Foreword

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The title *A Modern Guide to Wellbeing Research* of this collection firmly – proudly – situates it as a useful practical aide for charting the challenges facing us today.

This intent is more than timely. Wellbeing is as diverse a concept as it is ubiquitous. Perhaps unsurprisingly for such a multifaceted concept, as civil society and academics have advocated for an embrace of wellbeing as an explicit goal, different emphases in the meaning of wellbeing have come to the fore. The suite of different understandings and emphasis is also mirrored in a range of measures that each purport to improve a particular aspect of wellbeing.

This is where this book steps up to the plate. The various chapters in the book also ask the ‘so what?’ question and with a range of perspectives each dive into various understandings of wellbeing and, crucially, unpick the implications.

In many countries, efforts to enhance wellbeing is no longer a question of data – the statistics are largely available (if not yet perfect). It is thus now up to policy entrepreneurs to help apply them to the levers of policy and the ledgers of government budgets. In those efforts, if political decision makers, businesses, civil society groups, city leaders and others are to have a chance of taking the plethora of changes, shifts, alterations, transformations and red-signs that are necessary to truly embrace a wellbeing agenda, they are going to need all the clarity they can get.

The authors of respective chapters don’t shy away from probing where the onus of change lies in order to improve wellbeing. This is a question which is too-often dodged, yet differences between respective conceptualisations of wellbeing tend to lie in where to situate political responsibility and policy focus. For example, often the call from advocates of focusing on subjective self-reported wellbeing measures is for immediate support for individuals suffering stress and anxiety – often in the form of investment in mental health support to help people survive and cope with current circumstances. In contrast, advocates for the ‘system change’ conceptions of wellbeing, while strongly supporting the vital importance of helping people survive and cope with current circumstances, would point to the need to also pay attention to
those circumstances themselves, that is the drivers of stress and anxiety, rather than merely treatment for those who experience them.

The beauty of the book is that the chapters don’t get stuck on a false binary. In exploring what sort of measures are most useful, the implicit recognition is that it depends on the purpose. Change doesn’t happen through parsimony – it happens through finding the most relevant tools for each purpose. So a headline measure might be most useful for communications purposes (for example, I have long been suggesting governments pay more attention to the number of girls who ride their bikes to school than they do to GDP). And a multifaceted dashboard of measures might be more useful to cover the richness of domains that matter to multidimensional wellbeing and the suite of policy changes needed to get there. But before getting too complex, a message often coming from government advisors is a warning that too many indicators will increase the cognitive load on ministers and in turn lead to more of the status quo, rather than the bold, silo-busting policies that will attend to the upstream causes of wellbeing inequalities. The chapters in the following pages will be invaluable for policy entrepreneurs, in and outside government, in their efforts to distil the most poignant measures.

The authors thus do not cover concepts in lead: they position wellbeing as an evolving idea in service of the people, communities and societies it speaks about and describes. In that way it enables diversity and local relevance, but also brings to the fore that which makes us innately human.

The title Modern guide is thus more appropriate than perhaps originally envisaged: while many of the debates and discussions about wellbeing are as old as the hills (stretching back to Aristotle), it is now time to deploy them in the service of humanity.