The Pursuit of Happiness:

Should 'happiness' be included as a development objective in the SDGs?

Introduction

Global development encompasses a broad range of study that is centralized on the advancement of the human condition. When utilising the 'development as action' perspective, development agencies make a conscience decision to introduce policy around the ultimate goal of improving human well-being. The United Nations, whose main focus is resolving global challenges, defines its goal as creating "an enabling environment for people to live long, healthy and creative lives" (Stewart, 2014). To achieve this goal, the United Nations has selected multiple aspects of human life as key targets to guide development projects, known as the Sustainable Development Goals. These targets include: poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, sanitation, clean energy, economic growth, innovation, reduced inequality, sustainability, responsible consumerism, climate control, ocean conservation, land preservation, peace and capacity building (United Nations, 2018). One element of the human condition not included in this list, which is disputed within the development field, is that of human happiness. Due to its intangible nature, human happiness had been rejected as an objective for development standards. Is it justifiable to overlook the voices of the populations impacted by development projects in favour for observable and easily measurable figures? Neo-development professional are beginning to think not. In this essay, I will offer an analysis of happiness, taking into consideration both the difficulties in capturing this intangible good (Antolini, 2016) and the value of the "key information about people's quality of life" (Stewart, 2014) gained from measuring joy. This essay will highlight the case of Bhutan and its adoption of the Gross National Happiness Index as a governmental guide for development. There will be a discussion on the shortcomings of viewing development solely through the lens of economic improvement and the lack of correlation between happiness and wealth. The paper will stand in favour of the inclusion of human happiness perspectives in traditional development measures, like the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, for a more holistic understanding of the human condition.

What is happiness?

As one can imagine, there is no universal definition of happiness. Happiness is a socioculturally constructed concept whose meaning fluctuates region-by-region, person-to-person. In general, happiness does have a positive notion, which is often tied to emotional and mental states. Uchida et al., as cited by Antolini (2016), defines happiness as "a positive emotional state that is embedded within specific socialcultural contexts and circumstances". The collective view towards happiness will varies according to gender, religious beliefs, social class and local norms. Happiness, according to Tshiteem and Everest-Phillips (2016), refers to the state of "satisfied fundamental needs or goals". This perspective provides a more individualistic view on how happiness is interpreted, as goals are set by the individual and can differ even amongst people of the same socialcultural circle. Veenhoven offers a broader, but loose meaning of this word by defining it as "subjective enjoyment of one's life as-a-whole." His definition gives room for a holistic perspective of the human condition, such as the combination of physiological needs and safety with self-actualisation.

Happiness and wealth: the Easterlin paradox

The old saying goes "Money cannot buy you happiness"; according to economics professor Robert Easterlin, that saying is mostly true. The Easterlin paradox demonstrates that "studies across countries and over time find very little, if any, relationship between increases in per capita income and average happiness levels" (Graham, 2005). Understanding of the rationale behind this phenomenon is still unclear, with some theories suggesting that cultural upbringings may be an influential factor. What this theory does clearly illustrate is, after a certain threshold is met, increasing monetary gains does not necessarily result in happier lives. Yet, human development is most consistently measured through economic prosperity using indicators like Gross National Product or Gross Domestic Product, irregardless of the lack of positive correlation between wealth and happiness. This begs one to wonder what the motivation of governments is: to make financial gains or to promote the social welfare of its citizens?

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index

The year 1968 was momentous in the United States' history. The nation faced the start of the civil rights movement, protests against the Vietnam War and political assassinations. On the 18th

of March, 1968, just three months prior to his assassination, former United States Senator and aspiring presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy delivered a speech at the University of Kansas, which (amongst other topics concerning the nation's fragile state) addressed the shortcomings of Gross National Product:

> Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product, now, is over $800 billion dollars a year, but that Gross National Product - if we judge the United States of America by that - that Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. […] Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. (Kennedy, 1968)

Thirty years later, the small land-locked and remote Asian country of Bhutan decided to prioritize the welfare of its people over its economy. It led the way in the use of happiness in development by choosing to replace "Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary measure of national health, settling instead on the more utopian "Gross National Happiness" index, which prizes social and cultural well-being over material wealth" (Tucker, 2007). It was the first (and so far, the only) country to make this landmark decision. Prior to the adoption of the happiness index, Bhutan "suffered from some of the highest poverty, illiteracy, and infant-mortality rates in the world" (Larmer, 2008). By refocusing the end goal of all developmental and governmental work on balanced livelihoods and overall happiness, this leading country "has pulled itself out of abject poverty without exploiting its natural resources" (Larmer, 2008). Literacy rates are increasing, child mortality is dropping and the economy continues to strengthen, yet "Nearly three-quarters of the country is still forested, with more than 25 percent designated as national parks and other protected areas—among the highest percentages in the world" (Larmer, 2008). This far-reaching recovery, made without compromising its sustainability, is remarkable. With global climate change and sustainability leading many development discussions, the global community is turning to Bhutan to better understand its happiness index.

