cash to pay for services like the clinic or the school (NPC, 2007l).

### Subtheme 1.3: Markets/Exchange

The third subtheme refers to access to markets and exchange opportunities, where participants can sell and/or exchange their produce (Sen, 1999; Sawyer, 2007). If they produce and there are no markets, then they will only eke out a subsistence existence. The participants indicated the need for markets to sell their produce, e.g., their *omahangu* and *nangondwe* (thatch grass) for financial gain (NPC, 2007a–m).

## Theme 2: Social opportunities

The concept of *social opportunities* is described as those measures society takes to make provision for essential services (like health and education) which affect an individual's freedom and opportunities to live better. These services have an immediate impact on people's lives, as the ability to be educated can help them earn a better living. Also, the ability to read and write facilitates participation (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005; Sawyer, 2007). Good health allows an individual to work and participate in both the family and the community (Robeyns, 2005). In terms of this theme, the following emerged from the data: Most urban and in particular remote communities considered access to basic services (clinics, hospitals, police stations, water, electricity, educational facilities, roads and telecommunication) as prerequisites for establishing well-being. Both rural and urban Namibian participants emphasised the importance of accessing education as an enabling factor to improving well-being, in particular if they could provide an education for their children. Being employed or having an income enables them to provide their children with uniforms and transport money, all of which work towards becoming better educated. This, in turn, results in children being able to find suitable employment and support the household, which helps to ensure that the entire household is better off.

The participants expressed the idea that gaining knowledge helps people manage their lives towards sustainable well-being. Without knowledge, they argued, those

who inherit something were more likely to squander it, as they did not know how to manage their assets and lives. In another example, the participants stated that well-being entails having knowledge of how 'the system' works, for example, knowing how to get death certificates and identification documents enabled them to access assistance for the orphans they were taking care of (NPC, 2007j). These comments coincide with Freire (1998) and Hope and Timmel (2007, p. 24), who emphasise that 'reading the word will assist in reading the world'.

For the rural participants, the struggle to access resources and services, and the time it takes to complete a task despite the fact that the resources exist, are linked to their experience of poverty: '*Walking long distances to obtain water is also regarded as poverty*' (NPC, 2007e). The participants reported that it could take from 08:00 in the morning to 17:00 to fetch water using cattle. They stated that everyone, including the children, had to sit in the shade and wait for the water to arrive before they could do their usual household chores. Chambers (1994) raises awareness of how much time rural people spend completing simple tasks like fetching water due to a lack of services and resources, which leaves them with less time to spend with their families or children, for instance (see also World Bank, 2013). Another example shared by the participants, is the time it takes for children to reach school due to the long distances and '*... not having bridges for the children to cross the river when they go to school*' (NPC, 2007k).

In addition to access to education and infrastructure, reference was also made to the importance of good health as a vital part of well-being. Being in good health not only has direct benefits for the individual but also enables him/her to work in the fields and look after livestock and assets. For urban participants, good health allows an individual to go to work and earn an income, and they reported that someone's well-being is at risk if his/her health does not allow them to function.

It was interesting to realise the importance of access to telecommunication, radio and electricity for inhabitants of remote rural areas – it helps them establish contact with others, maintains relationships and is an avenue through which to obtain information. It was mentioned that electricity was important so that people could charge their cell phones – in remote areas that is their only mode of communication, information and connection to services, friends and relatives (NPC, 2007d).

Helliwell (2004, 2011), Ravallion and Lokshin (2010), and Burgess (2009) in particular confirm the importance of access to social opportunities and the imperative of such access for subjective well-being. However, the mere fact that services exist is not sufficient: well-being is more directly linked to the level of trust or distrust which people have in these services. An honest, caring government and political stability play increasingly important roles (Helliwell, 2004). Corruption and being treated badly were important factors in reducing well-being. Many narratives were shared of rude nurses, bribery and unreliable services at clinics, children being abused at schools and safe houses (like private hostels), and government officials not being helpful (NPC, 2007a–m). Rural people often receive services at levels which differ

from those in urban areas. This creates unequal social opportunities and a lack of trust.

