

## ***PURSUING HAPPINESS: THE POLITICS OF SURVIVING WELL TOGETHER***

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Until recently, it has been widely assumed that economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product gauge not just the economic well-being of nations but the subjective well-being – the happiness – of their citizens. However, over the last forty years this assumption has been unravelling as studies investigate the empirical link between economic development and happiness. In 1974, Richard Easterlin compared data from countries across the globe and his findings have become known as the Easterlin paradox: *within* countries, those on higher incomes are happier than those on lower incomes; however, when comparisons are made *between* countries there is little difference in levels of happiness between richer and poorer countries, and as countries get richer levels of happiness do not necessarily increase.<sup>1</sup>

With more data now available, the Easterlin paradox has been refined and researchers pinpoint that once Gross Domestic Product per capita reaches \$15,000 per year there is no systematic relationship between levels of happiness and Gross Domestic Product.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in some so-called advanced economies such as the UK and the US, levels of happiness have decreased as Gross Domestic Product has increased.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside studies that unsettle and even overturn the presumed relationship between happiness and economic advancement, there is growing interest in devising indicators that de-economise happiness by incorporating the full range of factors that are thought to play a role in shaping well-being and happiness. In 1972, the fourth King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, provocatively pronounced that 'Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product'.<sup>4</sup> Building on this commitment, the Government of Bhutan has devised an index for measuring Gross National Happiness based on nine domains, of which economic development (expressed as living standards) is only one. Other indicators that delink happiness from economic advancement include the New Economics Foundation's Happy Planet Index and the United Nations World Happiness Report.<sup>5</sup> These new measures are part of a critical interrogation of the notion of 'development' that highlights the short-term and limited priorities (and perverse outcomes) that emerge when development is understood simply as economic success. These measures expand the conception of development to include not only human happiness and but also planetary health.

The critical role that measures such as Gross National Happiness, Happy Planet Index and the World Happiness Report have played in debates about human and planetary well-being are welcome, if not long overdue. One important aspect of these measures is that they move away from understanding happiness in purely individualised terms as a personality trait, and acknowledge the role that collective endeavours play. Another is the way they incorporate an expanded understanding of the

economy as involving not just familiar economic activities, but also hidden economic activities such as unpaid and volunteer work. However, there is a troubling side to their deployment. By reducing happiness to a single national measure and even ranking countries according to their happiness score, these indicators replicate some of the more concerning features of individually-oriented understandings of happiness. This chapter explores other ways that measurement tools might be used to enable more politically engaged futures.

### **Beyond an Individualised Approach**

One characteristic of the emerging national measures of happiness is their acknowledgement that happiness is a collective endeavour. In Bhutan the founding view is that it is not sufficient to focus narrowly 'on happiness that begins and ends with oneself and is concerned for and with oneself' because '[t]he pursuit of happiness is collective'.<sup>6</sup> This recognition of the collective or relational aspect of happiness is reflected in the Gross National Happiness index, most explicitly via the domains of community vitality (which includes social supports and community relationships), cultural diversity (which includes socio-cultural participation) and good governance (which includes political participation and political freedom). However, other domains also recognise collective endeavours. For example, the domain of time use includes unpaid and volunteer work that contributes to families and communities. Even the domain of ecological diversity and resilience takes a collective view by including people's sense of responsibility towards the environment, thus acknowledging the importance of human and non-human relationships.



Other national measures also recognise that relations with others matter. For example, the United Nations World Happiness Report includes the role of social support (expressed as having someone to count on in times of trouble) and the prevalence of generosity (expressed as giving money to charity).

As it turns out, relations with others might not just be about individual, family, neighbourhood or community-based practices. According to the 2013 World Happiness Report the five happiest countries were Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands and Sweden, all nations that systematically invest in schemes for assuring collective well-being. This result certainly seems to challenge the tenets of neoliberal government that promote individualism, austerity and disinvestment in social welfare as the rightful way to progress the nation. It might be that a strong sense of collectivity enacted through both informal and day-to-day practices of caring and giving, and more formal mechanisms of government are indispensable to securing happiness and well-being.

