

## On the relation of Happiness and Sustainability

*Sustainable development is an urgent task, but often a possible loss of quality of life is associated with it, especially when it comes to sufficient lifestyles. At first glance, happiness and sustainability do not necessarily fit together, but on a second glance, a number of possible connections unfold ...*

### The search for happiness and the need for sustainability

The question of happiness and the good life has always been on the mind of people, from the greek philosophers to the modern happiness research.<sup>i</sup> In the context of sustainable development the idea of a post-growth society fuels a renewed discussion of the question of happiness: from *Gross National Happiness* in Bhutan, *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador up to initiatives of the UN and various countries of the EU - the worldwide countries are looking for new indicators to measure the well-being of its society beyond material wealth.<sup>ii</sup>

Given the limited resources of the planet and even more so its biocapacity (sinks), it is an urgent deed. Research shows that sustainability will not be achieved by increased efficiency alone, but needs a move towards more sufficiency – and a debate on what and how much we need to lead a good life. Thus habits are to be questioned: the materialistic way of life is up for negotiation, a dispute about our lifestyles is needed<sup>iii</sup>. „The idea to enable all human beings a lifestyle similar to the one lived in the western industrialised countries cannot be realised [...] we need to find a lifestyle that complies to the model of sustainable development.“<sup>iv</sup>

Meanwhile research on the topic of sufficiency has discovered the aspect of happiness / well-being already and pointed out possible synergies: “It is a lucky coincidence that the results of happiness- research reconcile the needs of the inner nature of man with the environment.”<sup>v</sup> Now it is but to determine these relationships and synergies in more detail - in theory and in their implications and practical utilisation.

Empirical happiness research shows that well-being is only partly related to material prosperity - if the basic needs are covered, the non-material part of the lifestyle creates happiness: enjoying more free time to take care of friends, family and other social contacts, leisure, creativity and joy of playing, pursuing meaningful activities (for themselves and often for others) and / or to enjoy nature.<sup>vi</sup>

### On the relation of happiness and sustainability

Happiness research confirms two basic philosophical concepts of happiness<sup>vii</sup> and it is worth taking a look at both of them with a perspective of sustainability.

1. Hedonism. The pleasure of experiencing, of sensing. Any form of sensual pleasure. It is quickly connected with the enjoyment of things, objects, the consumption of goods. But we can give our senses equally or even more delight through music, dance, movement, music, touching and feeling, than by offering all the world of consumer products. The consequence of a materialistic lifestyle is therefore not clearly derivable from the idea of hedonism.



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2. Eudaimonia. The happiness of the virtuous life. Today it is mainly connected with the meaningful activities and the joy deriving therefrom. Meaning is here defined in the social sphere; it connects just as easily with social commitment and nature conservation, as with labouring in a factory. However, any construction of meaning seems to have limits, as when people "opt outs" reporting that they just regard their job (e.g. financial services, marketing, etc.) no longer as meaningful and choose another job and lifestyle. Ultimately, meaning is thus associated with doing something good for other people, for the society and thus to some extent to produce happiness. This includes ultimately and basically a sustainability. Thus here also opens a perspective that tends to be focussing less on the purely material prosperity, but rather onto creating environmental and social values

There are many more definitions and forms of happiness. This includes the momentary feeling-good, as it is easily generated by consumption of sugar, caffeine, music, etc. However, this has usually little lasting effect and does not relate to the more substantial concept of an "authentic happiness".<sup>viii</sup>

Another known happiness concept is "Flow", based on the research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.<sup>ix</sup>

Flow describes the condition of being totally emerged in an activity, forgetting everything else around. This approach is indifferent to sustainability, because such Flow can be achieved in all sorts of activities: in meditation and artistic creativity, but also for repetitive work in industrial manufacturing. Even soldiers tell of a flow state in combat missions.



### **Does sustainable generate happiness or vice versa?**

It seems attractive and reasonable to link sustainability to the pursuit of happiness. The two big questions, one that is currently urgent, the other that seems an eternal quest of mankind. However, the sustainability issue should not be raised to be the source of creating meaning. Deriving meaning out of seeking sustainability can hardly be successful, because sustainability only makes sense for people as it contributes to the good life (happiness). Sustainability can therefore only be a goal as it enables him/her to perpetually pursue the striving for happiness, wellbeing and meaningful activities.

