ISSN 1756-7904

DEV INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT University of East Anglia

Working Paper Series

Cultures of Aspiration and Poverty? Aspirational Inequalities in Northeast and Southern Thailand

Laura Camfield, Awae Masae, Allister McGregor and Buapun Promphaking

2012

University of East Anglia

Working Paper 38

The School of International Development, University of East Anglia
Norwich, NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom

DEV Working Paper 38

Cultures of Aspiration and Poverty? Aspirational Inequalities in Northeast and Southern Thailand

Laura Camfield, Awae Masae, Allister McGregor and Buapun Promphaking

---

First published by the School of International Development in June 2012.

This publication may be cited as:
Camfield, L., Masae, A., McGregor, A., Promphaking, B., 2012, Cultures of Aspiration and Poverty? Aspirational Inequalities in Northeast and Southern Thailand, Working Paper 38, DEV Working Paper Series, The School of International Development, University of East Anglia, UK.

About the Authors

Laura Camfield is a Lecturer in International Development in the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

Awae Masae is a Lecturer in the School of Social and Environmental Development at the National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand.

Prof. Allister McGregor is Head of the Vulnerability and Poverty Reduction team at the Institute for Development Studies, Sussex, UK.

Buapun Promphaking is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand.

The work reported in this paper was conducted while the authors were working for the ESRC Wellbeing in Developing Countries Research Group in Bath, UK.

Contact:
Email l.camfield@uea.ac.uk
School of International Development
University of East Anglia
Norwich, NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom
Tel: +44(0)1603 591885
Fax: +44(0)1603 451999

ISSN 1756-7904

About the DEV Working Paper Series

The Working Paper Series profiles research and policy work conducted by the School of International Development and International Development UEA (see below). Launched in 2007, it provides an opportunity for staff, associated researchers and fellows to disseminate original research and policy advice on a wide range of subjects. All papers are peer reviewed within the School.

About the School of International Development

The School of International Development (DEV) applies economic, social and natural science disciplines to the study of international development, with special emphasis on social and environmental change and poverty alleviation. DEV has a strong commitment to an interdisciplinary research and teaching approach to Development Studies and the study of poverty.

International Development UEA (formerly Overseas Development Group)

Founded in 1967, International Development UEA is a charitable company wholly owned by the University of East Anglia, which handles the consultancy, research, and training undertaken by the faculty members in DEV and approximately 200 external consultants. Since its foundation it has provided training for professionals from more than 70 countries and completed over 1,000 consultancy and research assignments. International Development UEA provides DEV staff with opportunities to participate in on-going development work, practical and policy related engagement which add a unique and valuable element to the School's teaching programmes.

For further information on DEV and the International Development UEA, please contact:

School of International Development
University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1603 592329
Fax: +44 (0)1603 451999
Email: dev.general@uea.ac.uk
Webpage: www.uea.ac.uk/dev

Abstract

The paper provides micro-level evidence of rising inequality in Thailand, using data from an intensive study of seven communities in Northeast and Southern Thailand. This inequality affects participants' material and subjective wellbeing, their aspirations, and the extent to which they feel these are realised. The paper argues that adaptation, expressed as reduced aspirations, could explain why the effect of material poverty on people's satisfaction with their lives is small. The reduction in attainment of aspirations linked to socio-economic status suggests that a small, but constant group of people are being excluded from a shift in the societal consensus over what constitutes a good life.

1. Introduction

Thailand is a country now better known for its remarkable development rather than for its poverty. Since the 1960s it has experienced long periods of growth and modernisation that have been little short of astonishing. However, many commentators are also concerned by the growing inequality that has accompanied its development (Bellow et al. 1999; Pongpaichit and Baker, 2009; Rigg and Salamanca, 2009). This inequality is evident in terms of the material conditions that people experience and although Thailand has made considerable progress in reducing the proportion of the population that falls below the poverty line there continues to be considerable policy concern for the living conditions of some sections of the population. However, what is proving to be more significant for the political and social development of the nation in recent years is that alongside material inequalities there is also evidence of aspirational inequalities (e.g. Mills, 1997; Isaacs, 2009) as goods, experiences and statuses that were previously unattainable come into reach for a much larger proportion of the population than before. Many Thais can now pursue highly sophisticated, globalised, and materially rich lifestyles, but others are coming to the view that they cannot realistically aspire to the ways of life of their more modern, urbanised compatriots. Preliminary analyses of our data showed that material poverty increases negative emotions (measured by the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, Watson et al., 1988), but has no effect on satisfaction with life as a whole (measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale, Diener et al., 1985). This seems surprising, bearing in mind the effect of income poverty on asset holdings, need fulfilment, education and occupation within this sample, as we describe later. This finding led us to further investigate the data seeking evidence to support the possibility that people's adaptation to their material circumstances, expressed as reduced aspirations, is the reason why the effect on satisfaction with life and positive emotions is small.

This paper is based on the analysis of data from an intensive study of seven communities in Northeast and Southern Thailand. This comprehensive and multi-disciplinary study involved data collection at the individual, household and

community levels and was designed to reveal the patterns of human wellbeing outcomes that were achieved in these communities. The research, which used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, also sought to explore the social, economic and political processes whereby these outcomes were achieved. The types of communities studied in each of the two regions of Thailand ranged from remote rural to peri-urban villages to urban neighbourhoods and they were studied over a period of 18 months. For a more detailed explanation of the methodology employed in the study see McGregor et al. (2007a).

Aspirational inequalities are implicitly the lynchpin of contemporary development debates in Thailand and they provide a pivotal tension for contemporary national politics. Media coverage of the political protects of 2009, e.g. http://asiancorrespondent.com/24086/inequality-of-opportunities/, linked the protests to the income inequality highlighted in the 2009 Thai Human Development report (UNDP, 2009), which found that the 20 percent of Thais in the top income quintile earn 14.7 times more than those in the bottom income quintile. This is a far higher income inequality ratio than either Europe/North America (excluding Scandinavia), which has an inequality ratio of 5 to 8 times more, or Thailand's South-east Asian neighbours (9 to 11 times more). The effects of these inequalities are particularly evident in rural lives, where '… as villagers attempt to pursue the standards and symbols of modern wealth, comfort and status, they encounter major obstacles in their day-to-day realities of political and economic dependence, exploitation, and poverty' (Mills, 1995:255). A recent report on the 'income gap' in Thailand by Somchai Jitsuchon (NESDB, 2011) confirmed this analysis, identifying a politically significant 'missing middle' in the form of the lower middle classes (those from poor backgrounds with few assets and educated only to secondary school). This group was benefitting least from recent economic growth as they were unable to catch up with rising incomes among the rich and were being squeezed by the lower-income group which had received financial support under the Thaksin administration (2001-2006). We argue here that understanding aspirational inequalities is important for how we understand experiences of poverty and poverty dynamics under conditions of rapid growth and social change. They also provide insights into the kinds of profound political division that can beset fast modernising, developing societies like Thailand such as the longstanding conflict in the Southernmost provinces of Thailand, which has intensified since 2004, and the active role played by people from Northeast Thailand in the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship ('red shirts'), which organised high profile demonstrations in 2009.

1.1 Context

In almost all villages in Thailand, including the most remote, it is possible to find satellite televisions on which villagers daily observe the modern and consumerist lifestyles of fellow citizens in Bangkok and in other countries around the globe.

Images of metropolitan lifestyles, involving increased physical comfort, material convenience, and opportunities for travel are widely disseminated through public education and the mass media. However, they are not reflected in the daily reality of people living in the seven communities studied in Northeast and Southern Thailand. Nonetheless, many of the respondents in all the communities explained that they wanted to feel that they were sharing in the 'samai mai' (new times). In one of the rural communities in the South (Baan Chaikao) for example, houses being newly constructed copied modern urban architectural styles and made a strategic display of key material possessions such as new pick-up trucks and motor bikes. Purchases such as these had sometimes been enabled by incomes from migrant work in factories in regional towns or in Bangkok and the experience of the urban setting were fresh in many minds. In almost all of the communities studied migration was a common livelihood experience for young villagers. Migration from rural areas was also colloquially described as 'going to get (white) skin' (Mills, 1997:43), since such work was often indoors as well as having a disposable income which allowed people to seek to achieve images of modern style and beauty.

1.2 Evidence of inequality

Despite the increased familiarity with urban life the processes of modernisation in Thailand are not as smooth as might be suggested by a superficial view from ultra modern Bangkok. This study confirmed that the trends of growing inequality that have long been a concern for Thais continue. We propose however that it is helpful to understand this rising inequality in terms of three dimensions – material (people's assets, the extent to which they can satisfy needs, and education and occupations), relational (the extent to which the relationships or networks that people have in the society and economy enable them to do the things they want to do) and aspirational (revealed through people's life satisfaction and views of what they aspire to and the extent to which they feel these aspirations are realised). Inequality in all three dimensions is shown to relate to location, age and particularly socio-economic status, which affects people's relationships and aspirations, as well as their material wellbeing.

