The Wellbeing Conceptual Model: Why Identity Deserves Discriminate Consideration

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a high-order conceptual model of human wellbeing that isolates identity among other discriminate variables that are constituents and determinants of wellbeing. Drawing on germane literature, the paper understands wellbeing as a dynamic and subjective state that is satisfied when individuals can pursue and achieve their aspired quality of life. Achievement of this state is facilitated by conversion factors that can be summarized into three overarching categories namely environmental, social, and personal conditions. These conversion factors enable individuals to transform resources or opportunities into functionings or their desired outcomes. The paper notes the vital role and magnitude of the influence of identity on human action in the pursuit of wellbeing at individual level and proposes a high-order conceptual model of wellbeing expressed as a function of identity, environmental, social, and personal conditions. Although identity is an element of personal conditions, it is argued here that identity deserves to be considered discriminately in the wellbeing model because of its unique and profound influence on human action, which lends weight to the explanatory power of the conceptual model of wellbeing. The paper appeals for inclusion of identity transformation interventions in the agenda of development practice and recommends areas that need further research.

Keywords: Conversion factors, development theory, functionings, identity.

1. Introduction

So much has been published about human wellbeing as the ultimate end of the development agenda (Dasgupta, 2001; Nambar, 2013, p. 223; Narayan et al., 2000; Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2022). Literature in the development field is not devoid of strategies for achieving human wellbeing. However, the concept of wellbeing seems to have been understood differently. There is a dearth of literature on the academic efforts to develop a more inclusive definition that highlights the major variables: constituents and determinants of wellbeing. By this statement, this paper does not include the ubiquitous popular publications imbued with advertisements on dieting, exercising, outfit fashions, cosmetics, perfumes, and other related products that claim to make people feel great about themselves. Although the literature on such claims is not scanty, it is not relevant to the subject of wellbeing under discussion in this paper. While the little effort that has been made to propose an inclusive definition of wellbeing provides an idea of what wellbeing looks like (King et al., 2014; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Pouw & McGregor, 2014; Sen, 1999), what seems to have been largely neglected is a conceptual framework that isolates identity among the key constituents and determinants of wellbeing. This neglect has culminated in flawed and ineffective development strategies. This paper suggests a more inclusive definition qualified by identity, environmental, social, and personal conditions as wellbeing’s major constituents and determinants. The paper proposes a high-order conceptual model of wellbeing based on this definition. As much as identity is an element of personal conditions, this paper argues that it deserves to be considered discriminately because of its pivotal role in influencing human action towards fulfilment of wellbeing aspirations at the individual level.
The discussion of this paper sets off with a synoptic review of development progress towards wellbeing attainment to provide context to its agenda. The next section reviews the literature to understand the perspectives of various scholars on wellbeing. This literature review is followed by a section that summarizes the perspectives on wellbeing into a broader definition expressed as an equation that is critically analysed in the subsequent section to point out the psychological dimension of humans as integral to wellbeing. The next section shifts this discussion to identity or self-concept as a psychological dimension of humans alluded to in the literature on the wellbeing perspectives. The discussion is continued in the succeeding section, which proposes a high-order conceptual model of wellbeing that isolates identity as one of the discriminating variables in the wellbeing equation. The following sections discuss the properties of identity and make recommendations for development research and practice before summarizing the paper’s discussion in the conclusion.

2. Contextual Background

Today, we are edging close to a century since the post-1945 era when development efforts were intensified to improve human wellbeing across the globe. Between 1945 and today, development literature has grown exponentially, leading to its recognition as an academic discipline. Also, numerous development actors have emerged on the scene to facilitate the implementation of development projects. In addition, various development strategies have been formulated under the leadership of the United Nations (UN) organization to expedite the achievement of human wellbeing. Indeed, the UN has championed global development blueprints like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to mention a few. But has human wellbeing been achieved across the globe?

Recent statistical evidence shows that the world experienced drops in human wellbeing between 2016 and 2020. Trends of Global Wellbeing Indicators (GWI) scores in 2016–2020 indicate a decline for each region of the world (GWI, 2020), as shown in Table I.

