



PLANET
UNDER
PRESSURE
2012 MARCH 26-29
LONDON

RIO+20 POLICY BRIEF

#6

Human well-being for a planet under pressure

Transition to social sustainability



PHOTO: UN PHOTO / KIBAE PARK

Our rapidly increasing and urbanizing global population is facing unprecedented food, energy, economic and security crises, which are being compounded by climate change and extreme environmental events. As planetary boundaries are placed under increasing stress, so too are social bonds, relations and thresholds. This policy brief examines the need for urgent, innovative solutions and sets out key messages and recommendations that will guide humanity on the road to a more sustainable socioeconomic and ecological future.

Rio+20 Policy Briefs

One of nine policy briefs produced by the scientific community to inform the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). These briefs were commissioned by the international conference *Planet Under Pressure: New Knowledge Towards Solutions* (www.planetunderpressure2012.net).



Summary of key points and policy recommendations

- Well-being can only be attained when policymakers acknowledge it as being complex, multidimensional and context-specific as well as having physical, social and emotional attributes.
- Both environmental and social sustainability need to be regarded as imperative for overall human well-being by policymakers.
- Policies designed to maximize a nation's well-being should consider the socially established benchmarks.
- In measuring well-being, policymakers need to develop tools, methodologies and metrics that are multidimensional and nationally standardized while simultaneously acknowledging differing contexts, universal rights and freedoms.
- Reducing absolute poverty is essential, but not sufficient. Efforts must also be taken to reduce inequality. Countries should identify key quantifiable well-being measures within the comprehensive well-being list, in which inequality is minimized through a participatory approach.
- Population growth will impede sustainability objectives unless there is a move to allow freer movement and better integration of people. International and regional bodies should revise present migration and labor laws as well as governance mechanisms to facilitate a more equitable allocation of labor.
- The effects of urbanization and the physical urban environment on health and well-being have become increasingly significant. For this reason the seriousness and importance of urban planning needs to be reflected in policymaking.
- For the Green Economy to succeed it needs to also focus on social and ecological sustainability as a contributing factor to holistic well-being. International agencies and national governments should focus on growth in well-being and call for the following changes:
 - Move beyond GDP: develop new measures of progress, e.g. indices of inclusive wealth and comprehensive well-being.
 - Undertake a complete reform of the global institutional structure: agencies such as the United Nations, Bretton Woods institutions, the World Trade Organization and others must be given new mandates that respect planetary boundaries and establish comprehensive human well-being as an end objective.
 - Identify measures and incentives through a participatory, bottom-up process that recognizes planetary boundaries and the social needs of all individuals.
- Introduce a new institution or reform an existing multi-lateral agency or bank to be responsible for the improvement of comprehensive well-being of the global society.
- Develop economic systems as incentives for improving well-being, living within planetary boundaries and decreasing inequality.
- Adopt a new intellectual and values paradigm of social and environmental sustainability that underlies both private and public decision-making.
- A trans-disciplinary research effort is needed to improve understanding of the links among comprehensive human well-being, ecological systems, socioeconomic systems and pathways towards sustainability. The global environmental change research community should undertake an international assessment on the human dimensions of global change. The aim would be to highlight gaps in knowledge and identify future research into reducing poverty and inequality, improving well-being and a better understanding of planetary life support systems.



RIO+20

**United Nations Conference
on Sustainable Development**

THE HUMAN WELL-BEING CHALLENGE: INTERCONNECTIVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The crises facing the world today are deeply interwoven, and approaching each independently is both inadequate and unhelpful. Indeed, a solution to one problem might exacerbate another if designed in isolation. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2003) highlighted the many ways in which ecosystem services affect the various constituents of well-being (Figure 1), and the trade-offs and synergies that can occur across constituents. For example, the growth

in demand for biofuels is affecting food prices; rapid urbanization in developing countries is putting pressure on periurban ecological and social systems as well as city infrastructure (see box). Furthermore, the current popular fiscal policy of bolstering economic growth in the hope of leading economies out of the global economic downturn also raises demand for natural resources. This, in turn, increases pressure on the global ecosystem and threatens climate, water, biodiversity and other planetary boundaries.