1.3 Aspirations and adaptation

The reduction in the attainment of aspirations linked to socio-economic status suggests that a small, but consistent group of people in our sites are not benefitting from what appears to be a widespread shift in the societal consensus in Thailand over what constitutes a good life. The universality of this shift is demonstrated by the relatively small differences in the number of valued goals between rural and peri-urban/urban respondents and middle-aged and older age groups within this sample. There is evidence in Thailand, as in other rapidly developing countries, of two parallel processes: rising and unequally satisfied aspirations among the younger generation, and adaptation among those who have been marginalised by recent

economic developments (Dalton, Ghosal and Mani, 2010). We will look first at aspirations, particularly in relation to the new forms of consumption available to young people in Thailand (Wilson, 2004; Mills, 1997).

The importance of consumption for modern, urban Thai identity can be imagined from the reactions to the burning of Bangkok's Central World shopping complex in May 2010 during anti-government protests. Taylor (2011:6-7) describes how "the consequence of the arson was a massive outpouring of emotion from Bangkok's middle classes; a "mourning" not of a death of a material object, but of life itself [...] to smash the "dreamscape", the desires and imaginings of the middleclass in bringing down CW was tantamount to declaring a class war". Isaac's (2009) develops a similar line of argument in his study of the growth of European hypermarkets in the Northern city of Chiang Mai. The rapid expansion of the Tesco-Lotus and other supermarket chains throughout Thailand ('Talad Tesco') has lead them to be seen as places where consumers enact middle class identities and use their consumption choices to indicate their preference for 'elite' (modern, clean, private, quick) rather than 'traditional' ways of life (old, dirty, public, slow). Isaacs (2009:353) uses the example of a woman[1] who owns a traditional barbecued pork stall in a nearby village who reports that "when I eat dry food or sticky rice I use my hands. But when I go to the supermarket and eat there I need to use fork and spoon to be polite and look nice'. The desire to conform and participate in the standards and norms of the hypermarket illustrates how it is operating as a symbol of modernity in Thailand that suspends or reconfigures traditional values and age-based hierarchies:

A dual-sited ethnographic study of female garment workers from North-Eastern villages by Mills (1997) also confirmed the importance of symbols of modernity for young people in Thailand. She argues that being seen as modern is particularly important for people from the North-East (from Isaan) due to their historical depiction as 'backward' and 'undeveloped' – the 'country bumpkins' in television soap operas. The linking of modernity and femininity to urban living means that many young rural women believe that only by migrating to Bangkok will they be able to acquire an identity that is modern and sophisticated. Unfortunately the demands of factory work mean that they are often unable to live this identity in the urban setting and are only able to enact it by returning to the village to display their modernity. Returnee urban migrants inevitably influence the aspirations of those who have been left behind in villages. Mills' ethnography fleshes out the pathways identified by Nguyen et al.'s (2009) study of how young Thais (ages 20-32) acquire materialist values. Nguyen et al conclude that peer communication about consumption during adolescence is the main influence on aspirations, rather than television or socio-economic status.

[1] The stall holder is probably an older woman, although her age is not given.

Studies of consumption aspirations in other developing countries have similarly highlighted how people's evaluations of satisfaction are influenced by local reference groups (Fafchamps and Shilpi, 2008, Nepal; Guillen-Royo, 2011, Peru) as well as current income (Herrera et al., 2006, Madagascar and Peru). Herrera et al. (2006) observe another framing effect that may have relevance to Thailand, which is how perceptions of the (un)desirability of inequality affect people's subjective wellbeing. For example, Herrera et al's data, collected from two longitudinal studies of individuals and households in the capitals of Peru and Madagascar suggest that in Lima (Peru) inequality is seen as an indicator of social mobility and so respondents who live in areas with great inequality have higher subjective wellbeing, regardless of their own income. Conversely, in the smaller and less heterogeneous city of Antananarivo (Madagascar) social homogeneity is valued as the basis of good social relationships and inequality in the neighbourhood reduces subjective wellbeing (similar differences are found in Alesina et al's (2004) comparison of perceptions of the desirability of inequality in Europe and North America, which are not affected by the respondent's own position). Herrera et al's findings in Lima may seem counter-intuitive, however, they support Hirschman and Rothschild's (1973) analogy of a two-lane tunnel where the traffic is heading in the same direction and slows to a stop. When a driver sees the cars move in the opposite lane they are initially encouraged, but if their lane continues not to move they "experience the turnaround from hopefulness to disenchantment" with consequent "potential for social upheaval" (p552) which Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) dub the 'tunnel effect'. Studies also find that consumption shows mixed effects on subjective wellbeing; Sugata and Ranjana (2010) and Linssen et al. (2011) found negative effects in India, due to the 'treadmill effect' of status-driven consumption (Sugata and Ranjana found that 'status driven consumption' reduced expenditure on household nutrition and saving while Linssen et al found expenditure on 'conspicuous consumption' lowered subjective wellbeing, regardless of the respondent's income relative to others). Conversely, Guillen-Royo (2011) found positive effects in Peru due to the inherent pleasures of consumption and providing for a household.

Evidence on the extent of adaptation and its effect on subjective wellbeing is similarly mixed. Clark (2007:11) argues that adaptation to material deprivation occurs less frequently than is claimed, as poor people retain an awareness of what they lack: "while the poor and disadvantaged often report high levels of happiness and life satisfaction […] they are still capable of imagining, articulating and demanding a substantially better or 'good' form of life". Barr and Clark (2007:23) provide empirical support for this in their analysis of a dataset from Cape South Africa which concluded that adaptation to low incomes and limited opportunities is at best partial. Recent research with children in Ethiopia suggests that many children experience an acutely painful awareness of the gap between the life they are living and the one they aspire to, even if to an observer the space between the two appears unbridgeable (Camfield, 2010).

Other authors, e.g. Elster (1983), argue that humans have efficient psychological mechanisms which reduce the dissonance between their aspirations and their reality by reducing their aspirations. He uses Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes to illustrate his point – when the fox realizes that he cannot reach the grapes, he decides that they were probably sour. Mechanisms of this kind underpin the notion of a "culture of poverty", where the dynamics of persistent poverty cause people to consciously or unconsciously limit their goals to what they believe is achievable (Lewis, 1966). In a contemporary study Desai (2010:5-6) argues that further research is needed into what has been characterised as "a distinctive, self-perpetuating culture of poverty" in urban environments in some developing countries that "deals with authority in certain ways, that promotes certain forms of self-destructive (even criminal) behaviour, and that largely is self-excluded from civic life". He attributes this to forms of socialisation ranging from families to "religious groups to mafias and street gangs" (ibid) that practice self-exclusion in response to structural barriers to inclusion in mainstream society. Desai's analysis is an example of the new generation of scholarship on the cultural dimensions of poverty which according to Small et al. (2010) rejects the idea that people's poverty can be explained by their values, or a common culture, or even that "members of a group or nation share "a culture" or that a group's culture is more or less coherent or internally consistent" (ibid:8). Swidler (1986), for example, suggests that poor people are not culturally impoverished, but lack access to (the right) set of ideas to construct their strategies and actions from. This means that their 'repertoire of actions' or 'toolkit' is constrained, while "some actors may have greater horizons of possibility because they have a wider array of repertoires of action" (Small et al., 2010:16).

Swidler's (1986) ideas about constrained repertoires of action are echoed in Appadurai's (2004) concept of 'the capacity to aspire' which he sees as differentially distributed and as key to reproducing existing social structural conditions. Appadurai argues that the development of people's capacity to aspire is central to overall development process as 'it provides an ethical horizon within which more concrete capabilities can be given meaning, substance, and sustainability' (ibid:82). By exercising and nurturing these capabilities people are then able to 'move […] away from wishful thinking to thoughtful wishing' (ibid). An empirical example of these processes is provided by Muller's (2010) evaluation of an HIV/AIDS mitigation intervention in Central Mozambique which by building participants' agricultural skills also developed their capacity to aspire. Muller gives the example of Carlito who "before becoming involved in the project, working on the machamba was merely a means to survive, now being a professional farmer has become a major part of his future ambition" (ibd:264-5). Carlito's experience represents the progression identified by Dorward et al. (2009:242-3) from 'hanging out' through 'stepping up' to 'stepping out' "whereby existing activities are engaged in to accumulate assets which in time can then provide a base or 'launch pad' [...] for example, the accumulation of livestock as savings which can then be sold to finance children's education".

Bernard et al. (2011) in their study of rural households in Ethiopia identify the opposite condition of 'aspirations failure', expressed in the form of fatalism. They found that fatalism, measured by whether the respondent agreed with the statement "one's success or failure in life is a matter of his/her destiny", is consistently correlated with low expressed demand for credit, which they suggest reflects a lack of entrepreneurial spirit. However, the authors acknowledge measurement issues in relation to aspirations and that there may be reasons for avoiding debt embedded in individual biographies, which have also affected the sense of control respondents feel they have over their lives. The operationalism of aspiration failure as fatalism can also be questioned as it is possible that believe that ultimately outcomes are predestined and take a fatalistic attitude to failure while still actively pursuing aspirations. Ibrahim's (2010) survey of rural and urban households in Egypt also finds aspirations failure in eight domains, and particularly in the areas of employment and education. She identifies two dynamics of aspirational failure: a downward spiral as aspirations reduce in the face of repeated failures and as a consequence of these failures an intergenerational transmission where, for example, children are withdrawn from education to enter the workforce.