The evidence in Table I shows that South Asia, Europe and Central Asia, East Asia and Pacific, Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and North America experienced decreased GWI scores in 2016–2020 Δ(wellbeing). This situation is fascinating, considering the yearly development efforts to improve human wellbeing across the globe. Perhaps what is most surprising is that the wellbeing drop did not skip any region. The United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western countries that are expected to be global leaders and role models of development were equally affected. While the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic might have contributed to wellbeing reversals across the globe (UNDP, 2022, pp. 3–4), it cannot be quashed to opine that some development efforts have not been effective, especially considering that the reverse trends started three years before the pandemic invaded the scene. In addition, other international development actors have noted elsewhere that food insecurity has been worsening since 2014 (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2021, pp. 18–19). This situation requires careful investigation to identify what needs attention to improve development theory for human wellbeing attainment.

Nevertheless, the concept of human wellbeing needs to be defined before investigating what needs attention to improve development theory for human wellbeing attainment. It would be helpful to set off with a clear definition of human wellbeing because, without a clear definition, any effort to improve development theory for human wellbeing attainment would lead nowhere.

3. Perspectives on Wellbeing

The definition of wellbeing has roots in the Alma Alta conceptualization of health as a ‘state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity
and bring their capabilities to maturity as people with dignity. Korten (1990) proposed social, psychological, physical, and economic dimensions as components of human wellbeing. Dasgupta (2001) views wellbeing as a continuum that ranges from extreme poverty to abundant acquisition of one’s needs (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). In this perspective, wellbeing has five components, namely health, good social relations (social cohesion, mutual respect, and the ability to help others), security (personal safety and security from disasters), freedom of choice (ability to pursue and achieve what an individual values), and the ability to afford a secure and adequate livelihood that includes income, material assets, adequate food, access to clean air and water, and shelter. The achievement of these wellbeing components depends on the Earth’s ecosystems (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005).

Perhaps the most cited and influential perspective is the capability perspective pioneered by Amartya Sen, who won the Nobel Prize. He viewed wellbeing as the freedom for individuals to pursue their aspirations. This freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development (Sen, 1999). According to Sen (1999), freedom involves the processes that allow freedom of actions and decisions and the actual opportunities people have given their personal, social, and environmental circumstances. This perspective implies that personal, social, and environmental circumstances or conditions determine wellbeing. Sen calls these conditions’ conversion factors that inhibit or enable individuals to transform available resources or opportunities into functionings or desired outcomes (Sen, 1999, p. 109). Examples of personal conditions are a person’s intelligence, skill, metabolism, physical or mental ability, and height. As for social conditions, examples include government policies, cultural beliefs, and ethnic and gender prejudices, while environmental conditions that affect the transformation of resources into functionings include climate, transportation, and natural resource endowment, such as mines for precious minerals and oil wells. Therefore, if freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development, as Sen (1999, pp. 36–38) asserts, then the conversion factors are both determinants and constituents of wellbeing. This is just a glimpse of Sen’s perspective (see Sen, 1999 for a more comprehensive description of this perspective).

Another insightful perspective views wellbeing as a dynamic and subjective state that is satisfied when individuals can pursue and achieve their aspired goals (Easterlin, 2005; Government Office for Science, 2008; Pouw & McGregor, 2014). Pouw and McGregor (2014) add material, relational, and subjective aspects of people’s needs and satisfaction with their way of life. In this definition, material wellbeing refers to material possessions that determine the quality of life, the relational dimension considers people’s quality of life concerning the relationships that are important for them in their social and physical environment, and the subjective or cognitive dimension of wellbeing recognizes that the quality of the material and relational achievements are then translated into a person’s subjective evaluation of their quality of life. One contribution worth highlighting in this work is the relational aspect of wellbeing, especially the relationship with the physical environment. Though the paper does not expound on this relational aspect, it can be added that environmental conservation is part of this relationship and contributes to human wellbeing. Perhaps, King et al. (2014) elucidate this when they argue that environmental degradation negatively impacts the ecosystem on which humans rely directly for their wellbeing. They note that ecosystem services correlate positively with human physical, physiological, and psychological wellbeing. Ecosystem services, also known as natural capital, are essential for the necessary resources that enable humans to pursue and fulfill their needs, such as food and clean water (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Elsewhere, UNDP (2022) has reported similar observations.