### **Beyond a Familiar Economic Approach**

The emerging national measures of happiness don't just challenge the assumption that economic advancement secures happiness, they also challenge understandings of economy. Generally the economy is narrowly understood as involving paid workers employed in capitalist enterprises to produce goods and services that are sold in the market. However, as noted above, the national measures take into account other forms of work, such as the unpaid and volunteer work that occurs in households and communities, as well as acts of giving. Elsewhere, we have

used the image of the diverse economy iceberg to capture this expanded understanding of economy (see Figure 8.1).

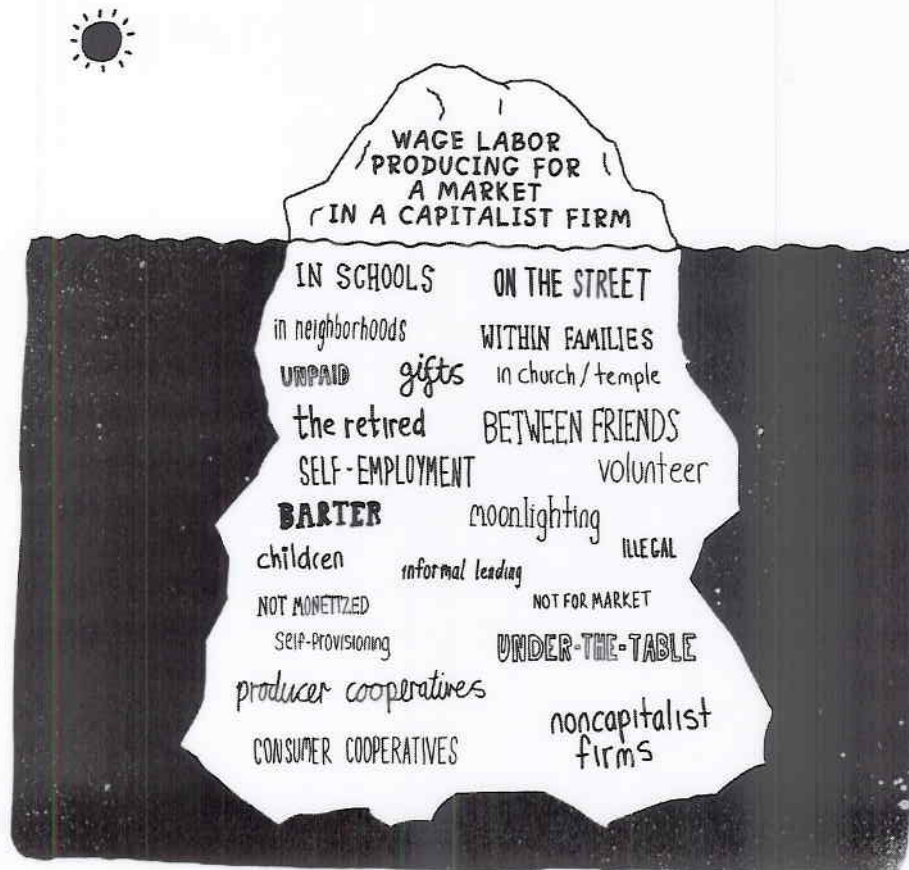


Figure 8.1: The Diverse Economy Iceberg

The emphasis on economic advancement as the route to happiness largely focuses on that small fraction of the diverse economy iceberg that sits above the waterline. Whereas the emerging national measures of happiness suggest that there are many more economic practices that contribute to happiness. Indeed, the 2013 World Happiness Report notes that volunteering, donating to charity and helping a stranger are all associated with higher individual levels of happiness.<sup>7</sup> Thinking

about the economy in this way also has implications for environmental well-being. As identified in the introduction, there is a level of national economic development needed to secure well-being (pinpointed at a Gross Domestic Product per capita of \$15,000 per year), but economic development beyond this level does not guarantee happiness. In a climate changing world, there is the risk that if happiness is aligned purely with economic development, understood as increasing levels of production and consumption, this will further undermine the very environmental conditions that make life (as we know it) possible on this planet. Whereas economic development, defined as diversifying economic practices, particularly focusing on activities with a low carbon footprint, may well be key to both human and planetary well-being.