Appadurai establishes the connection between culture and aspiration by noting that 'aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms. Aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life' (2004:67). His proposition is supported by Macours and Vakis (2009) who find that the aspirations and investments of Nicaraguan households after receipt of a cash transfer are primarily influenced by their social interactions. Appadurai (2004:65-6) further observes that poor people can oscillate between an alienation from and a 'deep moral attachment' towards societal norms that support their own oppression: 'the poor are frequently in a position where they are encouraged to subscribe to norms whose social effect is to further diminish their dignity, exacerbate their inequality, and deepen their lack of access to material goods and services'. As we have suggested earlier such tensions may have profound political consequences for modernising, developing societies like Thailand. The binary relationship to core cultural values (i.e. either negative or over-attached) for those who are the caught in this tension, may cause them to swing between 'loyalty' and 'exit' without having the space to participate critically in society and to develop the distinctiveness of their own 'voice' (Hirschman, 1970).

One of the main implications of high aspirations is the effect on people's subjective wellbeing when their aspirations are frustrated (Ruta et al, 2007; Copestake and Camfield, 2010). Work by Ray (2003) suggests that if the aspiration gap is small then people will be motivated to close it because it seems likely that they will be successful, but if it is large then they won't, causing ''the curse of frustrated aspirations'' or aspiration failure. As has long been noted by writers in a culture of

poverty tradition, aspiration failure can occur if people have failed to aspire in the first place. But elaborating on this Ray develops three concepts to further explain how aspirations work: the aspiration window - a person's cognitive world which is peopled by 'similar' individuals; the aspiration gap - the difference between their actual and aspired standard of living; and aspiration failure - their response to that gap. He argues that since aspirations are socially determined they are unevenly distributed across different wealth strata in society. This suggests that the "terms of recognition" are often such that the aspirations of the poor are lowered, thus depriving them of the ideational resources to challenge their own poverty (a point made by both Lukes (2002) and Doyal and Gough (1991) in their discussion of 'critical autonomy').

Ray's (2003) understanding of how people respond to aspiration gaps is supported by Van Kempen and Luuk's (2009) experimental study of female self-help groups in North-East India. This found that "if the gap between expectations and achievements becomes too wide, the valuation of agency tends to go down. Moderate expectation shortfalls on the other hand seem to have the opposite effect and foster a stronger degree of commitment to future empowerment" (ibid:477). Graham and Pettinato (2002) find a similarly adverse affect on the subjective wellbeing of certain Peruvians whom they label ''frustrated achievers'' because an improvement in income caused them to report lower satisfaction with their economic situation. Interpreting this using Ray's schema suggests that their dissatisfaction could be attributed to a greater expansion of their aspirations window than their increased income could support. Finally, Ahmed et al.'s (2001) study of Bangladeshi women participating in a BRAC micro-credit scheme found that the higher the woman's perceived contribution to household income, the more likely she was to report emotional stress and express fatalistic attitudes (aspirations failure). They suggest that this may be due to the ''discrepancy between expectations and achievement'' (ibid:1957) where participants and their families have high expectations of the benefits from the project and are frustrated and disappointed when these are not realised or not realised as quickly as they expected.

2. Methodology

2.1. The study sites

The data the paper is based on was collected from adult household members in seven rural, peri-urban and urban communities in the Northeast and South Thailand between 2003 and 2006. The Northeast and the South of Thailand are two of the most populous regions of Thailand, which together account for forty eight per cent of the population. As Table 1 illustrates, their aggregate position in terms of economic and human development indicators is markedly different.

Table 1. Regional differences in per capita income, poverty and selected human development indicators

Regions	*Annual Per Capita Income, 2001*	*Poverty Incidence (%), 2002*	*Maternal mortality per 100,000 births*	*% workforce with social security*	*% no education*	*Mean years of schooling*
Kingdom	78,783	14.2	12.9	17.1	5.5	7.3
Bangkok	234,398	0.3	10	47.5	4	9.6
Central	75,075	6.1	11	24.6	4.8	7.1
Northeast	**26,755**	**28.1**	**9.8**	**3.4**	**2.8**	**6.7**
South	**53,966**	**11**	**19.9**	**9.4**	**7.7**	**7.1**

Source: UNDP, 2007.

While the Northeast is the region with the highest incidence of income poverty and greatest number of poor people, the South is one of the wealthier regions of the country, albeit that is still falls below the Bangkok and Central regions (UNDP, 2007). These aggregate outcomes provide us with important contextual information when seeking to understand the wellbeing prospects of different men, women and children, but we must also note that the aggregates obscure the considerable diversity within the regions. The urban centres of Khon Kaen in the Northeast and Had Yai in the South are, like many other provincial centres in Thailand, rapidly growing and modernising. The rural areas are also widely differentiated. In the South, for example, the three most Southerly provinces (not included in this study) are amongst the poorest in the country and they account for a range of poverty incidence amongst provinces in the South from zero to twenty three per cent (ibid).

The differences between the regions have their basis partially in environmental conditions. The Northeast is predominantly a semi-arid plateau, which hitherto has been used to cultivate rice and low-return field crops such as cassava. The South has an agricultural base of rubber and fruit production that has been remunerative, while its coastal areas benefit from fishing and have emerged as a popular destination for international tourism. The two regions also have distinctive histories and social and cultural identities. For example, in Thailand the Northeast is referred to as Isan which is a culturally and politically important label that distinguishes Northeasterners from the rest of Thailand. In contrast, the South contains a large proportion of Thai Muslims and people who are ethnically Malay, which gives the region a distinctive feel and character.

The seven communities were selected to span rural, peri-urban and urban locations and to provide insight into a range of challenges that are being generated by the Thai

model of development. The five rural sites represent different degrees of proximity and connectedness to urban centres, infrastructural development, ethnic composition, and dependence on agriculture and natural resources. These were supplemented by sites in the two rapidly growing provincial cities (Khon Kaen in the Northeast and Had Yai in the South), so as to explore the disparities between rural and urban areas. Bangkok was not included in this study so we cannot contrast the aspirations and satisfactions of people there with those in the communities studied here. We also do not discuss the impact of religion because within our sample this is confounded by location (the majority of the Buddhist respondents are located in the Northeast while the Muslim ones are in wealthier communities in the South). However our data does enable us to compare the material and subjective wellbeing and the types of goals aspired to and achieved for people from different age groups, socio-economic statuses, rural and urban locations.

2.2. Methods

The paper draws on data generated by different elements of a methodology for studying the social and cultural construction of wellbeing that integrates qualitative and quantitative research (McGregor, 2007). It originates from a distinctive approach to wellbeing that builds on the Theory of Human Needs (Doyal and Gough, 1991), Sen's capability approach and earlier work on entitlements which highlighted the importance of relationships, and studies of subjective understandings of wellbeing from psychology and 'participatory' research (Gough et al, 2007; McGregor, 2007). On the basis of the evidence reviewed in the first part of the paper we expected to find statistically significant differences relating to location, socio-economic status, and age for indicators of i) Material wellbeing (asset holdings, needs satisfaction, education, and occupation), ii) Subjective wellbeing (satisfaction with life, positive and negative affect), and iii) Aspirations (number and type of goals perceived as necessary – goal importance, and number and type of goals perceived as attained – goal satisfaction). For example, people who were older, poorer, and living in rural locations might both express and realise fewer of their aspirations. These differences would indicate broader differences between communities and households within these communities that support our identification of rising and solidifying inequalities. The data reported here comes from the measures of material wellbeing (the Resources and Needs Questionnaire, RANQ, the Asset Index, and the Intermediate Needs Deprivation Index, INDI), subjective wellbeing (Satisfaction with Life Scale, SWLS, and Positive and Negative Affect Scales, PANAS) and aspirations (WeDQoL-goals), which are described below. While we mainly report data from measures of material and subjective wellbeing, we also collected data on relationships and social structures using methods such as participant observation, household case studies, and in-depth interviews on topics such as community institutions which we use to interpret the quantitative data presented here.

Material wellbeing: The Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ)

The Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ) is a household survey designed to identify the types of resources that households have to pursue their wellbeing, and establish what needs are being met for specific households, represented by scores on the Intermediate Needs Deprivation Index (INDI). The RANQ's development involved iteration across countries and disciplines to achieve sufficient cognitive and linguistic equivalence that results from it could be analysed both across communities in a single country and across the four countries. In Thailand the RANQ was administered by teams of local research partners led by two of the authors. The data from the RANQ enables examination of differences in objective indicators by location and by age group and allows us to break down the population by socio-economic status.

Subjective wellbeing: Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS)

We applied adapted versions of two international measures; one capturing satisfaction with life as a whole (SWLS, Diener et al. 1985), the other feelings or, put more precisely, positive and negative affect (PANAS, Watson et al. 1988). The SWLS was administered with a three point scale (5 items, range 5-15) and the PANAS with a five point scale. We have reported separate scores for the components of Positive Affect (9 items, range 9-45[2]) and Negative Affect (10 items, range 10-50). Respondents to these scales and the WeDQoL-goals were sub-sampled from the RANQ so that we could connect data on people's wellbeing and their material circumstances.

