

Dr Nic Marks

RM: You have been working with the New Economics Foundation, a group well known for their work on issues of social justice and sustainability and increasingly on developing new measures of collective wellbeing. Part of this work has seen the development of the Happy Planet Index which has received a lot of attention of late. I wonder if we could begin by exploring exactly what the Happy Planet Index is and what its purpose might be.

NM: The Happy Planet Index is an indicator that tries to differentiate between what the ultimate outcomes of societies are and their fundamental inputs. When we think about lots of indicators, they represent a means to an end but what is the end that we are trying to get to? If we go all the way back, say to Aristotle, the concept of happiness has been thought of as an end – people don't want to be happy for another purpose, so that they can be wealthy or educated or attract a mate. Happiness is something that we want for its own sake. Aristotle talks in terms of telos - that ultimate aim or purpose - and well being or happiness fits that idea. So it is good to look at how well societies do at producing long and happy lives. But there is another issue here and that is how much of the planets resources they use to produce that happiness. The idea of a Happy Planet Index was to link together this increasing global interest in the concepts of wellbeing and happiness, with the understanding that we do only have one planet and there over 6 billion of us here and we have to share these increasingly scarce resources around. What the HPI does then is it looks across nations at the average levels of life satisfaction in a country (and this is the most globally available indicator of happiness), length of life because people

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

want to live the full span of human life if possible and divides these by people's ecological footprint. So, the idea is really to create an efficiency measure, one that shows how efficient we are at converting the planet's resources into wellbeing and happiness. It is like a measure of miles per kilometre, or how much bang you get for your buck. Ultimately, that is what the Happy Planet Index is trying to do.

RM: Overall what have been your major conclusions after constructing the Index? What did they reveal?

NM: I think a major finding was what quite a lot of us in so-called developed countries already feel, and that is that we are becoming less efficient in producing happiness. That is, we are using more and more resources for very marginal gains in wellbeing. We are over-developing, in contrast to for instance the Thai concept of the sufficiency economy which is where we use neither too little nor too much. If we look at all the things we have in the West that we don't need, it is a terrible thing. And I think lots of parents feel this when they look at all the toys their children have that they do not need. When I was young we played with only a few toys and played with them a lot. But now kids have masses but they don't have the time to play with them. And if you scale that up a hundred-fold it includes mobile phones, I-Pods, televisions etc. How many televisions do we need? If your current television works then why do you need a bigger, flat-screen one? Why drive newer, larger four wheel drives in the city when you only really need a little smart car. So, we have huge over-consumption and it is a problem in two ways. In one way, it is always easy to show that there is just too much pressure on the planet and that this pressure on our basic resources is simply not sustainable. Strictly in terms of throughput, most products in the economy are simply waste-in-waiting, just waiting to be thrown away. We may get some of what economists call 'utility' in using them along the way, but sometimes we do not. In the UK, something like 20% of food is thrown away before it is eaten. It gets grown, shipped

around the place, it gets frozen, packaged, put in the shops' fridges, in our own fridges. We go and park in the supermarket car-park, drive all this food home and leave it there till it passes the sell-by-date. Then we throw it in the bin. If not even a tasty meal comes out at the end of all of that, it is so unbelievably wasteful. About 30% of our footprint is about food systems, so it is a massive area that we are over-consuming in. But the point really is not only that it is not good for the environment - obviously, but I also feel that it is also not good for our true feelings of wellbeing and happiness.

The recent research on happiness from the Western positive psychology movement is now trying to redress the imbalance of the past where there was much attention on disease and distress and not very much on understanding human flourishing. Now there is interesting and good research looking at positive outcomes like happiness, meaning and so on. And one of the most important things to come out of this is that it is not the material things that make you happy, it is your relationships that are primary in bringing happiness and well being. You can buy something new and it might give you some pleasure when you get it but often that soon wears off. You buy the new car thinking its fantastic, but you quickly realise you are still stuck in the same old traffic jam, going to the same old job so it is not really bringing you that much extra benefit. What we are finding is that having materialist values means chasing what psychologists call 'extrinsic rewards' - that is, things that bring you status, so you are chasing after something from the outside that other people will respect you more for having. The ways in which we chase approval and status in the west in particular, revolve around our material goods and our relative position - keeping up with the Joneses, or even out-trumping the Joneses. Or another way we do it is to compete on the basis of our physical looks. Today we have a younger generation growing up with very poor body images because they do not feel they live up to the impossible standards of models and pop stars. Their self-esteem is hit by the fact that they cannot look like them. Or

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

they try and starve themselves so they can sort of look like them. Chasing such an external identity is hollow and is never going to be intrinsically rewarding.