### **The Downside of Happiness Indicators**

Measuring happiness at a national level is part of a larger trend of using statistical indicators to, as Sally Engle Merry puts it, 'measure the world'.<sup>8</sup> The attraction of indicators is their power 'to convert complicated and contextually variable phenomenon into unambiguous, clear, and impersonal measures'.<sup>9</sup> Thus a single number can stand as an accurate account of a nation's happiness and be used for comparing and ranking nations according to their level of happiness. One effect of the reliance on indicators to make a complicated world both knowable and manageable is that technical and statistical expertise comes to the fore, and provides the means for supposedly objective and rational decision-making. As a result, '[i]ndicators replace judgments on the basis of values or politics'.<sup>10</sup> A second effect is that



nations are depicted as coherent wholes and the diversity of individuals and circumstances within nations is overridden.<sup>11</sup> Thus social scientists such as John Law call for 'an alternative sensibility' that recognises the complexity of any given context and uses more qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and citizens' juries to reveal the heterogeneity of a collective such as a nation.<sup>12</sup>

This alternative sensibility is evident in a recent Australian effort to define what Australians consider the key dimensions of 'progress', particularly with the aim of taking into account not just the economic but also the social, environmental and governance dimensions of progress.<sup>13</sup> The Measures of Australia's Progress project, run by the Australian Bureau of Statistics over two years (2011 and 2012), asked a broad range of Australians, 'What is important to you for national progress?'<sup>14</sup> Consultation methods included workshops, forums and social media (such as blogs and Facebook). The project identified twenty-three aspirations that are important to Australians. Contradictions are readily apparent. Australians 'want their environment to become healthier rather than degraded over time',<sup>15</sup> yet they also want increased well-being 'understood as having the opportunities, means and ability to have a high standard of living and lead the kind of life they want and choose to live'.<sup>16</sup> They aspire to a growing economy with quality paid employment, yet they would like to have the availability of time for 'building and maintaining positive relationships'.<sup>17</sup> We might conclude, as did some members of the popular press when the report was published, that Australians want to 'have it all' and are unable to let go of anything. It seems that there is work to be done if an

alternative sensibility is to generate outcomes that can contribute to meaningful discussions, debates and decision-making.

### **Toward a 'Relational Metrics' Approach**

Indicators have the potential to be developed beyond mere end points for projects aiming to establish levels of happiness. They can be the starting point for conversations about the means of attaining happiness. In what follows, we discuss a series of what we call 'relational metrics' that offer examples of the sorts of indicators that might be used as prompts for these conversations about means.<sup>18</sup> The idea with relational metrics is to highlight the collective nature of happiness and well-being, and the role that an economy comprised of diverse economic practices can play in attaining happiness and well-being. We apply these metrics to two lives that are based on real people. To begin, let's replace the idea of the pursuit of happiness with the pursuit of 'surviving well together'. Surviving well together is a collective endeavour engaging multiple elements – individual happiness and well-being, and the happiness and well-being of others and the planet on which we live. The term survival might seem too linked to material sufficiency, but for us it gestures towards the maintenance of life conjuring up the human and non-human others that contribute to this delicately balanced process.