Aspirations: The WeD Quality of Life measure (WeDQoL-goals)

The WeD Quality of Life measure (WeDQoL Weighted Goal Attainment Scale or WeDQoL-goals) has two components that measure i) how necessary a person perceives an item to be to their wellbeing (the question asked 'What things do you think are necessary to make you happy?' and the responses were i) not necessary, ii) necessary, and iii) very necessary) and ii) how satisfied they are with this item. The first component is used to weight the second so the final score represents satisfaction with items that are valued by the respondent. The WeDQoL-goals' development was influenced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition of quality of life , however, the group modified this to represent subjective quality of life as arising from the disjuncture between what people aspire to and their evaluation of their ability to achieve those aspirations. This approach recognises that the goals that people regard as important for their wellbeing include material items but also relationships, personal qualities and dispositions. Measure development involved a review of existing methods of subjective quality of life used in developing countries;

[2] The Positive Affect scale normally contains ten items, but we dropped one item, 'excited', which failed to load on the same factor as the other items, presumably because it was not perceived as positive by the respondents. The alpha of the positive affect scale with 'excited' excluded was 0.805.

open-ended qualitative research by local fieldworkers in each of the four countries to identify what local people regarded as important goals for their quality of life (Camfield, 2006); and the trialling and psychometric validation of the final form of the instrument (Woodcock et al. 2007). The WeDQoL-goals had a common format with additional country-specific items.

In Thailand the WeDQoL-goals consisted of fifty one items and was interview-administered to 369 people, sub-sampled from the RANQ, who were aged between 15 to 89 (mean age 45.7, sd 18.0). Respondents rated the perceived necessity for wellbeing of the fifty one goals using a three-point scale (0 to 2, where 0 represents 'unnecessary', and 2 'very necessary'). They then rated their satisfaction in achievement of the same goals. The scores for necessity were used to weight the scores for satisfaction so goals that were 'not necessary' were excluded when calculating goal satisfaction, while those that were 'very necessary' were weighted more highly. The factor analysis of WeDQoL-goals identified three factors which have been labelled by the researchers as 'community/social/health' (twenty three item, alpha 0.90), 'nuclear family' (six item, alpha 0.82), and 'house and home' (fifteen item, alpha 0.80). The 'house and home' factor can be sub-divided into two sub-scales for a more fine-grained analysis: 'basic house and home' (eleven item, alpha 0.80) and 'luxury' (four item, alpha 0.61). Table 2 in the appendix shows whether the data maps neatly into different factors or whether there is overlap between factors ('cross-loading'), e.g. friendship and being recognised in the community could be part of both the 'community/social/health' and 'luxury' factors. The factor scores enable a more reliable representation of the importance a respondent accords to a domain of life, for example, their family, than would be provided by a single item. For this reason the analysis of between-group differences uses the factor scores rather than the item scores.

The analysis of aspirations focuses on between-group differences for total and factor scores for goal necessity and goal attainment for people from different locations (rural, n=153 vs. peri-urban/ urban, n=216), socio-economic statuses (poor, n=103 vs. non-poor, n=266), and generations (age groups 15 to 24, n=51, 25 to 44, n=138, 45 to 64, n=107, 65+, n=73). As explained earlier, we were not able to look at religion as this was confounded with region, and gender proved not to be significant in our analyses, although clearly an important factor shaping the formation and pursuit of aspirations (Mills, 1997). The significance of differences between these groups was tested using independent sample t-tests or ANOVA[3] with a post-hoc Scheffe test[4], as appropriate.

[3] T-tests and ANOVA shows whether differences between groups are statistically significant or could have occurred by chance. It was possible to use these tests because the variables were normally distributed, with the exception of the sub-scale score for nuclear family goal attainment. The distribution of the scores for this sub-scale reflects changes in attainment of such goals at different times of life, despite consensus as to their importance.

In the following section we compare the material wellbeing, subjective wellbeing and aspirations of people from different locations, socio-economic statuses, and age groups.

3. Results

3.1 Material wellbeing

The first part of this section provides a broad overview of differences by location, before reporting differences in Asset Index and Intermediate Need Deprivation Index scores by type of community, age of household head, and socio-economic status. In the final section it reports differences in the key aspirational areas of education and occupation by the same categories (age of household head is replaced by age of household member to enable analysis of a larger dataset).

3.1.1 Overview

In the communities studied household composition changes as we move from rural, through peri-urban, to urban sites. In particular, the number of female household heads increases, while household size and number of children decrease. People's social networks outside the household appear to get smaller, evidenced by less regular contact with friends and relatives and reduced community participation. Access to educational facilities and educational outcomes improve; illiteracy reduces (especially among older people); and years of schooling and the likelihood of speaking Thai and English increase, suggesting a greater exposure to alternative lifestyles and an increase in choices, which we might expect would affect the nature and scale of people's aspirations. Increases in the choices available to people in urban communities is also reflected in decreasing use of government services, including healthcare, despite the greater availability of government provision in urban areas. People in more urban communities also appear to be materially better off: housing quality increases (for example, having a tiled roof and an inside toilet), as does the quality of people's transportation (pick-up trucks rather than motorbikes). This greater material security is indicated by decreasing vulnerability to 'shocks' that adversely affect income or assets, higher scores on the Asset Index, and lower scores on the Intermediate Need Deprivation Index. However, urban households have more limited resource profiles due to reductions in the natural, social, and cultural resources that they command, which might affect their ability to achieve their aspirations.

3.1.2. Differences in asset holdings

The RANQ Asset Index (Clarke, 2006) used survey data to classify households as poor or non-poor according to the presence of locally salient assets such as a

[4] Post-hoc tests show whether statistically significant differences between groups, e.g. age groups, only occur between particular sub-groups, e.g. the oldest and the youngest group.

motorbike or an educated household head. For example, households in the bottom two quintiles were classified as poor as they had only 'basic' household goods and kitchen appliances (e.g. bed, fridge), common electrical consumer goods (e.g. radio), and jewellery.

Table 3. Differences in asset holdings by region, type of site, age of household head and socio-economic status

Group	*N*	*Mean*
Total	1183	3.35 (1.37)
Rural	513	3.02 (1.36)**
Peri-urban	408	3.57 (1.32)
Urban	262	3.65 (1.33)
15-24	12	3.08 (1.44)
25-44	448	3.33 (1.41)
45-64	485	3.49 (1.30)*
65+	238	3.09 (1.40)*
Poor	352	1.56 (0.50)**
Non-poor	831	4.11 (0.79)**

**p=<0.01 *p=<0.05

The data in Table 3 shows clear and significant differences in asset holding by site type, income quintile and age of household head (asset holdings peak between ages 45 to 64 and decline thereafter, reflecting the different opportunities and liabilities of households at different stages in the lifecycle).

3.1.3. Differences in needs satisfaction

Objective need satisfaction was measured using the Intermediate Need Deprivation Index (INDI) from the RANQ (McGregor et al. 2007b), an aggregate indicator of unmet needs at the household level, which was based on the set of 11 intermediate needs identified in the Theory of Human needs (Doyal and Gough, 1991). An index of 10 indicates that a household lacks access to all of the 10 intermediate needs and an index of 0 that it has access to all of them. The areas of highest deprivation in the Thai sample as a whole all relate to health, as over sixty percent of households did not have access to clean water sources, had not been able to vaccinate their children or treat a sick household member, or had access to contraception. Levels of deprivation varied, however, and Table 4 reports total scores for households by type of site, age of household head and socio-economic status.

Table 4. Differences in intermediate need deprivation by region, type of site, age of household head and socio-economic status

Group	**N**	**Mean**
Total	753	1.37 (0.75)
Rural	339	1.59 (0.82)**
Peri-urban	273	1.18 (0.65)
Urban	141	1.20 (0.61)
15-24	5	2.09 (1.26)
25-44	349	1.44 (0.76)
45-64	280	1.30 (0.74)
65+	119	1.28 (0.69)
Poor	216	1.79 (0.84)**
Non-poor	537	1.20 (0.64)**

**p=<0.01 *p=<0.05

As with the asset index scores (Table 3), there are significant differences in intermediate need deprivation between rural and other communities, and between poor and non-poor households. The data by age of household head shows needs satisfaction rising with age, however, this was not significant.