These wellbeing perspectives have significantly shaped development practice. Many development strategies have fingerprints of Chambers (1983), Goulet (1985), Korten (1990), Sen (1999), and other
scholars who have contributed extensively to this conversation. For example, Plan International, Care International, World Vision International, and many United Nations agencies facilitate development projects that provide people experiencing poverty with access to education, potable water, agricultural services, entrepreneurial skills, human rights awareness, and health services, among other things. A likely case in point is UNDP (2022, p. 32), which defines wellbeing in terms of capabilities such as health and education that enable individuals to be and do what they deem essential and have reason to value. Also, these wellbeing perspectives are reflected in the current Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) that seek to end global poverty and hunger, promote good health and wellbeing, quality education, gender equality, potable water and sanitation, clean, affordable energy, employment and economic growth, industry, innovation, and infrastructure, reduced inequality, sustainable cities, and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, conserve life on land and below water, enhance peace and justice institutions, enhance partnership and collaboration to achieve all the SDGs (UN, n.d.). These development strategies have elements of Chambers’ (1983) view of wellbeing as freedom from a web of poverty traps, Sen’s (1999) capabilities or conversion factors, and the other perspectives discussed in this section. Therefore, a more refined definition of wellbeing can be derived from these perspectives.

4. What is Wellbeing?

Drawing on these perspectives, wellbeing can be summarized as a dynamic and subjective state that is satisfied when individuals can pursue and achieve their aspired quality of life. It is determined and constituted by personal, social, and environmental conditions. Sen’s (1999) conversion factors seem to provide a helpful summary of the perspectives of wellbeing reviewed in the preceding section. Environmental conditions include safety from natural disasters, unpolluted air and water, arable land, natural capital (ecosystem services), and natural resource endowment. Good political will, freedom of choice, personal safety, relationship with others, and social status are examples of wellbeing determinants that fall under social conditions. Psychological and physical health, mental and physical ability, knowledge and skill, and practical experience include well-being determinants that fall under personal conditions. While there are countless factors that constitute and determine wellbeing attainment, they all seem to fall under the categories of environmental, social, and personal conditions. As much as wellbeing is subjective and complex, as people have different priorities and conceptualize wellbeing differently (Pouw & McGregor, 2014), environmental, social, and personal conditions seem to be inclusive of every subjective definition. An equation of human wellbeing (W) can, therefore, be expressed in abstract terms as follows:

\[ W = \{E, S, P\} \]  

This might be called the ‘wellbeing equation’ where \( E \) is environmental conditions, \( S \) is social conditions, and \( P \) is personal conditions. Note that this equation suggests that the conditions that define \( W \) (\( E, S, \) and \( P \)) are also the means or requisite for attaining it. This logic follows Sen’s (1999, pp. 36–38) assertion that freedom or wellbeing is both the primary end and the principal means of development. Thus, while a conducive environment with available opportunities for humans to pursue and fulfill their aspirations, good social connections, friendly cultural practices, and personal good health, knowledge, skill, and other related conditions constitute \( W \), they also constitute the determinants for attaining \( W \).

5. Critical Analysis of the Wellbeing Equation

While the wellbeing equation derived from the literature seems inclusive and exhaustive, development strategies that have been devised based on it appear to have understood wellbeing in terms of deficits in \( E \) (environmental conditions), \( S \) (social conditions), and \( P \) (personal conditions). Thus, erratic rain due to an unfavourable climate, lack of money lending institutions, and lack of personal knowledge in agribusiness management, for instance, are equated to illbeing. In most cases, defining wellbeing and illbeing in terms of what is available and what is missing elicits development strategies that do not go beyond providing the missing materials and services, a typical welfarist approach. Though done with benign intentions, this approach may reduce the recipients to passive humans (Myers, 2011). They may lose their sense of agency and internalize a low opinion of themselves as victims who need help (Christian, 1999; Myers, 2011; UNDP, 2022). Individuals in this state believe that they cannot improve their livelihood. This psychological dimension of humans falls under \( P \) (personal conditions) in the wellbeing equation.