For a long time environmentalists and growth critics are arguing that having more and more stuff does not bring happiness. According to the slogan for an alternative - 'less is more' - it is important to reduce the material life and live 'a good life, not the goods life' it says. A sustainable lifestyle is not reducing quality of life. But how about reversing the argument and arguing that a happy life promotes sustainability? Such an approach would surely be attractive to many people and would certainly reach out to some who so far keep distance towards the issue of sustainability, especially when it is connected to imagined waiver.

Two common assumptions about the connection between happiness and sustainability are therefore to be questioned: First, the more prevailing assumption that material wealth is the central pillar of well-being. Here much more research and knowledge about happiness and well-being is needed. Second, the tendency of many environmentally minded activists to asceticism as "salvation" of the environmental and climate crisis, which is putting the personal wellbeing second to global problems. This may appeal to some people and motivate them to change their lives. For the majority of people it might work better to prove the necessity of sustainability to reach and secure happiness and wellbeing.

## Mainstreaming happiness

Happiness and sustainability offer, as we have seen, some connections, but it needs further investigation. In scientific research as well as in the practice of everyday life. It needs a stronger and profound research on the understanding of happiness and well-being, for society as well as for a single person on the individual level. What makes me happy? How do I care about my well-being? How do I contribute to the happiness of others or how are my happiness and the happiness of others linked? And regarding sustainability: is my happiness connecting or confronting it?

Specifically, there are two approaches on the subject to be tracked and taken into practice. First, it needs more education on the subject of happiness. Who is mature in questions about his/her own well-being engages probably less often in compensatory consumption, is more likely to step out of the treadmill of work and shopping, relativates the consumer experience and the entertainment industry. (This applies probably also for political ideologies, esotericism, etc.). Secondly a regulation of manipulative influences is needed, such as limiting advertising.<sup>x</sup>

The idea that happiness is a very private thing is deceptive: well-being is indeed in its final form a very subjective matter, but its realisation is deeply embedded in society. A debate on well-being and happiness could not just create space for more happiness, but also add a valuable contribution towards sustainable development.



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This essay gives an insight into my ongoing research on the topic of happiness & sustainability. Feedback is very welcome!

For more information and my contact details see the website.

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Thank you.

## References

(As my research is in German most literature used is German too.)

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Thomä, Dieter et al. (Hrsg.)(2011): Glück. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch. Stuttgart.
- ii UN (2012): Defining a New Economic Paradigm: The Report of the High-Level Meeting on Wellbeing and Happiness  
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- iii Jackson, Tim (2011): Wohlstand ohne Wachstum.  
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Stengel, Oliver (2011): Suffizienz. Die Konsumgesellschaft in der ökologischen Krise.
- iv WBGU (Hrsg.)(2011): Gesellschaftsvertrag für eine große Transformation.: S. 66  
Translation by J. Dallmer  
Original: „Die Idee, allen Menschen einen Lebensstil zu ermöglichen, der dem heute in Industrieländern entspricht, ist nicht realisierbar. [...] Es gilt einen Lebensstil zu finden, der dem Leitbild einer nachhaltigen Entwicklung entspricht.“
- v Stengel, Oliver (2011): Suffizienz. Die Konsumgesellschaft in der ökologischen Krise. S. 302-303  
Translation by J. Dallmer  
Original: “Es ist ein glücklicher Umstand, dass die Ergebnisse der Happiness-Forschung die Bedürfnisse der inneren Natur des Menschen mit der äußeren Natur versöhnen.”
- vi Paech, Niko (2012): Befreiung vom Überfluss: Auf dem Weg in die Postwachstumsökonomie.  
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- vii Seligman, M.; Csikszentmihalyi, M.(2000): Positiv Psychology. An Introduction. American Psychologist, Vol 55, No. 1, P. 5-14  
Schildhammer, Georg (2009): Glück.
- viii Seligman, M. (2002): Authentic Happiness.
- ix Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1992): Flow. Das Geheimnis des Glücks.
- x In the country of Bhutan billboards are illegal, in some brasilian cities there is a ban on adversting in public space. In Berlin a campaing struggles for a similar policy, but so far with limited success.  
<http://amtfuerwerbefreiheit.org/>