3.1.4. Differences in education and occupation

Visible and significant differences can be seen in the types of occupation and levels of education of WeD household members. These have been influenced by a series of government reforms that culminated in an increase in compulsory education to twelve years following the National Educational Reform Act in 1999. Consequently there are clear generational differences as younger people tend to continue schooling beyond primary level, and the category of 'no education' almost disappears among those under thirty five (even in communities where there is limited access to educational facilities). There are differences between the site types as while the threshold in rural and peri-urban areas is age thirty five, in urban areas it is forty five. The main difference, however, relates to higher education where the overall percentage rises from four in rural sites to twelve in urban ones. Unfortunately this is not a historic disparity as it is also reflected among 15 to 24 years olds where nearly three times as many are attending higher education in urban areas as in rural (ten per cent, compared to twenty seven per cent in urban). This is an important observation as secondary, and where possible higher education has a substantial effect on people's choice of occupation and mobility, which affect what they can aspire to and achieve

Similar differences are evident when we compare poor and non-poor samples on education and occupation. For example, non-poor respondents are significantly more likely to have received formal education (84 per cent vs. 77 per cent for poor) and be literate (88 per cent vs. 79 per cent for poor). Nine per cent of non-poor respondents have higher education compared to two per cent of poor, and the same disparity is evident in secondary education where thirty per cent of non-poor respondents have received education versus eighteen per cent of poor. Both poor and non-poor respondents work in agriculture (37 and 28 per cent respectively), but nearly twice as many non-poor respondents work in other professions such as transport and commerce, both of which require initial capital. While there were no significant differences in engaging in non-professional salaried employment (13.5 and 13.7 per cent respectively), non-poor respondents were significantly more likely to be professionals – four per cent of respondents compared to one per cent of poor. The differences in human capital described above are reflected in significantly lower asset holdings for poor households and higher scores indices of need deprivation.

3.2 Subjective Wellbeing

Scores for Positive Affect (the presence of positive emotions such as enthusiasm and joy) were significantly lower for the oldest age group (27.3 vs. mean 31.2), mirroring findings among older people in other studies. Scores for Negative Affect (the presence of negative emotions such as anger and sadness) was significantly higher among poor respondents (25.3 vs. mean 22.8) and people from peri-urban/ urban areas (24.8 vs. mean 22.4). Poor respondents reported significantly higher satisfaction with life as a whole than non-poor (10.4 vs. 9), which provides some evidence of adaptation.

3.3 Aspirations

3.3.1 Overview

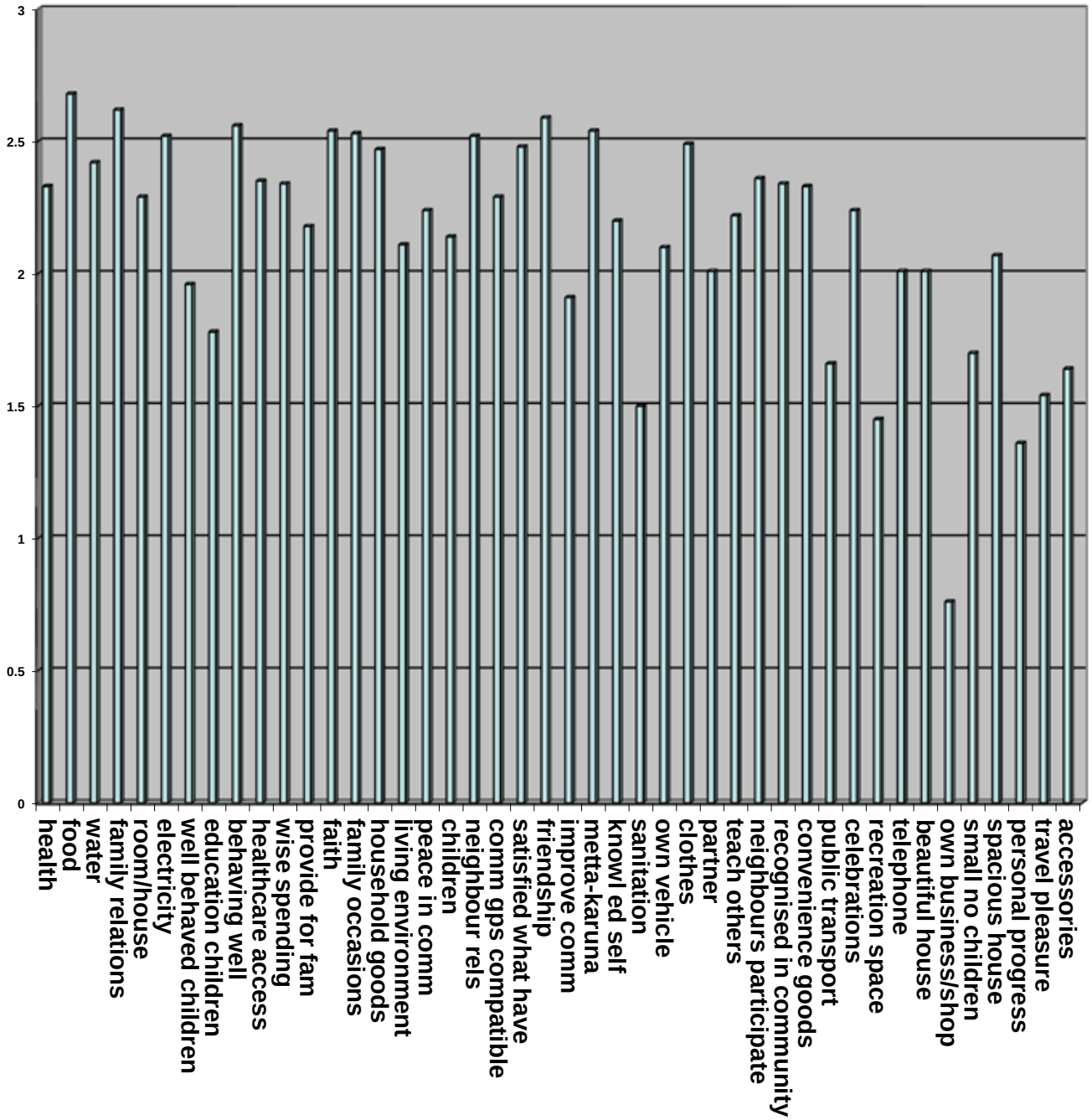
In Table 5 in the appendix we provide the frequency of the necessity scores for each goal, in descending order of importance, according to the mean score. Notably, as the mean scores reduce, the standard deviations increase, indicating greater contestation over whether the goals are perceived as important. The only item considered either ‘necessary’ or ‘very necessary’ by everyone was water. However, faith, food, electricity, good family relations, good neighbourly relations, good health, room or house, behaving well, healthcare access, having well-behaved children, being satisfied with what you have and wise spending were each only considered ‘not necessary’ by fewer than five respondents. At the other extreme, fewer than 100 respondents endorsed personal progress, accessories, and travel for pleasure as ‘very necessary’.

The table demonstrates that at the top level there is considerable agreement on the necessity of a group of goals that fit well with conventional theories of human need. In the lower section of the tables the goals after ‘telephone’ are much more contested

and this area highlights dynamically changing perceptions of what are to be considered needs and what are to be considered luxuries in contemporary Thai society.

Figure 1 uses mean scores for necessity and satisfaction to graphically illustrate the relationship across the sample between the perceived necessity of the goals presented in the table and the levels of satisfaction reported for the goal. By presenting them in ranked order of goal importance, the figure highlights some of the disjuncture between the priority of the goals and the perceived level of satisfaction of them. The 'jagged teeth' of the figure indicate that even for basic items such as health, food, sanitation, and education there are important gaps between the extent to which people view them as important and the extent to which they feel satisfied in their achievement. Of particular note is the high level of necessity which people accord to education for their children, but the relatively low level of satisfaction in its achievement.

Figure 1: Sample mean scores for perceived satisfaction of different goals, ordered by the sample means for perceived necessity to highlight any discrepancies



We will now summarise the quantitative evidence for aspirational inequalities across the study communities, focusing on differences between people from different age groups, locations and socio-economic statuses. Some of these findings are counter-intuitive and relate in part to the structure of the measure, as we explore further in the discussion section.

Age

Differences in the number of goals considered necessary were not significant, suggesting that young people did not have significantly higher aspirations (more goals) than their parents. There were, however, significant differences in the types of goals that were considered important, albeit that the differences were predominantly between those aged over 65 and the rest of the sample. For example, people aged over 65 perceived luxuries as less necessary than those aged 25 to 44. This may be evidence of a natural shift in priorities between different phases of life (Ingersoll-Dayton et al. 2001), or reflect the far greater opportunities available to the younger generation and a commensurate rise in expectations and pressure. People aged 15 to 24 also reported significantly lower goal attainment than those aged 45 to 64, which reflects the limited opportunities for young people to attain socially valued 'goods' such as their own home or family. For example, people aged 15 to 24 reported lower attainment for the factor of nuclear family.

Location

Respondents from peri-urban and urban areas reported significantly fewer necessary goals than respondents from rural areas. However, this finding is not conclusive since it could reflect greater relevance of items such as 'family members come together for special occasions' in rural areas with high labour migration. The main variations by location in the types of goals considered necessary were that respondents in rural areas reported the factors of community and social relationships and basic house and home as more necessary than those in peri-urban and urban areas. The attainment of goals perceived as necessary was significantly higher in rural than peri-urban and urban areas, although this may reflect the larger number of goals identified as necessary in rural areas. Rural respondents also reported significantly higher attainment for the factors of community and social relationships and nuclear family than those in peri-urban and urban areas, reflecting the findings on social resources from the RANQ.

Socio-economic status

We found no significant different in the number or type of goals that people from poor households considered important, suggesting a societal consensus about the necessities of life. However, there were significant differences in goal attainment as poor people reported lower attainment overall and for the factors of basic house and home, luxuries and nuclear family. There were no significant differences for

attainment of community and social resources, suggesting that poor people feel included in their communities and can draw on local social networks.