Though without clarity and specificity, many authors have alluded to this psychological dimension in their perspectives on wellbeing. For instance, in his perspective, Korten (1990) included the
psychological dimension as a component of wellbeing. Narayan et al. (2000) reported feeling well about oneself, a sense of dignity and respect, and peace of mind as some of the components of wellbeing. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) also included feeling and a dimension of wellbeing. Poon and McGregor (2014) included the cognitive aspect of humans in their perspective on wellbeing. Other authors that have alluded to the psychological aspect of humans as a component of wellbeing are Christian (1999), Prilleltensky (2003), and Myers (2011, 2015). However, as much as the authors have alluded to the psychological dimension of wellbeing, their descriptions lack specificity and do not help to pin it down. The succeeding section draws on social psychology to clarify that the psychological dimension of wellbeing is identity or self-concept.

6. Identity as a Psychological Dimension of Wellbeing

It is not uncommon for authors to describe the psychological dimension of wellbeing using vague terms. Perhaps this challenge explains why many development strategies are unclear on what to do with the psychological dimension of humans. Elsewhere, I have critically reviewed the literature on religion and development to clarify that identity is the psychological dimension of humans that is integral to wellbeing attainment among religious converts (Dambula, 2022).


While these researchers demonstrate an immense effort to understand the transformation experience of religious converts, their attempts do not pin down what changes. Nevertheless, from a social psychological perspective, the descriptions cited above seem to be alluding to identity, the overall definition of the self, which involves self-attribute and adoption of behavioural traits that give an individual a sense of who they are, or self-concept (Rosenberg, 1979; Sparks, 2000; Stets & Burke, 2014; Vignoles et al., 2011). It is constituted by various cognitive components such as self-worth, self-efficacy, achievement motive, and locus of control (Bandura, 1997; Chan, 2000; Shane et al., 2003).

Self-worth relates to an attitude about oneself as a human being with value and dignity (Rosenberg, 1979). This attitude often called the self-esteem motive (Gecas, 1982) or self-enhancement motive (Leary, 2007), influences individuals to behave and act in ways that are intended to maintain and enhance this favourable sense of self (Stets & Burke, 2014). Self-efficacy refers to individuals’ beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their level of functioning to execute a given task to produce certain outcomes (Bandura, 1998; Lane et al., 2004). Individuals with strong self-efficacy are determined, confident, and competent in areas that matter to them. Achievement motive contributes to individuals’ excellence in the spheres of life they deem important to attain personal accomplishment (McClelland, 1961). Individuals with strong achievement motives often set high goals for themselves and assume responsibility for accomplishing them (Poon et al., 2006). Locus of control relates to whether individuals believe they control over their lives or whether life’s events are determined by external factors such as luck (Rotter, 1966). Individuals with internal locus of control believe that they can influence their desired outcomes (Poon et al., 2006). These identity components provide a more helpful frame for understanding the psychological dimension of humans that contributes to wellbeing attainment and illuminates identity as an important variable that lends weight to the explanatory power of the wellbeing equation. As much as I (identity) is an element of P (personal conditions) I ∈ P, its influence is profound. Therefore, It is argued that identity deserves to be considered discriminately in the context of W (wellbeing) conceptualization and attainment.

7. Why Identity Deserves Discriminate Consideration

Sen’s (1992) conversion factors that enable individuals to transform resources into functionings or to utilize available opportunities in their milieu to improve their wellbeing is an insightful perspective for justifying why identity deserve discriminate consideration in development theory for wellbeing attainment. Indeed, as per Sen’s argument, a healthy or an able-bodied person who earns income has a high conversion factor to transform their income into their desired functionings compared to a person who is ill or handicapped who earns the same income since they are deprived of the capability to convert their income to achieve the same functionings as they would need more income for assistance (Sen, 1999). This argument implies that physical health is an important conversion factor that enables individuals to transform resources into functionings. Another important conversion factor that Sen (1999) underscores is education. While health and education contribute to the quality of life, as Sen
(1999) suggests, identity is a similar yet far more influential conversion factor that many development scholars, including Sen, have not acknowledged. *Identity* is the major force that drives wellbeing attainment. This is an important contribution to this paper.

