

The Policies of Happiness

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Over the last 100 years, living standards in the West have improved enormously, but it appears that people have not become much happier. In 2006, the first 'Happy Planet Index' (HPI) measured happiness across 178 countries. The small south Pacific island of Vanuatu was the happiest nation. Germany ranked 81st, Japan 95th and the US 150th. The index was based on consumption levels, life expectancy and reported happiness. Although Vanuatu was top, it only ranked 207th out of 233 economies when measured against Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Various surveys have indicated that while wealthy western nations use up vast quantities of the world's scarce resources, many of their citizens are not much happier, or are indeed less happy, than those who belong to poorer countries that use far fewer resources.

Take Bhutan, for instance, which places emphasis on 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH). While the political system there is far from desirable and although over 30 per cent of Bhutan's people are in material poverty, GDP per capita is among the highest in South Asia and it has made tremendous strides in education and tackling malaria. The country recognises a need to modernise and has been attempting to do according to its Buddhist values. It acknowledges the importance of economic growth, but also encourages the promotion of culture and heritage and the preservation and sustainable use of the environment. GNH comprises nine components of happiness: psychological well-being, ecology, health, education, culture, living standards, time use, community vitality and good governance, all of which can be quantifiably measured.

The 2009 version of the HPI placed Costa Rica at the top. Costa Rica also gained top spot in the WDH, which is based on respondents self reported happiness on a scale of one to 10. Costa Ricans scored 8.6. Denmark followed at 8.3 and Togo and Tanzania were last at 2.6.

Costa Rica dissolved its armed forces in 1949 and invested heavily in education. Increased schooling created a more stable society and boosted the economy. Rising education levels also nurtured impressive gender equality and improvements in health care, which means that life expectancy is now about the same as in the US. Education and health is a far better investment than military hardware for improving the quality of life and a general sense of happiness.

Industrialised countries that are highly unequal and lay great emphasis on military power, such as the US and UK, don't always fare too well in happiness surveys. Contrast this with Denmark.

According to the World Values Survey in 2007, Denmark was the planet's happiest country. It would be foolish to suggest that wealth does not positively impact well being or happiness because certain surveys indicate it does. But the concentration of wealth in the hands of a

relative few may help to explain why so many people are unhappy in the wealthier nations. Denmark is not just wealthy, but its people feel safe because emphasis and investment is placed on social equality and robust welfare policies. Indeed, Scandinavian countries always come out near the top of quality of life and well-being surveys, usually quite a bit ahead the UK and US, which have adopted more strident neo-liberal policies.

It is revealing that countries reported to be happier tend to avoid undermining the ability of future generations to prosper and people in other countries to live fulfilling lives – in other words, countries that live within the limits imposed by the environment and ones that do not engage in neo-colonialism or imperialism. Perhaps this is why the US does not always do too well in these surveys.

In India, we don't have to look far to see alternative models of development based on non-consumerist and communal forms of living. The Navdanya organisation has trained over 500,000 farmers in sustainable agriculture and is actively involved in the rejuvenation of indigenous knowledge and culture. Another example, is the initiation of a government backed project in Dandi and surrounding villages in Gujarat, based on the Gandhian values of village development and environmental conservation.

Such projects acknowledge that the pursuit of material wealth to the exclusion of all else impacts negatively on health and the quality of personal relationships, which are among the most potent predictors of whether people report they are happy.

These initiatives may well be on the right track because, according to the Human Development Index (HDI), economic growth in itself seems to have little to do with all round well being. Indeed, several poor countries have caught up with much richer ones in the non-income aspects of the HDI, such as life expectancy and literacy. Despite high GDP growth in recent years, India ranks 134th among 182 countries in the HDI. According to the World Map of Happiness, Indians are generally an unhappy lot. Based on standards of wealth, health and access to education, it barely makes the top 100 of ranked countries.

Look no further than India's urban centres as to why this may be. In a headlong rush to blindly ape the West, its cities are increasingly defined by their traffic-jammed flyovers cutting through fume choked neighbourhoods that are denied access to clean drinking water, a stable power supply and a generally decent infrastructure. Scratch a little deeper and you can see that its institutions are being moulded to fuel an unsustainable consumer culture and wholly divisive neo-liberal economic policies, which are leading to gross inequalities. Away from the cities, the influence of agribusiness and state-corporate grabs for land are leading to upheaval, major violent conflict and ecological destruction. Greed is no recipe for happiness.

In finishing, it has to be stated that many less wealthy (and wealthy) countries do well in happiness surveys because cultural priority is placed on family and friends, on social capital rather than financial capital, on social equity rather than corporate power. When decisions are taken to invest heavily in education and health as well as in self sustaining communities, local economies and the environment, happiness and well being are boosted. And this is all very achievable, despite what politicians and the mainstream media would have us believe.

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