4. Discussion

In this section we look first at what our findings mean in relation to the central concepts of aspiration and adaption and then at the extent to which our findings support or challenge the studies and theoretical frameworks reviewed in the first part of the paper. The significant differences in material and subjective wellbeing and aspirations reported here support our proposition that some groups in Thailand are experiencing an expansion of expectations beyond what they are currently able to fulfil and this has detrimental consequences for their wellbeing. If the gap between representations of material wealth and respondents' experiences of disadvantage and marginalisation is uncomfortable, perhaps more worrying is evidence of adaptation where some respondents have ceased to aspire to what they believe is unattainable. As we have discussed, respondents aged 15 to 24 seem distinct from other groups in terms of their aspirations and to an even greater extent their level of goal attainment. In the Northeast this may reflect the peer influences reported by Nguyen at al (2009) and Mills (1997) where the lifestyles 'performed' by returning migrants point to the existence of different chronological as well as geographical spaces in the central provinces and urban centres (c.f. Isaacs, 2009). For young women in particular these images challenge their sense of themselves by presenting a normative femininity – pale, fragile, impractically dressed - that appears incompatible with the demands of rural life. Nonetheless, the differences between the age groups may not be as great as they appear as even though we used individual priorities to weight the satisfaction scores rather than priorities generated at the community level, they still reflect a high level of social consensus which creates 'gaps' between perceived needs and attainment of those needs that may not be perceived as such.

Respondents' poverty has a significant effect on their level of satisfaction with goals[5] relating to household necessities, luxuries, and family, for example, children's education. This may account for the significantly higher levels of negative emotions such as envy reported by poor respondents. For example, a twenty year old man from Isaan said that "the most wealthy man is the one with most well-being" because this man can fulfil the modest aspiration of "buy[ing] anything he ever wants to eat". A twenty-six year old man with a comparatively enviable position as a clerk in a department store described how his 'greatest fear' was unemployment as "if I lose my job, I will not be able to repay a debt for my mother and my girlfriend will leave me". Perhaps counter-intuitively rural people reported both more aspirations and

[5] The question addressed the level of satisfaction with goals that people felt they had achieved and distinguished between whether people had achieved the goal at all (response option 0) and whether they had achieved it to a satisfactory extent (response options 1-3).

higher attainment of valued goals than those in urban and peri-urban areas. This may be due to a rural bias in the items selected for the measures from the emphasis placed on community relationships, which was increased by the culture-specific items added by the Thai team.

The reality in Thailand is often complex and at times is contradictory; in testament to this our data suggests the co-existence of a culture of aspiration, where goals exceed resources, with a culture of poverty, where people have stopped pursuing what they cannot achieve. We anticipated that if people's aspirations expanded and the resources to meet them were unequally distributed, this would reduce social cohesion. However, the fact that social cohesion in these particular communities has not yet been greatly affected can be explained by the strength of the socio-cultural mechanisms operating in these communities. These function around a set of values and institutional forms that are specific to Thailand such as religion, respect (age and class-based hierarchies), and an alternative vision of a good life encapsulated in the royal ideal of the sufficiency economy[6]. The strong emphasis on 'Thai values' of acceptance and moderation in current development discourses can be seen as seeking to assuage potential tensions and to enable people to better cope with rising material inequality. For example, the practice of age-specific forms of address expresses the common belief that Thais have to place themselves within a proper hierarchy: roojak thee soong thee tarn, literally knowing who is high and who is low. Vichitvadakan, a Thai anthropologist, claims that this emphasis on hierarchy strengthens solidarity and minimizes conflict (in Surin, 1999:30). This reflects Herrera et al's (2006) finding that the way economic inequality is perceived affects the level of people's subjective wellbeing in the presence of inequality. The successful promotion of Thai values is evident in the finding that despite experiencing lower attainment of valued goals and higher levels of negative emotion poor respondents reported themselves as more satisfied with their life as a whole than non-poor.

We observed some evidence of adaption, however, this was only in so far as while poor people appeared to want most of the same things as non-poor people, their scores for satisfaction with life suggested that they had adapted to not having these. We found no evidence that poor people lack ideational resources to challenge their own poverty[7] and this has been found by other authors, e.g. Clark (2002) in South Africa. Nonetheless, there are few examples of what Dorward et al (2009) characterise as 'stepping out' rather than 'hanging out' within our sample. This may evidence a diminished capacity to aspire, perhaps because, as Ray (2003) argues, respondents are defeated by the size and duration of the gap between their

[6] King Bhumibol Adulyadej first put forward his "philosophy of Sufficiency Economy", which includes sustainability, moderation and broad-based development in a speech in 1997. It was subsequently adopted in the 2007 Thai UNDP Human Development Report.

[7] See, for example, e.g. the occupation of Rachaprasong shopping mall area in Spring 2010 where protestors chanted "Rao Khue Phrai," or "We are peasants".

aspirations and their realities (c.f. Van Kempen and Luuk, 2009). We observed that poverty increased negative emotions such as anger and sadness, but did not affect satisfaction with life. This resonates with the experiences of microfinance recipients in Ahmed et al's (2001) study who reported emotional stress because they could not reconcile their high expectations of the programme with their low achievements.

5. Conclusions

This paper provides micro-level evidence of inequality in Thailand affecting participants' material and subjective wellbeing, although to a lesser extent than might be expected. It draws on literature from economics, psychology and philosophy and uses the specific context of Thailand to interrogate general ideas about the subjective effects of aspiration and inequality.

Rapid social and economic growth have reduced the proportion of the Thai population below the poverty line and led to Thailand being hailed as a development success. More recently, however, its reputation has been tarnished by high GINI index scores (53.6 in 2009, according to the World Bank), accusations of corruption surrounding Thaksin's premiership, and the subsequent military coup and political protests. We argue that young people in particular are increasingly frustrated by the combination of rapidly globalising aspirations, expressed in ultra-modern shopping malls such as Rachaprasong, with few opportunities for well-remunerated, skilled work[8]. According to economic commentators (e.g. Warr, 2011) this lack of opportunities results from Thailand having fallen into the 'middle income trap' where they are no longer cheap enough to compete with low income economies, nor skilled[9] enough to compete with high income ones. The situation is exacerbated by limited capital investment and stagnation of real wages and productivity since the Asian financial crisis in 1997, which caused the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to observe in 2010 that Thailand had "lost much of its former dynamism" (IMF Country Report No. 10/344). Our contribution to current debates over the quality of education in Thailand, and related to this the percentage of GDP invested in it (Thai government expenditure is less than half that of OECD countries), is to suggest reframing it in terms of the effect of poor quality education on people's 'capacity to aspire'.

While we could not measure the relationship between subjective wellbeing and inequality directly, the fact that participants in urban communities where inequality was highest also reported the lowest subjective wellbeing, regardless of their own

[8] Although youth unemployment is under two percent, less than a quarter of the working population receive a monthly salary and more than half are working in the informal sector.

[9] According to 2009 data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) a 15-year old Thai student ranks 50th for reading, 50th for mathematics and 49th for science among 65 countries surveyed.

wealth status, is suggestive of a link. Recent and longstanding political conflicts are also suggestive of the wider impact of inequality and maldistribution of resources (for example, the historic marginalisation of the Southernmost provinces). Finally, the Thai political crisis from 2008 to 2010 seems to be a clear example of "the turnaround from hopefulness to disenchantment" with consequent "potential for social upheaval" that characterises the 'tunnel effect' described by Hirschman and Rothschild (1973:552).

As described earlier, we observed few differences in what people aspire to, but large and consistent differences in their perceived success in attaining these aspirations, supported by objective data on a range of different resources. The close relationship between subjective and objective data, e.g. between poor people's perceived satisfaction with their own education and the small proportion of poor people who received higher education, is an important methodological point given a historical distrust of self-reported data among economists. Our analysis highlights the connection between the experience of poverty and negative emotions such as anger and sadness, which while common in qualitative studies, is often obscured by satisfaction measures. This is an important warning for studies that use satisfaction with life questions as the only indicator of subjective wellbeing. We also observed the influence of peer groups – highlighted as important by Vakis and Macours (2009), among others - in forming people's 'cognitive window' (Ray, 2003) within which they aspire and pursue aspirations.

In Thailand many of these aspirations relate to consumption, although luxuries such as accessories and travel were perceived as less important in this sample than we expected. Other studies, e.g. Wilson (2004) emphasise the importance of consumption within Thai society, particularly among the younger generation (less than 45 years of age) and its link to particular types of identity (Taylor, 2011; Isaacs, 2009). Studies in Europe and America (reviewed in Kasser, 2002) and developing countries (e.g. Sugata and Ranjana (2010) and Linssen et al. (2011) in India) suggest that a focus on consumption reduces subjective wellbeing, even when consumption aspirations are realised. This may explain our finding of greater subjective wellbeing in rural areas, despite their relative lack of material resources/ infrastructure. More plausibly, given the high level of consensus we observed, the finding may reflect greater social connectedness, which other studies have shown to have a mediating effect on subjective wellbeing (e.g. Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2006).