### Theme 3: Transparency guarantee

According to Sawyer (2007), *transparency guarantees* deal with social interactions and how people relate with one another. This includes the level of trust, social cohesion, networks, support systems, corruption and care – all factors which play a vital role in the well-being of individuals and communities. In their study in rural Bangladesh, Asadullah and Chaudhury (2012) confirmed that well-being is lower where inflation is high, institutions are of a poor quality, inequality is high, and the level of trust within society is low (see also Helliwell, 2004, 2011; Burgess, 2009). These authors emphasise the fact that well-being is strongly affected by interpersonal, social and institutional trust, as well as the personal and cultural values of the person. Sen also made it very clear that capabilities are not only personal characteristics but also shaped in interactions (with others and within a socio-economic context) (see Muffels and Heady, 2009).

Swanepoel and De Beer (2006) refer to social well-being as the ability to care for others, having self-respect, and living in peace and harmony with family and community members. Helliwell (2011) adds that there is evidence that altruism and trust enhance well-being. These two aspects of well-being were also identified by participants in both the urban and the rural communities: ‘... *there could be no well-being without happiness and love in the house*’ and ‘*having a family, husband, wife and two children is thought of as part of well-being*’ (NPC, 2007d).

Peace of mind and good cooperation were deemed further significant aspects of well-being. Peace of mind refers to a situation where peace prevails in the household, among neighbours, and in the village. Good cooperation includes having good relations with neighbours in the village, and also asking for help, when needed. In addition, a wife and children who are free from stress and who are in good health, enhance well-being. A participant defined well-being as ‘*a person who is filled with peace and has a good relationship within the household and the community*’ (NPC, 2007c, k, m).

Not having good relationships is seen as a manifestation of ‘experienced poverty’: ‘*Every household has its own way of living. You can have everything, but if there is no love it is no use; then you are poor even if you have furniture and transport*’ (NPC, 2007c). It was even stated that ‘*you are poor if you don’t have a wife, and there is nobody who can care for your things*’ (NPC, 2007a).

In urban areas, participants confirmed the importance of good social and networking relationships: these enable them to receive support, when needed. The urban respondents stressed the importance of mental health: ‘*streetwise people*’ are deemed to experience well-being as they are able to think clearly: ‘*They can put*

*good ideas together and make a success of most things*' (NPC, 2007j), they have *'the ability to think clearly and take decisions on what to do next, including budgeting money on a monthly basis'* and they are *'mentally healthy and happy'* (NPC, 2007j). The respondents suggested that such a person would not drink local alcoholic brews such as *tombo*, which affects the drinker's mental health and ability to function.

People who are mentally healthy and experience well-being are deemed to have *'psychological status'* – they are listened to and taken seriously, they have the right to talk and express their opinions, and are treated with respect. This is the dream of many poor people who experience helplessness and feel they have no voice (NPC, 2007d). A participant in Otjozondjupa region (NPC, 2007m) summarised the importance of social and psychological well-being as follows: *'When one is respected and is able to assist fellow human beings. When one is in a good state of mind.'* Another participant confirmed the need for self-esteem: *'If a poor person is at a rich person's house he keeps thinking about his poverty, and it has a very negative effect because it will make you depressed. It reduces his ability to stand up and do something for himself'* (NPC, 2007b). One participant said that the *'poor will remain poor'* (NPC, 2007a) and *'lose [their] identity'* (NPC, 2007b).

This is evident when poverty becomes an *'inheritance'* from which escape is seldom possible. Another participant confirmed this permanent state of affairs: *'To us poverty does not have a beginning, our forefathers lived in poverty, we are living in poverty and even the future generation will live in poverty'* (NPC, 2007k). In this regard, Lever *et al.* (2005) refer to a *'poverty culture'* where people are unable to take advantage of the opportunities on offer. The reasons for this so-called culture of poverty are further explained in terms of the psychological nature of the person, i.e., his or her self-esteem, sense of identity, coping strategies, locus of control and physical appearance (Lever *et al.*, 2005; Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2006). The explanations from the literature correlate well with the voices of the Namibian people.