Deeper happiness involves living in such a way that you get deep satisfaction, from living in ways that meet your own passions and interests and meet your own values. You set the agenda yourself, if you like. So, instead of playing society's game, you set the agenda yourself. Consumption then is definitely bad for the environment and probably bad for wellbeing. And this means that this over-consumption that we really have in the West should be seen as a regression instead of a progression of human society.

RM: It is a very interesting way of putting it in terms of regression because it seems that in a sense, this movement towards gaining a sense of self-worth through the reactions of others is in many ways characteristic of a psychological immaturity. It is almost as if in our tendency not to look to the long-term, and in our self-absorbed individualism, we have failed to move beyond our limitations as Western cultures. But I think that wanting to impress on the basis of superficial things like fashion and cars is only the tip of the iceberg in that it is only one visible part of a more deeply problematic social structure. Do you think that alternative indicators like the HPI and the new evidence they bring to the table, can help challenge our collective immaturity and push back some of the forces that tend to keep us immature in our political, social and economic structures?

NM: Yes, well that is quite an interesting and profound question. I think that indicators do have a role to play in the maturation process that you are talking about there. Any maturing process requires reflection and one of the things that I have done in my life is to train and work as a psychotherapist and the models and ideas from doing that have certainly influenced my strategies around what indicators can do. If you look at the research on what makes

a good therapist, a good therapist is one who listens to his client and reflects back to the client what they are feeling and then asks appropriately challenging questions. So, I think indicators can play a similar role in that they listen to a population if the questionnaires and surveys are constructed in a good way. They allow us to basically hear the views of people. Then by communicating the results of these they are basically reflecting back so that people and societies can suddenly see themselves afresh, anew, in a different way. Then we can move a step further to look at how we address the challenges we face and I think that is a maturing process.

I have become very struck in my work over the past four or five years of creating well being questionnaires that people really enjoy filling them out. They genuinely enjoy being asked questions that they are not usually asked. Usually, if you are given a questionnaire, it is a marketing one or a health screening questionnaire or something like that. Not many people ask you questions about whether you feel your life is worthwhile and useful, or whether you are optimistic, or how resilient you feel and these are important concepts. People really value being asked to reflect like that. And with information technology these days, you can design questionnaires that give people real time feedback if they fill it out on the web. People can not only enjoy it but they can stop and think about their life. We are not a very reflective culture and it is a big difference when you come to Buddhist countries like Thailand or Bhutan where people are allowed to be more reflective and in a way that you do not often see in the West. So, we design these indicators to give people instant feedback and I think people enjoy filling them out because it provides a mirror that can allow them to look at their lives in a different way and see a bit more clearly that maybe their life-work balance isn't really in balance, or that they are in too much of a rush, or that they might have a bit more choice around those things than they realise. So, I think we can begin in a very direct way to touch people's lives and have them look at why they are living the lives they are and whether this is really making them happy.

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

So, it is about asking these really quite simple questions of do I have a choice to do things differently. Obviously, we often find that our choices are really quite constrained and we cannot be too romantic and think that people are free to choose exactly how they want to live. But at the margins, people can definitely choose to invest their discretionary time in different ways. I can work harder and earn more money to buy that flat screen TV or pay back the debt on the one that I have already got, or I can have a little bit less money and more time to spend with my family, my children and my friends. I could possibly take up a hobby, something I've been meaning to do for years. I could go and join in that community project I have never got time for. So, I think that is one way that indicators can actually influence people.

Then there is the question of how indicators interact with the policy cycle and how much we think we can develop indicators that can inform policy debate. I work in a UK context and we are certainly seeing a lot of experimentation with that. We work with several local government authorities and we work for three different government departments – the Department of the Environment where we work on sustainability and wellbeing, the Audit Commission who evaluate government departments and we are part of a long term project with the Office of Science and Technology on what the scenarios are around wellbeing and how it will play out over the next 30-40 years in the UK. So there is a lot of interest there. And what they really seem to be looking for at the moment are contextual indicators, ones that can explain some of the differences between different groups of people and what they think around wellbeing, I think there is a nervousness though about wellbeing indicators becoming what are currently termed KPIs, key performance indicators and around any idea that government somehow must make the population happier. Some are nervous about these and I think quite rightly so for a couple of reasons. First, is it directly the role of government to make people happier? And, secondly, I think subjective indicators are useless for performance targets until we see how they operate at the real