The approach adopted in this paper characterises wellbeing as a multi-dimensional (material and subjective wellbeing) and dynamic concept (aspirations). In this the inter-subjective meanings of what it is to be modern and what it is one can reasonably aspire to must all be understood if we are to comprehend states of well or ill-being. A wellbeing approach creates the space for a debate between culturally diverse perspectives on development, which enables people to 'renegotiate the

norms that frame their social lives' (Appadurai, 2004:66). Far from being a fuzzy and utopian concept, wellbeing is a profoundly practical and political one (McGregor et al. 2007b), which can highlight the trade-offs that exist between different views of wellbeing. It can also indicate how in some circumstances the pursuit of wellbeing by some can result in the denial of the opportunities for wellbeing for others.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Catherine Locke and Lucio Esposito for their thoughtful comments on the (near) final draft. The support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries.

References

Ahmed, S. M., Chowdhury, M., & Bhuiya, A. (2001). Micro-credit and emotional well-being: Experience of poor rural women from Matlab, Bangladesh. World Development 29: 1957–1966.

Appadurai, A. (2004). 'The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition'. In: V. Rao, & M. Walton. Culture and public action. Stanford: Stanford University Press (p59-84).

Barr, A., & Clark, D. A. (2007). A multidimensional analysis of adaptation in a developing country context. CSAE Working Paper no. 17, Centre for the Study of African Economies, Department of Economics, University of Oxford.

Bellow, W., C. Cunningham, L. Keng Poh. (1999). Siam's Tragedy: Development and the Breakdown of Modern Thai Society. Bangkok: Komol Kheemthong Foundation.

Bernard, T, Dercon, S, Taffesse, A.S. (2011). Beyond fatalism - an empirical exploration of self-efficacy and aspirations failure in Ethiopia, CSAE WPS/2011-03

Biswas-Diener, R., & Diener, E. (2006). The subjective well-being of the homeless, and lessons for happiness. Social Indicators Research, 76, 185- 205.

Camfield, L. (2006). 'Why and How of Understanding 'Subjective' Wellbeing: Exploratory work by the WeD group in four developing countries'. WeD Working Paper 26, University of Bath.

Camfield, L. (2010). "Stew without bread or bread without stew": Children's understandings of poverty in Ethiopia. Children and Society 24(4): 271-281.

Clark, D A. (2002). Visions of Development: A Study of Human Values. UK: Edward Elgar

Clark, D.A. (2007). 'Adaptation, Poverty and Well-Being: Some Issues and Observations with Special Reference to the Capability Approach and Development Studies'. GPRG-WPS-081.

Clarke, R. (2006). 'Measuring wealth across seven Thai communities'. WeD Working Paper 17, University of Bath.

Copestake, J., Camfield, L. (2010).Measuring multidimensional aspiration gaps: a means to understanding cultural aspects of poverty. Development Policy Review 28(5): 617-33.

Dalton, P., Ghosal, S., Mani, A. (2010). Poverty and Aspirations Failure. CAGE Working Paper Series, #22, University of Warwick, UK.

Desai, R.M. (2010). The Political Economy of Urban Poverty in Developing Countries: Theories, Issues, and an Agenda for Research. Wolfensohn Center for Development Working Paper No. 20.

Diener, E., R. A. Emmons, R. J. Larsen, & S Griffin. (1985). The Satisfaction With Life Scale. Journal of Personality Assessment 49: 71-75.

Doyal, L., & I Gough. (1991). A theory of human need. London: MacMillian.

Dorward, Andrew and Anderson , S. and Nava, Y. and Pattison, J. and Paz, R. and Rushton, J. and Sanchez Vera , E. (2009) 'Hanging In, Stepping up and Stepping Out: Livelihood Aspirations and Strategies of the Poor Development in Practice.' Development in Practice, 19 (2). pp. 240-247.

Elster, J. (1983). Sour grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fafchamps, M, Forhad Shilpi, F. (2008). Subjective Welfare, Isolation, and Relative Consumption. Journal of Development Economics 86(1): 43-60.

Gough, I, J. A McGregor, & L Camfield. (2007). 'Introduction: conceiving wellbeing in development contexts'. In: I. Gough, I. and J. A. McGregor (Eds.) Wellbeing in developing countries: new approaches and research strategies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Graham, C., Pettinato, S. (2002). Frustrated achievers: Winners, losers and subjective well-being in new market economies. The Journal of Development Studies 38: 100–140.

Guillen-Royo, M. (2011). Reference group consumption and the subjective wellbeing of the poor in Peru. Journal of Economic Psychology. ISSN 0167-4870. 32(2), s 259-272 .Hirschman, A. O. (1970). Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hirschman, Albert O. And Michael Rothschild. 1973. "The Changing Tolerance for

Income Inequality in the Course of Economic Development." The Quarterly Journal of Economics 87.4: 544-566.

Herrera, J., Razafindrakoto, M., Roubaud, F.. (2006). The determinants of subjective poverty: A comparative analysis in Madagascar and Peru. Dial working paper, DT2006-01.

Ibrahim, S. (2010). Defining Well-being through the Voices of the Poor: An Egyptian Perspective. CPRC conference paper, September 2010.

Ingersoll-Dayton, B., C. Saengtienchai, K. Kespichayawattana, & Y. Aungsuroch. (2001). 'Psychological well-being Asian style: The perspective of Thai elders'. Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology 16: 283–302.

Isaacs, B. A. (2009) 'Imagining Thailand in European Hypermarkets: New Class-Based Consumption in Chiang Mai's 'Cruise Ships'', The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology 10(4): 348-363.

Kasser, T. (2002). The High Price of Materialism. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press.Lewis, O. (1996). 'The Culture of Poverty'. Reprinted in G. Gmelch and W. Zenner (Ed.s). Urban Life.: Readings in Urban Anthropology, 1988. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Linssen, R., van Kempen, L., Kraaykamp, G. (2011). Subjective Well-being in Rural India: The Curse of Conspicuous Consumption. Social Indicators Research 101(1):57-72.Lukes, S. (2002) Power: a radical view.

Macours, Karen and Vakis, Renos, Changing Households' Investments and Aspirations Through Social Interactions: Evidence from a Randomized Transfer Program (November 1, 2009). World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Series, Vol. , pp. -, 2009.

McGregor, J.A. (2007). 'Researching wellbeing: From Concepts to Methodology'. In: I. Gough, J. A. McGregor (Eds.) 2007. Wellbeing in developing countries: new approaches and research strategies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McGregor, J. A., A. McKay, & J. Velazco. (2007a). 'Needs and resources in the investigation of well-being in developing countries: illustrative evidence from Bangladesh and Peru'. Journal of Economic Methodology 14: 107-131.

McGregor, J. A., L. Camfield, B. Promphaking, & A. Masae. (2007b). 'The Promises and Pitfalls of Wellbeing for Understanding Development in Thailand'. PPDO International Conference on Happiness and Public Policy, Bangkok, Thailand, July.

Mills, M.B. (1995). 'Attack of the widow ghosts: gender, death, and modernity in Northeast Thailand'. In A. Ong & M. Peletz (Ed.s). Bewitching women, pious men. Berkley: University of California Press (p244-273).

Mills, M.B. (1997). 'Contesting the margins of modernity: women, migration, and consumption in Thailand'. American Ethnologist 24: 37-61.

Müller, Tanja R.(2010) 'Changing Resource Profiles: Aspirations Among Orphans in Central Mozambique in the Context of an AIDS Mitigation Intervention', Journal of Development Studies 46(2): 254 — 273

Nguyen, HV, Moschis, GP, Shannon, R. (2009). Effects of family structure and socialization on materialism: a life course study in Thailand. International Journal of Consumer Studies 33: 486–495.

Phongpaichit, P., C. Baker. (2009). Thai capital after the 1997 crisis. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books.

Ray, D. (2003). 'Aspirations, poverty and economic change'. Mimeo.

Rigg, J.D. & Salamanca, A. (2009). Managing risk and vulnerability in Asia: A (re)study from Thailand, 1982-83 and 2008. Asia Pacific Viewpoint 50(3): 255-270.

Ruta, D., L. Camfield, C. Donaldson. (2007). 'Sen and the art of quality of life maintenance: towards a working definition of quality of life'. Journal of Socioeconomics 36: 397-423.

Small, M.L., Harding, D.J., Lamont, M.(2010). Reconsidering Culture and Poverty. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 629(1):6-27.

Sugata, M., Ranjan, R. (2010). Conflicting Measures of Poverty and Inadequate Saving by the Poor – The Role of Status Driven Utility Function. Downloaded from http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/27472/. May 2012.

Surin, Maisrikrod. (1999). 'Joining the Values Debate: The Peculiar Case of Thailand'. Sojourn, 14: 402-13.

Swidler, Ann. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. American Sociological Review 51: 273-86.

Taylor, J. (2011). Larger than life: "Central World" and its demise and rebirth – Red shirts and the creation of an urban cultural myth in Thailand. Asia Research Institute Working Paper series #150.

United Nations Development Programme-Thailand. (2007). Sufficiency Economy and Human Development. Bangkok: UNDP.