A plethora of literature in religion and development research provides evidence that identity is integral to the attainment of wellbeing. A study conducted in Malawi to discover whether the identity of accomplished entrepreneurs had contributed to the success of their businesses found seven attributes of identity that had contributed to business survival and growth, namely work ethic, persistence, integrity, optimism about success, harmonious passion, passion for success, and belief in personal capability (Dambula, 2022). Another study conducted in Zimbabwe discovered that the success of religious converts who pursue entrepreneurial activities resides in positive mindsets – Identity attributes (Togarasei & Biri, 2018). One of the researchers who have contributed extensively to religion and development, Freeman (2015), reported that the subjective transformation (identity transformation) that religious converts experience influences them to believe in their inner strength. They become motivated to work hard to improve their wellbeing. They develop the agentic belief in their efforts to achieve their desired economic changes and become productive members of their communities (Freeman, 2015). Many other studies have reported similar findings (CDE, 2008; Hasu, 2012; Heslam, 2016; Zalanga, 2010). This research evidence supports identity as an oasis of the steam and energy that drives human action to pursue wellbeing aspirations and deems it an important precondition for wellbeing attainment.

Without isolating identity as a discriminate variable in the wellbeing equation, it would not be clear how Sen’s (1999) conversion factors would stir an individual into action to transform resources into functionings since identity is the main driving influence of human action. Although identity is an element of *P* (personal conditions), the significance and magnitude of its influence on wellbeing and attainment seem unique and unrivalled. It deserves to be isolated as a discriminate variable in the wellbeing equation. This argument leads to a more nuanced wellbeing equation expressed as follows:

\[ W = \{E, S, P, I\} \tag{2} \]

where:
- *E* is environmental conditions,
- *S* is social conditions,
- *P* is personal conditions,
- *I* is identity.

Wellbeing improvement (rate of change of *W* in a given time) would therefore be given by a function of *E* (environmental conditions), *P* (personal conditions), and *I* (identity) expressed as:

\[ \frac{dW}{dt} = f (E, S, P, I) \tag{3} \]

It is assumed in this equation that wellbeing will continue improving as time goes by, provided the requisite conditions (i.e., *E, S, P, I*) are met. This assumption seems realistic because individuals’ conception of wellbeing usually changes to higher wellbeing aspirations once the previous ones are satisfied (Maslow, 1943, p. 375). Also worth highlighting is that this equation helps to understand why some individuals lapse into illbeing. If *I* (identity) is not isolated as discriminate in the wellbeing equation, it would not be clear why some individuals do not pursue the functionings that would improve their wellbeing given conducive *E* (environmental conditions), *S* (social conditions), and *P* (personal conditions).

### 8. Properties of Identity

While identity is the main force that drives human action in pursuing wellbeing aspirations, it can also be inhibitory when it gets marred or defective. For instance, individuals with low self-worth have negative attitudes or ill feelings about themselves (Rosenberg, 1979, pp. 30–31). This negative feeling influences them to accept their low social status as something they cannot change. A lack of confidence and determination characterizes low self-efficacy. Individuals with low self-efficacy lack the agentic belief that their actions can produce desired effects (Bandura, 1999, p. 28).

Similarly, individuals whose locus of control is externally oriented believe that they have no control over the events of their lives (Bohanek *et al.*, 2006, p. 9; Poon *et al.*, 2006). As for the achievement motive, it leads to stagnation characterized by a lack of vision about the future when it is weak. Individuals with weak achievement motives do not set high goals and lack motivation to aim for success (Poon *et al.*, 2006, p. 63). How does identity get marred, and how can it be repaired?
8.1. Factors that Affect Identity

Many factors that affect identity are related to social influences. A case in point is handouts to people experiencing poverty to meet their needs. This practice can influence the recipients to look down on themselves as victims who need help. Handouts take away the poor people's agentic beliefs and reduce them to passive recipients of donations (Myers, 2011). This effect of handouts also occurs at the macro level.