Our relational metrics starts by exploring individual happiness and well-being via a 24-hour time-use clock on which to record hours of work, rest and play. Figure 8.2 records the typical twenty-four hours of Maya, a thirty-eight-year-old junior partner at a leading law firm, who defines her well-being



Philosophical Engagements

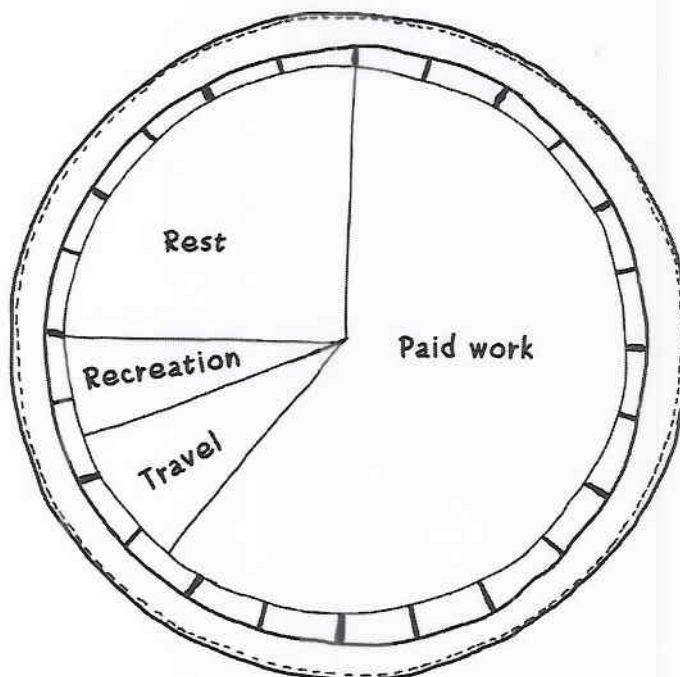


Figure 8.2: Maya's 24-hour Clock

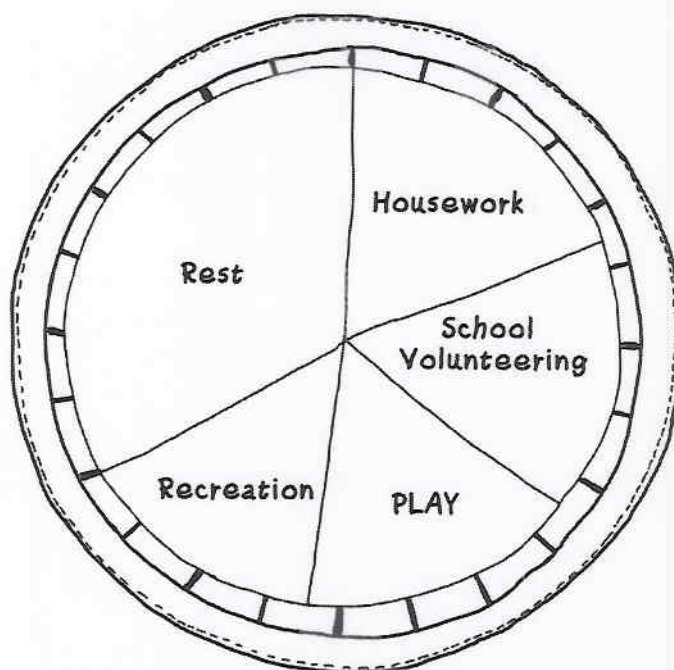


Figure 8.3: Josef's 24-hour Clock

and happiness in terms of her career advancement and spends the bulk of her time focused on this paid work activity. In contrast, Josef is a forty-two-year-old sole parent living on a disability benefit who spends his typical day in a range of unpaid or alternatively paid work activities (see Figure 8.3). He carries out the housework associated with rearing his young family, spends time at the local school volunteering in the reading program, and puts energy into PLAY (an initiative he has started with other men in his neighbourhood who are also on disability or unemployment benefits to contribute to the neighbourhood by doing things such as helping single mums with tasks around their homes and building a community garden on vacant land). At the end of the day, he picks up his children from school and they spend time together doing the children's homework, reading and playing music.