There was a common assertion among the participants (who hailed from different regions) that some people are born lazy and that is why they are poor. There were people who have all the resources, or at least no fewer resources than other villagers, but remain poor only because they are *'lazy or drank too much. They are healthy but do not work: they just eat. Lazy people – omudedede – do not want to work. Lazy people sometimes inherit cattle, but sell them. They are said to work in someone else's field, but not their own.'* They were even viewed as *'too lazy to attend meetings!'* (NPC, 2007j).

In a study among the homeless in Calcutta, Biswas-Diener and Diener (2006) found that psychosocial (self-actualising) factors are probably the most important in terms of subjective well-being. People sharing space with others on the streets reported higher levels of life satisfaction (Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2006, p. 13).

This may refer to the social benefits and support derived from living with friends and family, and having a sense of community.

Burgess (2009) explains that psychosocial well-being includes a strong sense of self, fostered by positive individual and group identities. These factors are still underestimated and may, in fact, be the key to numerous efforts at enhancing people's well-being – as seen in the quotes from the participants. The psychosocial well-being of an individual is the one factor that will determine whether s/he believes in him/herself, which makes it possible for him/her to take up available economic facilities and opportunities. This is a prerequisite for taking advantage of social opportunities and participating in processes (political freedoms). Participation relies on the psychosocial well-being of the person (Burgess, 2009) rather than on his or her 'character' (Sen, 1999). Some of the quotes shared by both the rural and urban participants corroborate this notion.

It was further mentioned by a participant in the Oshikoto region that '*God never created poor people. God created everybody to be a hard worker*' (NPC, 2007l), while another participant in Ohangwena shared that '*poverty is like five fingers of the hand: they are not equal and will never be*' (NPC, 2007h). Some did argue that 'lazy' people would therefore not reach optimal well-being and that some unfortunates had been bewitched to be poor. People at higher levels of well-being were generally regarded as those who worked harder in their fields. In an urban context this equated to people who were not absent from their jobs. Well-off people were also seen as makers of plans and problem-solvers, with the ability to determine whether they were '*moving backwards or forward*' (NPC, 2007c). A poor person could not make plans and would most likely die from a '*small disease*' (NPC, 2007l). Moreover, '*they (educated people) can put good ideas together and make a success of most things*' (NPC, 2007j). Well-being is a status further assigned to knowledgeable and disciplined people, hence the importance of education (Freire, 1998).

## Theme 4: Protective security

Protective security refers to the safety net created for people who fall through the cracks in the economic system (Sawyer, 2007). In both rural and urban communities, the importance of safety nets in respect of well-being and poverty were related to government grants, institutional support (drought and disaster relief) or support from society and families.

Being independent and having a good social support system were deemed key elements of well-being. Poverty implied dependency on others for survival; as one participant described it: '*If all my children passed away, then there is no one to help build shelters. Children and family members help to cultivate fields and collect food, so the absence of family members can make you poor.*' Such individuals had to rely on others and could therefore become trapped in extreme levels of poverty, since the support and assistance of others was not guaranteed: '*A poor person will*

*continuously be in search of food*' (NPC, 2007k) and will even *'steal cattle and break into shops'* (NPC, 2007b) or *'may live by begging or from rubbish bins'* (NPC, 2007b).

One particular group was described as dependent, having grown used to hand-outs: *'The San people are very dependent on others and they are used to just being given...'* [...] *'they hardly work ...'* (NPC, 2007k). On the other hand, as much as children assist with parental independence, it was reported that parents who were too dependent on their children prevented households from moving out of poverty. A participant from the Otjozondjupa region noted: *'Our reproductive function makes us vulnerable to poverty. Every child we have has an extra mouth to feed. Sometimes we lose time and income while caring for and raising children'* (NPC, 2007m). This situation could be worsened if these households had to accommodate orphans who are not supported by grants, for example.

