

## ***Honing in on Happiness at the World Economic Forum***

***by***

***Julia Novy-Hildesley***

***Founder, World Economic Forum Young Global Leader's Task Force on Happiness***

While the economic crisis and the need to create jobs took center stage at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland last week, a bold new vision garnered much attention: Happiness.

Are we working as individuals and nations to cultivate greater happiness – most simply described as thriving people living in a thriving environment? After all, what is the point of faster growth if it deepens the environmental degradation, inequality and social unrest we are already experiencing? Sessions with intriguing titles such as “The Art and Science of Happiness,” “Beyond GDP: Metrics that Matter,” and “Designing Better Lives” filled the Davos agenda.

In the “Beyond GDP” session, Lord Richard Layard, founder of the Center for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, celebrated the world waking up to the fact that GDP is an insufficient – and sometimes misleading - measure of well-being, failing to reflect the quality of the natural environment, social connections, personal health and individual opportunity.

The number of countries and coalitions - from China, Japan and Korea to the UK, US and Germany - that have taken steps to reframe our vision of progress is cause for celebration. As early as 1972, the King of Bhutan launched the Gross National Happiness Index as an alternative to GDP. More recently, French President Nicolas Sarkozy created a Commission led by Nobel Laureate economists Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, which resulted in the 2009 “Report on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.” And just last October, the OECD launched its “How’s Life?” report, ranking countries across a dozen indicators of well-being that include material living conditions and quality of life.

The European Commission (EC) has defined key actions to improve countries’ standings on these indicators, which have influenced the five targets set by the EC to guide its policies in the EU 2020 Strategy. “If we can know better what people wish for, what they want, what makes them happy, then we [as policymakers] can have better answers. It is one of most promising bits of work we are doing at the OECD,” said Angel Gurría, Head of the OECD, in the Davos “Beyond GDP” panel.

At the same time, Monk Matthieu Ricard – often called “the happiest man on earth” – reminded us in the “Art and Science of Happiness” session that one can enhance happiness through individual practice, not solely through external interventions. Neuroscientists

Richard Davidson and Tanya Singer, corroborated his point, noting that after modest training, new synaptic connections are formed in the brain, resulting in more altruistic and compassionate behavior. Even the business community is getting behind happiness. The most recent edition of the *Harvard Business Review* makes the business case for happiness, arguing that happy employees engaged in service are more creative and likely to be promoted.

We all want happiness. This was viscerally apparent at the start of the “Art and Science of Happiness” session in Davos, when the 250 wait-listed world leaders in government, civil society and business clambered to get in to oversubscribed session.

Let us translate these vibrant discussions from Davos into action, at the local, national and global level.

First, support greater happiness in your community through personal practice and service. The Dalai Lama reminds us that the straightest path to becoming happy is to care for the well being of others. Create a new requirement for M.E. (mental exercise) - in addition to P.E. (Physical Exercise) - in schools. Convince your local leaders to begin measuring human well-being in cities and provinces. Second, continue to spur national leaders to adopt broader measures of societal progress beyond GDP. Compel them to abolish national policies that run counter to this vision and design positive ones. As Gurria noted in the “Beyond GDP” session, consider the resultant dramatic improvement in well-being from reallocating the \$400 billion in global fossil fuel subsidies to the needy.

And finally, prioritize happiness within our global frameworks. Human well-being should take a front seat at the United Nation’s “Rio + 20” Conference on Sustainable Development this April in Brazil, so that the myriad elements that contribute to true societal progress are adopted as the next round of international Development Goals.

Julia Novy-Hildesley

Founder, World Economic Forum Young Global Leader’s Task Force on Happiness