Rapid urbanization in Asia

With over half the world's population living in cities, the effects of urban environments have become increasingly significant for overall human health and well-being. In rapidly urbanizing Asia, cities are extremely unhealthy, facing poor service infrastructure and excessive air and water pollution. The health impact of urban activities reaches beyond urban boundaries. Untreated residential and industrial sewage pollutes irrigation water, which enters the food system and causes serious health issues. How cities are planned and built affects the well-being of its people, too. Sprawling cities, for instance, tend to have a greater proportion of overweight individuals than do compact, 'walkable' cities. Cities that incorporate parks and green areas, on the other hand, benefit residents in many ways, from mitigating pollution and health problems to fulfilling a basic human need for contact with nature.

Source: Seto et al. (2011), Bai and Imura (2000), Bai and Shi (2006), Ewing et al. (2008), Garden and Jalaludin (2009), Tzoulas et al. (2007).

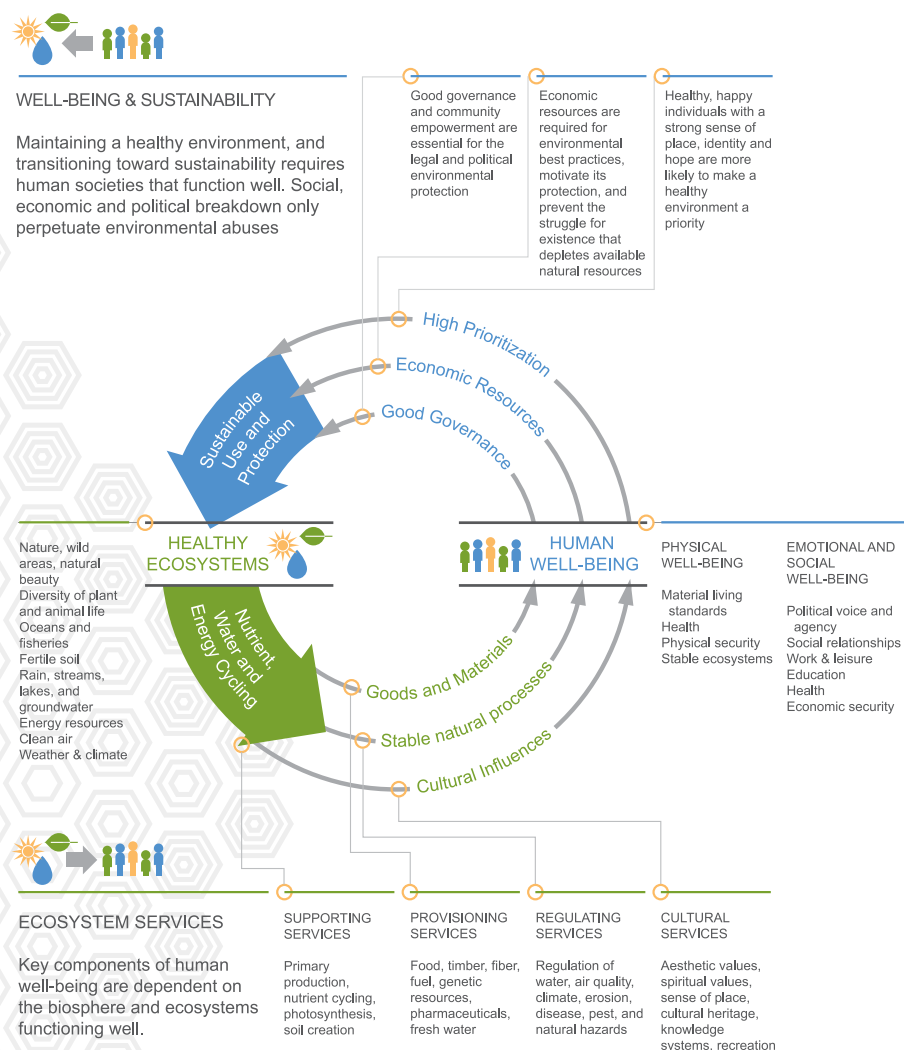


Figure 1. Links between ecosystem services and human well-being (adapted from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2003)

As planetary boundaries are tested, societies inch closer toward destabilizing 'tipping points' without necessarily knowing where they are.