sharp end of policy. Can we actually produce some of these indicators? How are they going to perform? What are the best ways of doing it? I personally think we will be able to do these things but I totally understand that we have to prove it. We have to do action research around developing questionnaires, getting local authorities to use them and talk with the policy makers in those local authorities about whether that is a useful process for them. Has it informed their policy decisions, and changed the way they spend their money? I think often we talk so much about spending more in certain areas when it might in fact be more an issue of how policy is being delivered that is important. So, how can we best deliver education? The use of wellbeing indicators leads this to be much more child-focused in the schools. It is more about developing curiosity that bunging them full of knowledge. So it can be quite a subtle change and not necessarily one costing more money. We can design housing differently to facilitate people meeting other people in a casual way. They can get to know their neighbours more easily which is difficult in say tower block living, where you come straight upstairs and shut your door behind you. Living like this means you are not going to meet your neighbours. But if we design spaces in the round, so that people have to move around them and have social spaces where people gather naturally, it works better. The kids want to play there and the older people to sit out there. And particularly when the motor car is taken out. Where children used to play out in the street they are now inside, often watching television or playing computer games while outside, drivers in their private tanks think they own the road and have an attitude of 'get out of my way child'. It would be much better for kids' wellbeing if they could get out there and muck around a bit more.

RM: I am interested in a couple of things you said there. If you look at much of the focus of work on wellbeing it seems to be primarily about creating the environment within which wellbeing can thrive. Many people are sceptical about government's right to try to make people happy but to put it in the context of creating an environment within which people

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

can create their own happiness makes it fit clearly with the Bhutanese perspective. Do you think there is a tendency at the policy level to demand simple and quick answers to creating wellbeing that might undermine some of its deeper potential? I mean, for example, in terms of looking for overly simple outcomes, such as a single happiness measure, and in the process losing a more complex view of what is important and valuable? Do you find this sort of process in action as you engage with policy makers or do you find an openness to the fact that it is a multi-dimensional issue and that happiness and wellbeing involves the coming together of a variety of situational factors within which individual happiness can thrive?

NM: At a local government level, policy-makers are used to having to deal with a variety of social indicators. In the UK, local government is assessed against a list of about 200 KPIs and quite a lot of these are about social inclusion, participation and so forth. But they are very poor on more personal wellbeing, whether they are building peoples' resilience and those sorts of things. In the UK certainly there are a lot of process indicators relating to the percentages of people involved in this or that, or the ethnic breakdowns of these but they are acutely aware that they need to move to more specific outcome indicators that are of more significance to people. I feel fairly encouraged in a local government context. I think that is very different in a national government context where, again, they have a multiplicity of targets but they have quite a top down view that they have to somehow solve the problem. Local governments are used to dealing with the grey areas and the difficulties involved in only being able to do so much, but sometimes central government want clearer and simpler answers. In the political realm, they are far more interested in having one number. But I am quite comfortable with producing indices which are composite and bring things together. The Happy Planet Index is a single number. If you are playing the game of producing one number, you have to be acutely aware that it cannot catch everything in it. You have to be transparent and explain why

you brought certain things together and you have to deal with the issue of trade-offs. This is in fact the nice thing about indicators – you have to start having those debates about how much of this compared with how much of that do we really want? These are the real policy questions of how much we invest in health, education, leisure and so on. If composite indicators are to be worth anything, the structure must contain those tensions and look at how much wellbeing we get from our resources. We already do that in the sense that GDP is a composite indicator and it has the assumption that any transaction is good and that the measure of value is what people are willing to pay. But there is no concept at all as to what the other outcomes are.

RM: Although there does seem to be a real movement internationally towards the inclusion of broader aspects of our wellbeing, for a long time we have laboured under this purified ideological notion that the bigger the market is, the more satisfaction it represents and therefore that GDP has to be an indicator our happiness. There are many towns, provinces, states and nations beginning to seriously look at broadening the scope of their evaluation of progress as you well know. I am wondering if you think that this momentum has to do with the unfolding environmental situation and our increasing appreciation of this. There are many voices now being raised about the lack of fit between ever-growing consumption and the health of the planet and the radical changes we need to make in the short term if we are to avoid severe disruption. As these pressures enter our consciousness, does it suggest to you an easier transition towards more inclusive thinking, or do you think that it might drive us in the opposite direction to becoming more individualistic, more competitive and even more oblivious to the big picture?