An obvious example is the Official Development Assistance (ODA), which has led to aid dependency and debilitated the private sector in many developing countries (Dambula, 2020; Moyo, 2009). Another social influence is families. Studies show that families can contribute to marring identity if they undermine or ignore the opinions and thoughts of their children (Bluck & Habermas, 2000), if they are too controlling, and if they are not supportive. Children with an externally oriented locus of control report their families to be too controlling and demanding (Carton & Nowicki, 1994), while children with parents who are not supportive are more likely to have low self-worth (Kernis et al., 2000).

Also, prejudiced structures in society are another social influence that affects identity. Prejudiced social systems reinforce low self-worth among excluded individuals (Christian, 1994). Perhaps colonialism and racism are conspicuous examples of social influences that have contributed to a marred identity among certain people groups, like in Africa, where white colonial rulers treated Africans as less humans. The colonists understood themselves as superior, essential, and anointed to rule. They used religion, government policies, and bureaucracies to justify their privileged status. Africans could not access leisure places like beaches and resorts in South Africa. In Malawi, only white people were allowed to enter market stores, while Africans were asked to shop through the window. The treatment of Africans in religious communities was not different. Some white missionaries presented themselves as holier than Africans. They portrayed angels and Jesus in white skin, yet Jesus was not white. These activities of white people influenced Africans to think of themselves as diminished humans and that this is as it should be. The effect of white missionaries and colonists has prevailed to this day, especially among African women, as evident in skin bleaching and the use of hair mesh extensions to look like white people, a clear sign of low self-worth. Contemporary societies continue to exert a negative influence on black people by promoting Eurocentric beauty standards. European faces dominate advertisements, fashion magazines, and movie posters as symbols of beauty. Beauty featured on screens rarely resembles black people. Unsurprisingly, some black people struggle with feelings of inadequacy as they long for Eurocentric ideals so they can be accepted in society. Such social influences play a big role in marring human identity. However, a marred identity is not something that cannot be repaired.

8.2. Repairing a Marred Identity

Just as identity can be marred, it can be repaired and improved. Studies in the field of religion and development provide overwhelming evidence of individuals who experienced identity transformation due to the influence of their religious communities. A participant in an ethnographic study reported that she had no direction in her life before she had received Jesus. When she received Jesus, she became hopeful about her future and was motivated to return to school (Hasu, 2012). Another study quoted a participant who reported gaining confidence and hope for the future after receiving Jesus (Piot, 2012). In the same study, another participant said:

"The new churches make people feel good about themselves and give them the willpower to take control of their lives... Christianity empowers. It gives people the feeling that they can take hold of their lives and improve them." (Piot, 2012, pp. 122–123).

In these direct quotes, restoration of hope and confidence about the future allude to improved self-efficacy, while the willpower to take control of one's own life implies an enhanced internal locus of control, which constitutes identity. The participants quoted in these studies seem to have experienced recovery from a marred identity. Other researchers have reported similar findings whereby individuals rejected their negative and fatalistic beliefs and adopted a new look and positive beliefs about themselves due to the influence of their religious communities (Dambula, 2022; Freeman, 2013; Heslam, 2016; Hunt, 2002; Togarasei & Biri, 2018).

How religious communities facilitate identity transformation among their converts has been explained by several researchers. According to Miller and Yamamori (2007), religious converts realize their worthiness as God's image through participation in worship rituals. Freeman (2012) suggests that some religious communities provide constant positive feedback to their members to make them realize that they are worthy humans with agency, a practice known as social persuasion in social psychology (Bandura, 1982; Setiawan, 2014). In another study, she added that the weekly Bible studies some religious communities conduct introduce beliefs to new converts, gradually transforming their self-worth (Freeman, 2013). Another explanation was provided by Riches (2017), who focused on religious communities of Aboriginals in Australia to understand how religious communities influence identity transformation. She concluded that worship rituals induce physical and emotional responsiveness,
encouraging participants to imagine themselves in dialogue with the Spirit of God, who transforms them by rewriting their internalized scripts of low self-worth (190). These findings seem to have been supported by scholars of religious conversion. Evidence in the literature highlights identity as one of the personality components impacted by religious conversion experience (Gillespie, 1991; Rambo & Farhadian, 1999).