But what is sustainability? Environmental sustainability means, broadly, living within the limits of the natural world. Likewise, social sustainability means living in a manner that provides everyone with the capabilities to fulfill their material, social and

emotional needs while avoiding behaviours that result in poor health, emotional distress and conflict. Further, it means ensuring that we do not destroy the social structures (e.g. families and communities), cultural values, knowledge systems and human diversity that underlie vibrant and thriving communities. In other words, social sustainability means creating and maintaining the necessary conditions for human well-being.



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THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-BEING

“Directly or indirectly, well-being, in some shape or other ... is the subject of every thought, and object of every action, on the part of every known Being ... nor can any intelligible reason be given for desiring that it should be otherwise.”

Jeremy Bentham (1817)

It is well recognized that well-being is complex, multi-dimensional and context-specific and includes physical (objective well-being), social and emotional attributes (subjective well-being). However, policy and practice continue to use single or multidimensional objective measures to evaluate well-being and pursue policies to improve it. Policymakers need to develop multidimensional measures to evaluate comprehensive well-being by using standardized national methodologies and metrics, allowing for differentiations in context but acknowledging universal rights and freedoms.

Objective well-being

Per capita GDP is often used by economists and the economic policy community as a relative indicator of well-being. However, GDP measures only monetary exchanges of goods and services within a society; it is

an average measure and therefore ignores the asymmetrical distribution of wealth within a country. Moreover, there is growing consensus within the social sciences literature that there are diminishing returns to happiness from increases in income and, in some cases, zero returns above certain thresholds (Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Easterlin, 2003). Most academics, practitioners and policymakers agree that the basic constituents of objective well-being should include such physical aspects as adequate nourishment, clean and safe housing, clean water for drinking and personal hygiene, education and personal security.

Subjective well-being

As might be expected, human 'happiness' is not determined solely by physical factors. A number of social and emotional components – including self-esteem, identity, equity, outlook towards the future and social

interaction – also affect the happiness and health of individuals. Other elements include healthy ecosystems, security, a caring society and equality in social relations.

Comprehensive Well-being

Both objective and subjective factors are critical for the overall well-being of individuals. The elements contributing to comprehensive well-being are universal in concept but context-specific in implementation. The natural environment provides many of the most vital elements of well-being: physical, emotional and social. Of course, cultural values and personal circumstances also affect happiness; therefore the elements of well-being will vary from person to person, place to place, and culture to culture. Thus, policies should focus on enabling well-being by providing for the freedoms and capabilities that allow each person to achieve what will contribute to his or her own well-being.

MEETING THE WELL-BEING CHALLENGE

Key elements of comprehensive well-being

Health: adequately nourished; access to health care; avoidable diseases

Agency: ability to make choices; ability to voice; political participation

Education: access to primary and secondary schooling

Physical security: free to move; secure against violent assault; secure against extreme events

Housing: electricity; clean and running water; sanitation; indoor air quality

Affiliation: engage in social events and relations; self-respect and esteem; non-discrimination on gender, race, religion

Material wealth: stable employment; manufactured capital assets

Emotions: being able to play and laugh; leisure time

Ecological surety: Constitutive values of diversity of life and ecosystems; instrumental values of ecosystem services

Source: Adapted from Nussbaum (2011), Doyal and Gough (1991) and Duraïappah and Kosoy (in review).

Although the global community has recognized that improving well-being is a worthy objective, there has been limited success in addressing the underlying drivers of poverty and inequality. If we are to move towards a just and sustainable society in which human well-being is prioritized, four main and overarching challenges must be addressed.

1. Globalization and the 'race to the bottom'

The global population encompasses many different cultures and ideals, suggesting that a single social and economic model cannot be imposed on the world. Yet, through the machinery of globalization, we are doing just that. In the process, we are removing the ability of societies and individuals to choose from different models, in many cases destroying traditional, local economies and their values, and enlisting workers in a global 'race to the bottom'. The intrusion of commercialized and industrial culture, privatization and economic policies driven by market forces are also threatening local cultures, traditional social arrangements based on solidarity, and traditional agricultural practices.

