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Happiness may be a choice – except that it's constrained by vested economic interests

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Our knowledge about what it is that people need to feel happy and satisfied with in their lives keeps growing, yet the extent to which people actually feel happy and satisfied with their lives has largely stagnated. There might be small shifts each year that may enable one country to claim it is “happier” than another, but these shifts rest on narrow definitions of happiness and are rarely the result of government policies that would warrant any real celebration.

Decades of research into happiness and well-being have shown us that the key determinants of well-being are the quality of our relationships, mental and physical health, our capacity to meet basic needs, social and emotional skills, having a purpose in life, and stability. More money, beyond the point of meeting basic needs, rarely brings that much extra happiness.

Yet it is economic growth that nearly always takes policy precedence. And this concern for the economy often fails to account for economic injustices and the ever mounting climate crisis that will undermine the well-being of future generations.

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Climate change will massively affect our future happiness. Rupert Rivett/Shutterstock.com

Some might believe that happiness and well-being are purely a matter of personal choice. Yes, a person might be able to “choose” a different lifestyle, or to look at their unchangeable life circumstances differently, to enable them to experience more happiness and greater well-being. But our societies rarely facilitate making these choices. Nor do they instil us with many life skills that may help us perceive our life circumstances in a different way.

Our choices are instead constrained by the needs of the economy. We are constantly encouraged to buy things that will not fulfil our deepest human needs, we may face the stark choice of working very long, sometimes irregular, hours, or having no job at all, and we are compelled to learn things for the sake of productivity and not our passions.

Over to Bhutan

There is never an easy path to happiness. Even for those with less acute economic pressures there is struggle. Yet could we create societies that are more supportive in helping us all live lives that bring greater well-being? I spent more than ten years carrying out research into happiness and well-being, and I believe so.

Most of my research has focused on the relationship between the economy and well-being. I argued, backed up with evidence, that by aspiring to ever higher incomes – at both an individual and societal level – in the hope of obtaining greater happiness, we may end up sacrificing the very things that would bring us greater happiness.

In my last job I faced my own struggle to improve my personal well-being. I recognised that even for me, the happiness and well-being researcher, it wasn't easy to make those choices I knew would give me a more fulfilling life. My work environment didn't actively support my ability to do so.

Read more: Why I quit my day job researching happiness and started cycling to Bhutan

Instead, there was constant pressure to perform, and even though I was successful at what I did in a narrow measurable way that kept my employer “happy” – publishing regularly and obtaining research funds – I knew I would need to look elsewhere if I wanted to be happier. That’s why in October 2017 I decided to quit my job and begin cycling to Bhutan.



Bhutan: where happiness is valued more than GDP growth. Shutterstock

I wanted to do something more meaningful to me than writing another academic paper. I wanted to understand more deeply how other countries value happiness and well-being. I wanted to learn about Bhutan, a country that has eschewed international economic agendas to develop its own notion of sustainable development based around happiness and well-being of all its citizens.

But I also wanted to travel to Bhutan in a way that supported the well-being of others and myself, so I cycled most of the way to limit my carbon footprint. And I visited places en route where people are not completely dominated by economic demands. For example Costa Rica, where there is a national pride in being able to live happily and healthily with less. Canada, which has one of the most progressive indicators of national well-being. And Vietnam, which might actually be the least underdeveloped country in the world if we were to consider modern notions of development.

Choice at every level of society

These countries are this way not by accident, but because of choice. In 1948 in Costa Rica, then president, José Figueres Ferrer abolished the military and used the saved resources to invest more

fully in health and education. In 1972 in Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck declared that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product”. In a citizen-driven initiative, which began in 1999-2000, Canadians were given the chance to identify what constituted quality of life to them.

These were progressive choices; choices made by people in influential positions. It sits in stark contrast to the choices that have been made, and continue to be made, by influential others elsewhere to largely suit vested economic interests. Choices that ultimately put the economy, rather than people’s happiness, first.

There is, however, hope. I arrived back in Scotland in April 2019 after 18-months and more than 10,000 miles on a bicycle. The Well-being Economy Alliance, a group of countries committed to creating economies focused on sustainable well-being, of which Scotland plays an important part, is generating traction.

Care for the climate will require changes that simultaneously improve our well-being now and in the future and, thanks to activism, the climate crisis is firmly on the agenda. There is a growing awareness that many people care more about economic and social justice than economic growth. We are beginning to see through old misleading beliefs about consumption. If we want to live happier and more fulfilling lives it is time for everyone, at every level of society, to make different choices.

Money Happiness GDP Wellbeing Economic growth Choice

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Laura Hood

Politics Editor