However, religion is not the only factor that facilitates identity transformation. My study, which sought to investigate whether the participants had experienced identity transformation, discovered that apart from religious communities, the influence of the families in which the participants were raised contributed to their experience of identity transformation (Dambula, 2022, pp. 152–156). One of the participants reported, “In my childhood days, my grandparents used to encourage me not to give up. . . They used to tell me that I would be successful next time. That stuck with me, and I still draw on that during business challenges” (Dambula, 2022, p. 131). Another participant reported that when he was young, his parents encouraged him to work hard and be self-reliant (Dambula, 2022). The first statement suggests that the participant’s family (grandparents) contributed to his adoption of persistence, which is an element of self-efficacy (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994; Shane et al., 2003), while the second statement shows that the participant’s family (parents) had instilled work ethic in him, which is an element of locus of control which is an individual’s belief that they can work hard (self-reliant) and influence things to achieve their desired outcome (Poon et al., 2006; Simpeh, 2011).

Further evidence of the effect of families on identity suggests that supportive parents often have children with positive attributes of identity (Enger et al., 1994; Kernis et al., 2000). In addition, parents who encourage autonomy among their children enhance their positive self-efficacy (Allen et al., 1994; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). It should be admitted, however, that religious communities and families may not be the only agents of identity transformation. Further investigation is therefore recommended in this area.

9. Recommendations for Development Research and Practice

As an integral variable in the wellbeing equation, identity deserves attention in development practice. Various development strategies have been tried, but the results have not been as satisfactory as expected. Training programs for capacity building, borehole drilling for potable water, construction of clinics for health services, education projects for literacy boost, provision of microloans for small businesses, and many other development initiatives have been rolled out with the hope of achieving wellbeing aspirations for all humans across the globe. Identity has been left out of the prevailing development initiatives. It is recommended to try out development initiatives focusing on identity transformation to promote human wellbeing. While further research is needed in identity to discover more agents of identity transformation and how to engage them in rolling out development initiatives designed to facilitate identity transformation, families and religious communities could be a starting point.

Development actors such as nongovernmental and governmental organizations could encourage families and religious communities to facilitate identity transformation among their members intentionally. As much as families and religious communities facilitate identity transformation, they can contribute to marring identity if their influence is negative. Families that are too controlling, too demanding, unsupportive, and unappreciative of their children’s thoughts and opinions facilitate the marring of identity (Allen et al., 1994; Carton & Nowicki, 1994; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Kernis et al., 2000). Similarly, religious communities can influence identity negatively if they promote beliefs that socially exclude or undermine certain people groups, like what some white missionaries and colonists did to Africans. Collaborative efforts between development actors, families, and religious communities could help raise awareness of the negative influences of the practices that contribute to marred identity and promote those that lead to the recovery and enhancement of the positive attributes of identity. To this end, it must be admitted that identity transformation is not a panacea in the pursuit of wellbeing. However, trying it out in development practice is worthwhile.

10. Conclusion

As much as wellbeing has been defined differently, all definitions seem to be pointed towards personal, social, and environmental conditions as its main determinants and constituents. Indeed, these three variables appear to overarch all possible conversion factors for transforming resources into functionings at the individual level. While identity is an element of personal conditions (I ∈ P), this paper has argued that its unique role and magnitude of influence in propelling human action towards wellbeing attainment is so profound that it deserves to be considered among the main subsets of wellbeing. Identity is an oasis of the steam that drives human action to fulfil wellbeing aspirations.
The vital role of identity helps to explain why some people pursue the functionings they deem important to improve their wellbeing, while others living under similar conditions do not. Therefore, this paper has proposed a wellbeing equation that is expressed as a function of four variables: environmental conditions, social conditions, personal conditions, and identity.

This paper has discussed that identity can be marred, repaired, or enhanced. This understanding of the properties of identity and its role in pursuing wellbeing aspirations is an important opportunity for practitioners to expedite development progress. Development actors like nongovernmental and governmental organizations could initiate programs for social institutions designed to encourage activities that facilitate identity transformation among their members. Studies reviewed in this paper have identified families and religious communities as social institutions that facilitate identity transformation. While these two institutions provide a starting point for rolling out identity transformation initiatives, further research is recommended to explore other potential agents of identity transformation.

References