### WELL-BEING SCORECARD

MAYA'S WELL-BEING	1	2	3
Material			X
Occupational		X	
Social	X		
Community	X		
Physical		X	

Figure 8.4: Maya's Well-being Scorecard

Maya's and Josef's well-being are also gauged using a well-being scorecard on which they self-assess the five dimensions of well-being,<sup>19</sup> with scores of 1, 2 and 3 representing assessments

of poor, sufficient and excellent (see Figures 8.4 and 8.5). Maya scores her material well-being as excellent, her occupational and physical well-being as sufficient, but her social and community well-being as poor. On the other hand, Josef assesses all dimensions of his well-being as excellent, except for his material well-being which he rates as sufficient.

### WELL-BEING SCORECARD

JOSEF'S WELL-BEING	1	2	3
Material		X	
Occupational			X
Social			X
Community			X
Physical			X

Figure 8.5: Josef's Well-being Scorecard

Maya and Josef are clearly two extremes. One is oriented toward career advancement and material success; the other toward service to others and internal satisfaction. Most of us probably live some mix of these two. But the time-use clock and well-being scorecard can be used to open up discussions about how we achieve happiness and well-being. How do we spend the hours in a typical day? How do we assess the multiple dimensions of our well-being? To what extent do we prioritise paid work and material well-being as the means for achieving happiness, while potentially putting at risk other forms of well-being and eroding our chances of happiness, as Maya is doing? To what extent are we willing to follow Josef's path of moderating



our material well-being in order to achieve happiness via the other dimensions of well-being?

The time-use clock and well-being scorecard are metrics that can be used to initiate an exploration of individual well-being and happiness. But what of the happiness and well-being of others and our planet? Here we can add another metric into the 'surviving well together' relationship. Today there are a plethora of ecological footprint calculators available online that allow us to measure the impact of how we live on the planet.<sup>20</sup> In Australia, the average ecological footprint is 3.7, meaning that Australians (on average) require 3.7 planets to sustain how we live.<sup>21</sup> Josef with his pared-down lifestyle can be sustained by 1.5 planets; whereas Maya, with her heavy reliance on consumption requires many more planets.<sup>22</sup> With the time-use clock, well-being scorecard and ecological footprint calculator it is possible to compare one's individual well-being with planetary well-being and ask, what is the ecological cost of my lifestyle? How does my work/life (im)balance relate to planetary sustainability? There are also relational metrics that can be used to interrogate how our attempts to achieve material well-being impact on others. The ethical interconnection checklist (see Table 8.1) invites us to consider what happens when we have to reach beyond our own capacity to meet our survival needs and use markets to provide what we need to survive well – the ethical interconnection checklist focuses our attention on what it means to survive well in relation to others. It asks us to consider how we are connected to those who supply our needs and to reflect on the impacts that our transactions have on others. It asks us to consider the well-being of animals, environments, workers and communities involved in supplying our needs, and it invites us

to consider other ways that we might secure what we need to survive well.

Table 8.1: The Ethical Interconnection Checklist

ETHICAL INTERCONNECTION CHECKLIST		
THE ETHICAL CONCERN	THE ETHICAL QUESTIONS	THE PEOPLE AND PLANET CONNECTIONS
Are both my needs and the needs of others being met?	<p>Am I connecting with others more directly?</p> <p>Am I taking only what I need?</p> <p>Are there other ways I can give back to help others meet their needs?</p> <p>Are there other ways I can share or reciprocate?</p>	<p>Animals</p> <p>Are animals being treated humanely?</p> <p>Environment</p> <p>Are the environmental impacts of production being addressed?</p> <p>People</p> <p>Is well-being taken into account?</p> <p>Politics</p> <p>Are the politics just?</p> <p>Sustainability</p> <p>Does the product have a neutral or positive impact?</p>

## Conclusion

In taking back the pursuit of happiness there is much to be done. Our attempts to place 'surviving well together' at the core of discussions about happiness can be seen as another way of applying the insights Bhutan offers the West. As the Prime Minister of Bhutan put it:

We have now clearly distinguished the 'happiness'...in GNH from the fleeting, pleasurable 'feel good' moods so often associated with that term. We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realising our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds.<sup>23</sup>