It is worth noting that the Bhutanese definition of happiness is derived from Buddhist text (Buddhism is the country's predominant religion) and is geared towards an inward perspective of

mental stability and joy (Tshiteem and Everest-Phillips, 2016). To achieve this vast goal of happiness, the government needed to adopt a holistic measure of people's well-being. Through years of alterations, the current Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index was fashioned. This index includes measurements of traditional aspects of development, such as "sustainable and equitable economic development", "environmental conservation", and "good governance", combined with the "preservation and promotion of culture and heritage" (Brooks, 2013). These four pillars are further broken down into "9 domains of GNH: education, health, ecological diversity and resilience, good governance, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, psychological well-being, and living standards" (Brooks, 2013), with each category represented and weighted equally. The data collected is measured by international standards along with national goals, Bhutanese sociocultural expectations and self-reports creating a holistic set of data encompassing subjective and objective figures. With this information, the Bhutanese government is able to paint a more complete picture of the needs of its people, which has led other governments to follow its example.

Why happiness is needed for development in action

While Bhutan remains the sole country to depend on the Gross National Happiness Index, other governments have begun to acknowledge the importance of holistic development measures and to incorporate happiness indicators into their data sets. The United Kingdom's Prime Minister David Cameron mirrored Kennedy's sentiments by stating, "It's high time we admitted that, taken on its own, GDP is an incomplete way of measuring a nation's progress" (Hawkes, 2010). This perspective has continued to grow across Europe and the United States with the incorporation of happiness and well-being into local and national statistics. "In 2008, France's then-president, Nicolas Sarkozy, commissioned an influential study of alternative gauges of economic welfare. The U.K. started a "Measuring National Well-Being" program in 2010, and U.S. cities like Santa Monica, Calif., have followed suit" (Raymond, 2015). Furthermore, the United Nations, as cited by Antolini (2016), deemed "The ultimate goal of every human individual is happiness, so then, it must be the responsibility of the state, or the government, to create those conditions that will enable citizens to pursue this value, this goal". The responsibility of human happiness is gradually being placed on governmental institutions as the importance of happiness and holistic well-being amplifies within the development field. Sithey,

Thow and Li (2015) express the "need to measure well-being and ecological sustainability to reflect the overall progress of nations and of humankind." Amartya Sen, as cited by Brooks (2013), aims "to replace the economic growth paradigm with a focus on *human* development, which views human beings as the ends of development and economic growth as one means of achieving human potential". Noting Kittiprapas' reminder, as cited by Antolini (2016), that "people's happiness is an indirect signal of the appreciation of public policies and of the civil progress reached by society", it is important to recognise that traditional development measures do not share people's perspectives and reactions towards these very policies. Progression in economic development as measured by Gross Domestic Product or Gross National Product does not equate to success or happiness. In fact, policies that help governments grow financially may have negative impacts on the social welfare of its people. Costanza et al. as cited by Brooks (2013) underscore that "relying on GDP as a measure of "progress" may encourage activities that reduce rather than enhance long-term well-being." The United States' workforce is notoriously known for the painstaking amounts of labour hours many Americans put into their work for the sake of economic progression, while neglecting mental and physical needs. It is difficult to imagine a well-rounded, happy life if one has access to financial stability, but suffers a deteriorating mental state. This happiness index is allowing social welfare to take root in development, with more politicians and researchers agreeing that "the multidimensional nature of the GNHI is important because […] it meshes well with the concept of human development, and (iii) by showing which aspects of well-being are insufficiently fulfilled, it can be more useful for policy makers" (Brooks, 2013).

How to measure happiness

Happiness carries multiple meanings and interpretations, which makes measuring it challenging. This difficulty is one of the prime criticisms of the Gross National Happiness Index (Montes and Bhattarai, 2018), but growing efforts to use happiness in development studies are paving the way for new measurement techniques to be instituted. Bhutan's happiness index consists of national survey data collected by the government with personal questions, such as "How much do you trust your neighbors?", "Is lying justifiable?" and "Do you feel like a stranger in your family?" (Raymond, 2015).

To measure national happiness, aspects of life that are meaningful to a country must be carefully selected. Additionally, Ura et al. as cited by Montes and Bhattarai (2018) note, these indicators "need to reflect all the relevant aspects of life which are vital to the concept and practice of GNH". Social markers will vary by country, but at the most primitive levels must include rates of violence, liberty, public health and equality (Veenhoven, 2009), along with survey data and interviews inquiring on general life happiness and community engagement. These figures create a rounded picture of the welfare of a population. Figures that are widely collected (e.g. violence, public health, equality, etc.) can be used to compare happiness with other countries. Antolini (2016) offers a unique idea of using national expenditures on antidepressants as an indication of global *unhappiness*. As he states, "antidepressant expenditure as a cost of modern society may be a very useful indicator" (Antolini, 2016) because a happy person is not depressed thus, would not need to use antidepressants. If a country has a low rate of antidepressant expenditures, one can conclude that its people are generally happy. This model of measurement offers limited use to areas that have widespread availability and distribution of the medications, but is a worthwhile indicator for internal use in countries that have this medical resource. Happiness is a complicated element to capture on paper, but the difficulty in measurement should not obstruct its influence on policy. Instead, development researchers should follow Antolini's example to explore groundbreaking methods for gauging it.