NM: I think how one view the future unfolding is, in part, a personal choice depending on what one chooses to place emphasis on. There are different strategies and I will just say

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

what I think my strategy is. My true answer is that I don't really know how the future will unfold. I think we can see some trends but I don't believe we live in a totally linear system. But now we have almost weekly reports of looming environmental challenges and some of them are quite apocalyptic in their presentation. So, now most people are very aware that we have to face some serious issues. In Britain we experienced very serious flooding in late June 2007 when we had a month's rainfall in four hours. This is like monsoon rain - torrential. Small streams rose five feet in an afternoon. It worried people a lot and we can see that coming through in surveys. A good recent survey asked people across Europe what they think about the future and whether they are worried about it and twice as many people are worried about the future than are not. That is a massive number of people across Europe who are seriously concerned. Now that could be seen as a bad thing or a good thing. Quite often when we have threats as you say, we retreat into our shells and into immaturity. But if we want people to go towards a more positive future, then we need to offer them approach goals and not only avoidance goals. We have to offer them a vision of the future that would be better. And I think this is the big role that Gross National Happiness can play. We have not only seen images of increasing environmental costs but see these alongside scenes of social disintegration. So, if we can offer a future that has higher levels of social well being - community happiness as its called in Thailand, and show how the social milieu can be so much more functional, I think it could be an appealing future for people. Local relationships are good for community wellbeing and local food production and energy systems are good for the environment, so we need to create a new vision based on localism - which does not mean small-mindedness.

Most of us feel rushed off our feet and if we could only have the time to enjoy the fruits of our prosperity rather than rushing around indebted and chasing security, I think it would be an attractive future. So, I think there is an opportunity in that a fear of the future can really shake the

system up. Now whether there will be a smooth transition, I don't know. The Berlin wall came down fairly quickly following a change of mind. Obviously there were serious transition problems after that but I think that the weakness of the materialistic, consumer society is its hollowness. If people begin to see the hollowness for what it is and begin demanding a more deeply satisfying life, I think we could see a shift happening quite quickly. Unfortunately we will almost certainly have more environmental catastrophes and where they are experienced will matter. If more hit the wealthy world there might be a quicker shift, but if it is in the poorer parts, the need for change will no doubt be shut out. With peak oil, we reach a situation where prices rise more and more as the situation becomes less and less secure. Who is going to control the most essential fuels? We have Russia holding the major gas fields, control of oil being largely in the Middle East and so there is likely to be considerable geo-political insecurity over our supplies of fuels. If Russia turned off the gas taps to Europe, a lot of people would face a very unhappy winter. So, local renewable energy can be much safer and more secure. Personally though, I am not in the game of frightening people. I think we should be in the game of inspiring people to change

RM: Reflecting upon a few of your previous comments I am thinking that part of the movement towards happiness and a more grounded wellbeing might require a temporary plunge into quite deep unhappiness with the way we are living our unsustainable lives at the moment. It is a psychological constant in all major theories of growth - that to move forward you first have to become dissatisfied with where you are at present. I wonder if there is a danger in emphasising happiness too much, particularly in the context of the privileged world where there may be a tendency to avoid the unhappiness of acknowledging where the big picture is going.

NM: I do understand your question. I think the Buddhist perspective would see that our view of happiness is quite

Eleven Dialogues on Gross National Happiness

shallow with our unawareness of the sufferings of life. There are challenging concepts over what is right thinking and so forth and I think it is a useful stretch to our work. But, obviously, there is the notion of no pain, no gain in Western culture and I think there is a trade-off that goes on between pleasure and meaning in life. You can show this statistically when you do detailed work on the dimensions of wellbeing. Broadly speaking there are two major dimensions. One is around emotions and pleasure, while the other is about engagement and meaning. The latter is about maturation and personal development. We can all recognise people who are perhaps more pleasure seeking and not so centred on their personal development. And we can also see people who are centred upon finding meaning and personal development but who really don't enjoy life. The people who can find a balance and have a good time but still engage with being considerate and reflective, these are the most mature. So, a full model of wellbeing looks at a much deeper and more textured approach to assessment. We do have to recognise the hollowness of our lifestyle if we want to change and so I am not afraid of pointing that out. I think most people are pretty aware of that actually and if you ask a few meaningful questions, it doesn't take long to get to it.

There are very few people who are so attached to our Western way as to see it as the only way. So, maybe, the 27% in Europe who don't worry about the future are too hard to reach, so let's worry about the 47% who are perhaps ready to change first. And that is a much higher figure than people usually talk about. We talk of 'early adopters' but I think we have quite a body ready to change. There is another 20 something percent who say they don't know whether they should be worried or not. So there is quite a considerable audience there and so perhaps we do not worry about the ones that are harder to change straight away. If they are holding vested interests then that is likely to be a problem and we will come up against structures of power and all sorts of resistance but, we will see.