For both rural and urban participants, grants as a source of income were regarded as a consumer and productive resource (economic facility), since they provided access to cash that could pay for education, health facilities and transport. A lack of access to these three resources was viewed as inhibiting people's functioning.

## Theme 5: Political freedom

The last capability refers to people's voice in the form of civil rights, being able to vote, enjoying freedom of speech and being heard.

Poor people were perceived as oppressed, exploited and voiceless, and not being listened to. According to the respondents such people lacked the confidence to speak, therefore the community did not have much regard for what the poor had to say. In particular, some minority groups in Namibia expressed the belief that they were voiceless not only because of their poverty, but also because they did not belong to the majority who happened to be the current ruling party in Namibia: *'I cannot go to Government with 5 Damaras (minority group) – you have to put a Wambo (majority group and ruling party) in front'* (NPC, 2007b).

## CONCLUSIONS

Poverty and well-being are perceived and defined in different ways by various participants – it is clearly not a homogenous experience (Amato and Zuo, 1992). Sawyer (2007) mentions that when facilitating people's development, it is important to consider how they themselves define, perceive and experience their poverty and well-being, and the only way to clearly understand poverty in these terms is to engage actively with the people (Chambers, 1994; Sen, 1999; World Bank, 2002). This is exactly what the above analysis confirms. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach as a theoretical framework was adopted to make coherent sense of the perceptions of the people of Namibia. Sen (1999) clearly states that, as economic growth is not directly

linked to poverty reduction, he promotes a multidimensional approach to well-being by putting people and their experiences, rather than material things, at the centre (Clark, 2007).

In summary there are three insights into poverty using Sen's approach: 1) the realisation that while economic growth may be essential for reducing poverty, there is not an automatic relationship between these two issues, since it all depends on the capabilities of the poor to take advantage of expanding economic opportunities; 2) the realisation that poverty – as conceived by the poor themselves – is not just a question of low income, but also includes other dimensions such as a lack of infrastructure, services, good relationships and support networks, poor health, illiteracy, as well as a state of vulnerability and feelings of powerlessness in general. These are all aspects which can be important in making policy decisions that optimise societal welfare (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2013); 3) it is recognised that the poor themselves know their situation and needs best, and must therefore be part of any process aimed at designing policies and projects intended to better their lot.

It was clear from the perceptions of the Namibian people that poverty is complex and multidimensional, rather than solely an economic issue. Money/livelihoods were considered a means to an end, not ends in themselves. Well-being was rather seen as being able to foster and expand human capabilities, life choices and opportunities (Sen, 1999). Biswas-Diener and Diener (2006, p. 18) clearly state that material, psychological and social well-being should be regarded as equally important components in individuals' development process. We argue that those factors that are still underplayed and require further research, include transparency guarantees and social opportunities. These psychosocial factors focus on the individual's self-esteem, mindset, identity, locus of control, social networks and support, as well as the issue of trust in institutions, services, governments, procedures and significant others (Helliwell, 2002, 2011; Burgess, 2009).

Developing people's capabilities and removing personal, social and institutional barriers so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life they find valuable (Frediani, 2007) should therefore be the focus of development efforts. As Helliwell (2011) proposes, this should be facilitated in such a manner that people trust both the efforts and the institutions. Only then will we achieve the state of affairs evoked by Soal and Reeler (2009, p. 2), of 'creating freedom, creating opportunities ... to decide, to voice, to discover, to share, to learn ... with its accompanying responsibilities'.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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## ENDNOTES

1. The data from the PPA reports were regarded as qualitative data and not references, and therefore no page numbers are provided when quotes are used.
2. Robert Chambers and his team from the Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK, are the seminal thinkers regarding participatory assessments in rural poor communities.
3. Poor is regarded as people living on N\$377 per month (NPC, 2013).
4. Severely poor is regarded as people living on N\$277 per month (NPC, 2013).

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