2. Inequality

Not all members of the global society have been able to reap the benefits of globalization, with the poorest and uneducated living in corrupt societies faring worst. However, relative, non-income-based differences are equally important. A study of Latin American

countries found that inequality matters more to well-being than absolute income gains for those at the bottom (Graham and Felton, 2005). Similarly, data from eight countries showed a strong correlation between reduced income inequality and subjective well-being (self-reported happiness), apparently due to social comparisons in which happiness is decreased when others around you seem to be doing better (Hagerty, 2000). A more egalitarian society living on an ecologically and socially sustainable path is therefore an important contributor to well-being.

3. Population growth

Rising populations and migration, particularly in developing countries, are driving households, communities and countries deeper into poverty (UN DESA, 2005). On a global scale, population trends pose a huge challenge to sustainable development because there are no longer any new, free frontiers for people to move to.

4. Cultural inertia

Moving societies in the direction of greater social and environmental sustainability means overcoming the inertia of conservatism. Routes to helping societies on this path include:

- Exposure to new ideas (worldviews, beliefs, religions, values, information, understanding, new social norms and models of behaviour)
- Exposure to new ways of learning (education, media, social interaction, psychological development)

- Migration (emigrants learn from their new social environment, societies learn from incoming immigrants)
- Socioeconomic shifts (new modes of subsistence and economic systems, urbanization, globalization)

- Environmental changes (disaster impacts, depletion of resources, loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services, altered ecological functioning, pollution, climate change).

Leverage points or actions are needed to promote this process. The most

powerful and influential include the economic system, new innovations and ideas, the empowerment of people able to influence the outcomes, early influences in life through education and upbringing, and psychological transformation in later life.

ACHIEVING THE VISION: TOWARDS A GREEN ECONOMY AND SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

The 'Green Economy' has been described as a shift to 'green' technology and materials, incorporating new economic accounting and incentives and moving from carbon-intensive technologies to labour-intensive work. If it is to represent a green technology version of business as usual, it will not bring about the social transformations needed to ensure a move toward comprehensive human well-being and sustainability in a world of growing population, shrinking resources and degrading environments. A smarter approach is needed, which addresses the underlying indirect socioeconomic drivers of change, understands planetary boundaries and embraces key instrumental freedoms for everyone.

Simply incorporating technological change into the existing global market system is not enough: the new approach must encompass the cultural, ecological and socioeconomic dynamics of each country. Finally, to monitor progress towards sustainability and increased well-being, new metrics are needed

that go beyond income and material wealth.

While there is a large body of research on well-being, there is little consensus on its definitions and a lack of connection between work on well-being and that on ecosystems and planetary boundaries. Similarly,

there is limited knowledge on the links between economic models and ecological/social systems; consequently they do not feature in macroeconomic policymaking. There is therefore a clear and immediate need to bring scientists together to work on the integrated socioeconomic-ecological system.



PHOTO: PAUL MONONG / CREATIVE COMMONS



CONCLUSION: GROWTH IN WELL-BEING INSTEAD OF CONSUMPTION

“... the biggest challenge for development ... is to find more ways in which those with more wealth and power will not just accept having less, but will welcome it as a means to well-being, to a better quality of life”

Chambers (1997)

Societies must meet human needs for well-being if they are to become socially and environmentally sustainable. While poor communities need additional consumption to do well, it will be important to prioritize and monitor growth of human well-being rather than growth in material consumption.

More equitable distribution of resources and empowerment will require the ‘haves’ to give up some of their material wealth, but none of their well-being. Finally, we need

considerably more research on the key drivers of well-being: what do humans really need in order to feel well, both physically and emotionally, and lead satisfying and meaningful lives?

This will require a significant paradigm shift: away from growth, competitiveness and personal gain, and towards shared wealth, well-being and happiness. In return for these changes, communities and societies may experience better social relationships and less conflict. The material demands placed on

the environment can be reduced to a sustainable level. A commitment to addressing human well-being in an equitable way will foster the joint decision-making and collaboration needed to solve the world’s problems. Once success and happiness are no longer defined solely in terms of material wealth, human well-being can be created, re-established, and retained for a growing number of people without exceeding sustainability limits and planetary boundaries.

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