Critically, we are not proposing another attempt to 'see like a survey' as John Law puts it,<sup>24</sup> although we acknowledge that some of the tools we are interested in (time-use surveys, well-being assessments, ecological footprint calculators and checklists) are also ones used to aggregate up to national happiness figures. Rather, we are imagining groups of people engaging in joint reflection on their lives as a prelude to collective actions to more effectively survive well together and in so doing achieve happiness. The exercise of interrogating different kinds of human and planetary happiness and using relational metrics in collective conversations has the potential to generate new economic possibilities. If we take back the economy as a site of ethical action the pursuit of happiness becomes the pursuit of surviving well together. It becomes a means to develop greater capacity to connect and care. It prompts collective actions that promote global and local well-being. It generates new insights into the kinds of economy that might emerge if we are to take 'true abiding' human and planetary happiness seriously.

#### Endnotes

- 1 R. Easterlin, 'Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence', in P. A. David and M. W. Reder (eds), *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*, Academic Press, New York, 1974, pp. 89–125.



## Philosophical Engagements

- 2 T. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, Earthscan, London, 2009, pp. 39–43.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 40.
- 4 K. Ura, S. Alkire, T. Zangmo & K. Wangdi, *A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index*, Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimpu, Bhutan, 2012, p. 6.
- 5 In 2012, the Australia Bureau of Statistics identified 57 projects from across the globe aimed at interrogating societal well-being. These include projects at international, national and state levels. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Measures of Australia's Progress. Aspirations for our Nation: A Conversation with Australians about Progress*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2012, p. 69.
- 6 Ura et al., *A Short Guide*, p. 1.
- 7 J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard & J. Sachs (eds), *World Happiness Report 2013*, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, New York, 2013, p. 66.
- 8 S. E. Merry, 'Measuring the world: indicators, human rights, and global governance', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 52, no. S3, 2011, pp. S83–S95.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. S84.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. S85.
- 11 J. Law, 'Seeing like a survey', *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, pp. 239–56.
- 12 *ibid.*, pp. 249 & 250.
- 13 This project is not unique in Australia. In line with Merry's work on measuring the world, by 2012 there were at least 51 indicator projects across Australia, run by national, state and local governments, examining concerns related to happiness and well-being. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Measures of Australia's Progress. Aspirations for our Nation: A Conversation with Australians about Progress*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2012, p. 38.
- 14 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Measures of Australia's Progress. Aspirations for our Nation: A Conversation with Australians about Progress*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2012, p. 10.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 94.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 90.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 86.
- 18 The metrics discussed in this section are drawn from our recent book, J. K. Gibson-Graham, J. Cameron & S. Healy, *Take Back the*

## Philosophical Engagements

*Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming our Communities*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013.

- 19 Based on global research, Tom Rath and Jim Harter have identified five dimensions of well-being. Material well-being is having the resources to meet basic needs; occupational well-being is about enjoying what we do each day whether in paid, unpaid or alternatively paid work; social well-being is having close personal relationships; community well-being is being involved with community activities; and physical well-being is having good health and a safe living environment. See T. Rath & J. Harter, *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Element*, Gallup Press, New York, 2010.
- 20 Two examples are the Global Footprint Network calculator (see <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/gfn/page/calculators>) and the World Wide Fund for Nature - Australia calculator (see [http://www.wwf.org.au/our\\_work/people\\_and\\_the\\_environment/human\\_footprint/footprint\\_calculator/](http://www.wwf.org.au/our_work/people_and_the_environment/human_footprint/footprint_calculator/)).
- 21 Global Footprint Network, *The National Footprint Accounts, 2011 Edition*, Global Footprint Network, Oakland, California, 2012.
- 22 Gibson-Graham et al., *Take Back the Economy*, p. 34.
- 23 Cited in Ura et al., *A Short Guide*, p. 7.
- 24 Law, 'Seeing like a survey'.