United Nations Development Programme-Thailand. (2009). Human security, today and tomorrow. Bangkok: UNDP. van Kempen and Luuk. 2009. The 'Downside' of Women Empowerment in India: An Experimental Inquiry into the Role of Expectations. Social Indicators Research, 94(3): 465-82.

Warr, P. (2011). Thailand, a nation caught in the middle-income trap. East Asia Forum Quarterly 3(4):4-6.

Watson, D., L.A Clark, & A Tellegen. (1988). 'Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales'. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 54: 1063-1070.

Wilson, A. (2004). The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the World City. California, University of California Press.

Woodcock, A., L. Camfield, J.A., McGregor, F. Martin. 2007. 'Validation of the WeDQoL-Goals-Thailand measure: culture-specific individualized quality of life'. Social Indicators Research 94(1): 94 (1): 135-171.

Appendices

Table 2 Principal Components analysis on weighted goal attainment scores

item name	Single factor (22.33% variance)	Forced 4-factor solution (38.490% variance)			
	Thai total weighted goal attainment alpha 0.911	Comm /soc/health alpha 0.895	House & home alpha 0.803	Nuclear family alpha 0.815	Luxuries alpha alpha 0.631
celebrations	**.509**	.427	.098	.188	.283
faith	**.405**	.413	.041	.228	.003
knowl & ed self	**.589**	.685	.094	.057	.006
friendship	**.516**	.446	.093	.115	**[.347]**
family relations	**.462**	.356	.217	.135	.146
neighbour rel'ns	**.642**	.585	.200	.113	.227
health	**.407**	**.422**	.212	-.076	.003
improving comm	**.488**	**.371**	.282	-.042	.279
participate n'hood	**.579**	**.623**	.054	.140	.127
public transport	**.354**	**.388**	.094	.034	.002
recogn'd in comm	**.532**	**.440**	.169	.075	**[.326]**
behaving well	**.611**	**.632**	.157	.126	.046
recreational space	**.325**	**.359**	.035	-.010	.134
living environm't	**.589**	**.554**	.294	-.019	.090
teach others	**.560**	**.637**	.050	.131	.035
community peace	**.566**	**.639**	.138	.010	.022
healthcare access	**.447**	**.374**	.234	-.008	.170
travel pleasure	**.339**	**.340**	.070	-.092	.263
family occasions	**.551**	**.450**	.180	.228	.177
commgps compat	**.609**	**.633**	.214	.099	-.040
metta-karuna	**.634**	**.686**	.128	.167	-.011
satis'd what have	**.569**	**.519**	.221	.072	.149
wise spending	**.592**	**.594**	.202	.141	-.019
food	**.506**	.288	**.523**	.003	.082
clothes	**.484**	.203	**.479**	.012	**[.310]**

electricity	**.485**	.110	**.766**	.071	-.018
sanitation	**.419**	.221	**.462**	.117	-.062
water	**.462**	.095	**.733**	.044	.029
basic h'hold gds	**.591**	.268	**.585**	.146	.178
own vehicle	**.383**	.129	**.475**	.054	.107
personal progress	**.242**	.155	.014	-.019	**.446**
room or house	**.442**	.151	**.604**	.035	.048
own bus's/shop	**.219**	.037	**.349**	.090	-.042
telephone	**.483**	.245	**.420**	.072	.234
accessories	**.361**	.192	.220	.031	**.344**
conven'ce goods	**.436**	.100	**.517**	.050	**[.313]**
beautiful house	**.303**	-.000	.096	.134	**.783**
spacious house	**.216**	-.088	.046	.114	**.822**
educ children	**.476**	.213	.138	**.806**	.005
children	**.367**	.017	.152	**.873**	.052
partner	**.362**	.067	.288	**.521**	.033
provide for family	**.499**	[.373]	.108	**.497**	.036
small no. children	**.213**	.083	-.074	**.527**	.101
well-beh'd child'n	**.385**	.102	0.74	**.852**	.046

Table 5. Goal necessity item responses (51 items in WeDQoL-Thailand)

Item Explanation	**Necessity Rating Frequencies (%)**			**Mean**	**s.d.**
	Not Necessary	*Necessary*	*Very Necessary*		
1. Having good **health**	1 (0.3%)	34 (9.2%)	331 (90.5%)	1.90	0.31
2. Having enough **food**	3 (0.8%)	47 (12.7%)	319 (86.4%)	1.86	0.37
3. Having **water**	0 (0%)	56 (15.2%)	313 (84.8%)	1.85	0.36
4. Having good **family relations**	2 (0.5%)	56 (15.2%)	311 (84.3%)	1.84	0.38
5. Having a **room or house**	4 (1.1%)	55 (14.9%)	310 (84.0%)	1.83	0.40
6. Having **electricity**	2 (0.5%)	64 (17.3%)	303 (82.1%)	1.82	0.40
7. Having **well-behaved children**	3 (0.8%)	66 (17.9%)	300 (81.3%)	1.80	0.42
8. Access to **education for children**	9 (2.4%)	69 (18.7%)	291 (78.9%)	1.76	0.48
9. Being **well behaved**	1 (0.3%)	108 (29.3%)	260 (70.5%)	1.70	0.46
10. Having access to **healthcare**	2 (0.5%)	112 (31.4%)	255 (69.1%)	1.69	0.48
11. **Wise spending**	3 (0.8%)	114 (30.9%)	252 (68.3%)	1.67	0.49
12. Being able to **provide for family**	13 (3.5%)	101 (27.4%)	255 (69.1%)	1.66	0.54
13. Having **faith**	2 (0.5%)	132 (35.8%)	235 (63.7%)	1.63	0.49
14. Being able to have **family occasions**	10 (2.7%)	118 (32.0%)	241 (85.3%)	1.63	0.54
15. Having basic **household goods**	6 (1.6%)	129 (35.0%)	234 (63.4%)	1.62	0.52
16. Having a **good living environment**	6 (1.6%)	132 (35.8%)	231 (62.6%)	1.61	0.52
17. Having **community peace**	8 (2.2%)	130 (35.2%)	231 (62.6%)	1.60	0.53
18. Having **children**	29 (7.9%)	91 (24.7%)	249 (67.5%)	1.60	0.63
19. Having **good neighbourly relations**	4 (1.1%)	141 (38.2%)	224 (60.7%)	1.60	0.51
20. **Having harmonious relationships between groups in the community**	6 (1.6%)	141 (38.2%)	222 (60.2%)	1.59	0.53
21. Being **satisfied with what one has**	4 (1.1%)	151 (40.9%)	214 (58.0%)	1.57	0.52
22. Being able to **improve the community**	15 (4.1%)	135 (36.6%)	219 (59.3%)	1.55	0.57
23. Having *metta-karuna*	3 (0.8%)	160 (43.4%)	206 (55.8%)	1.55	0.51
24. Having **friendships**	8 (2.2%)	150 (40.7%)	211 (57.2%)	1.55	0.54
25. Being **knowledgeable and able to learn**	21 (5.7%)	145 (39.3%)	203 (55.0%)	1.49	0.60
26. Having a **vehicle**	29 (7.9%)	142 (38.5%)	198 (53.7%)	1.46	0.64

27. Having **good sanitation**	27 (7.3%)	147 (39.8%)	195 (52.8%)	1.46	0.63
28. Having **good clothing**	21 (5.7%)	164 (44.4%)	184 (49.9%)	1.44	0.60
29. Having a **partner/spouse**	50 (13.6%)	119 (32.0%)	201 (54.5%)	1.41	0.72
30. Being able to **teach others**	16 (4.3%)	212 (57.5%)	141 (38.2%)	1.34	0.56
31. Being able to **participate in the community**	20 (5.4%)	215 (58.3%)	134 (36.3%)	1.31	0.57
32. Being **recognised in the community**	33 (8.9%)	194 (52.6%)	142 (38.5%)	1.30	0.62
33. Having access to **convenience goods**	41 (11.1%)	181 (49.1%)	147 (39.8%)	1.29	0.65
34. Having access to **public transport**	35 (9.5%)	197 (53.4%)	137 (37.1%)	1.28	0.63
35. Having **celebrations in the community**	32 (8.7%)	225 (61.0%)	112 (30.4%)	1.22	0.59
36. Having **recreational space**	41 (11.1%)	209 (56.6%)	119 (32.2%)	1.21	0.62
37. Having a **telephone**	51 (13.8%)	193 (52.3%)	125 (33.9%)	1.20	0.66
38. Having a **beautiful house**	80 (21.7%)	175 (47.4%)	114 (30.9%)	1.09	0.72
39. Owning **business/shop**	120 (32.5%)	126 (34.1%)	123 (33.3%)	1.01	0.81
40. Having a **small number of children**	113 (30.6%)	148 (40.1%)	108 (29.3%)	0.99	0.77
41. Having a **spacious house**	134 (36.3%)	135 (36.6%)	100 (27.1%)	0.91	0.79
42. Being able to make **personal progress**	152 (41.2)	143 (38.8%)	74 (20.1%)	0.79	0.75
43. Being able to **travel for pleasure**	156 (42.3%)	174 (47.2%)	39 (10.6%)	0.68	0.66
44. Having **accessories**	1 (0.3%)	34 (9.2%)	331 (90.5%)	0.61	0.65