Critics of happiness

Researchers, mainly due to the difficulty in statistically discerning what happiness is, have contested the use of happiness in development. Veenhoven (2009) explains that critics take aim at the fluidity in linguistic interpretation of happiness: "La primera objeción es que las diferencias de lenguaje dificultan la comparación. Palabras como "felicidad" y "satisfacción" no tienen las mismas connotaciones en diferentes lenguas.[1]" Without a concrete definition to accompany happiness, consistently measuring a set parameter of what it constitutes will not be possible. The lines that shape this idea need to be clearly drawn. Some researchers express concern in the understanding by participants of the very questions used to ask about happiness: "Algunos críticos han señalado que las respuestas a las preguntas sobre felicidad miden en

[1] Translation of Veenhoven's (2009) text: "The first objection is that differences in speech make comparison difficult. Words like "happiness" and "satisfaction" do not have the same connotations in different languages."

realidad otros fenómenos. En lugar de indicar en qué medida el encuestado disfruta de la vida, las respuestas reflejan sus ideas normativas y sus deseos[2]" (Veenhoven, 2009). This, again, ties into the need for a clear distinction of what happiness is and this understanding needs to be applied to participants utilised for the study.

Veenhoven (2009) explains the critical perspective suggesting people's lack of innate and well-structured ideas about their own levels of happiness and his own rebuttal to that notion: "Uno de los reparos es que la mayoría de las personas carecen de opinión sobre su felicidad. Son más conscientes de lo felices que se les supone y de eso es de lo que informan. Aunque pueda ocurrir ocasionalmente, esta no parece ser la regla. La mayoría de las personas saben muy bien si disfrutan de la vida o no.[3]" Veenhoven (2009) suggests that people must surely know whether they have a positive or a negative perception about their lives. However, opinions about happiness may be influenced by the human ability to adapt to extreme conditions. If a child is born and raised in an isolated, rural village plagued by warfare and violence, he may not know of life any differently. This would skew his response of happiness when compared to someone from the same community who has had the opportunity to leave the village and experience safety. The once secluded (and happier) Bhutan saw an increase in violence, crime and drug usage soon after the introduction of the television and its international waves (Tucker, 2007). This critique of happiness drives towards philosophical and psychological research and begs the question of what instinctually creates happiness.

Veering towards the economic perspective, Antolini (2016) offers an insightful critique of the impact of happiness on productivity: "A society centered on productivity tends to achieve its targets regardless of planning arrangement, without considering the psychological needs of the individuals. The achievement of happiness within a productive society can therefore meet with several obstacles." Antolini's evaluation on happiness' effect on economic gain is a valid point for countries whose primary goals are focused on monetary value. For holistic views on well-

[2] Translation of Veenhoven's (2009) text: "Some critics have pointed out that the answers to questions about happiness actually measure other phenomena. Instead of indicating to what extent the respondent enjoys life, the answers reflect their normative ideas and desires."
[3] Translation of Veenhoven's (2009) text: "One of the qualms is that most people lack opinion about their happiness. They are more aware of what they are expected to be about happy and that is what they report. Although this may happen occasionally, this does not seem to be the rule. The majority of people know very well whether they enjoy life or not."

being, governments must strike a balance between how much economic gain the country wishes to have and the mental and physical well-being of its citizens.

The criticisms presented above are valid concerns that call for further evolution on a happiness developmental tool. Despite the potential for reporting errors, the data collected is useful for developing a richer understanding of the attitudes and perceptions on the needs of the public. Critics should also keep in mind that the loudest voices in the push for use of a happiness index do not wish to *replace* traditional measures of development. Such a move would be of great concern considering the indefinite and questionable data collection process of this abstract subject. Instead, it is the *inclusion* of happiness as an indicator of progress that is being urged (Graham, 2005).

Conclusion

Despite the criticisms, a strong case for the need to capture happiness in societies has influenced decisions by Northern countries to reproduce Bhutan's use of happiness for their own contexts. Ura et al. as cited by Montes and Bhattaria (2018) state that "the [GNH] measure and its component indicators aim to capture human well-being in a fuller and more profound way than traditional socio-economic measures of economic development, human development or social progress have done". If governments are motivated by the well-being of its people, then the Easterlin paradox, the limited perspective of traditional economic studies and the happiness index are significant concepts that should guide policy creation. Professionals are finding newer and better ways to capture this data as politicians and policy makers come to the realisation on the need for holistic well-being of its people. Bhutan continues to impact the global community by pushing for happiness' inclusion in the United Nation's development goals. These efforts bring the world closer to achieving the pursuit of happiness for all.

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