

## Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition Submission Template

**ID number: 449**

### **Summary:**

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Shifting the fundamentals of a Society, is that the answer to sustain or improve its well-being? The following essay demonstrates through the definition of the current energy and food crises, what is behind the concept of well-being and how it was shaped, influenced and ultimately entered into crisis. Society's well-being is based on good social and environmental conditions, economic stability and a fine perception of them by its members. Energy-related factors are fundamental elements of today's Society; should they be the only ones?

### **Essay:**

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Well-being? The concept of well-being is an issue by itself; relating to the matter of food and energy crisis it presupposes an interconnection, or even interdependence, between them. Are food and energy dependent factors of a Society's well-being? If so, how can food and energy contribute to the Society's «happiness», «wealth», «health», and to what extent and how «much» does a Society need to be considered well? It also presupposes that a Society is continuously seeking to improve its state.

One must define the terms of the questions before arguing one way or another, even though labeling terms subjectively frames and delimits the answer per se.

Starting from a restricted definition, *well-being is a state of being happy, healthy or prosperous*<sup>i</sup>. Individuals are considered as such if they feel content, in a good physical and mental condition and economically secure. While most studies focus on the economic factors as key and certainly easier elements to assess and compare populations, well-being is certainly shaped by non-monetary factors such as social cohesion or the environment in a large sense.

All in all, the above-mentioned definition emphasizes the importance of individual perception. Being well is highly subjective; each person has a different perception based on their culture, religion, social status, education, and income. The political stability and GDP per capita are of course key factors of the individual perception but are far from being the only ones. As an OECD paper puts it well «(...) *Individuals derive well-being from the satisfaction of their wants according to their own preferences*»<sup>ii</sup>.

Before going further let's note that the concept of Society is discussed in this paper as a global and unique entity whereas each Society is by definition singular.

According to the authors and their audience, the energy and food crisis may be explained in different way, through various means and perspectives. I personally define the current food and energy crisis as a global misallocation and misuse of natural resources coupled with the underestimation of their environmental and social impacts.

Since the industrial revolution, human Society has certainly deployed more energy than the world has before. Technological and scientific advancements allowed a better use of the world's natural resources, while economic growth and Society's organizational system, for instance the division of labor and democracy, permitted, for some countries, a rapid rise in social, wealth and living standards. Since then, oil and coal - later natural gas and nuclear - have been the main natural resources searched, extracted, transported, traded and they have ultimately vanished. History shows that this intense energy production and consumption already had severe consequences at the global level and that the past virtuous system combining and coevolving energy, technology and economics suffers today from these long-lasting consequences. Parts of the old machine are now rusty and it is the whole system that is gripped.

Undoubtedly, the latest global energy crisis is the tip of the iceberg. Our global Society is facing a scarcity of its main natural energy resources - even though the ultimate exhaustion of fossil fuels has no definite date - and grave environmental hazards due to the related pollution. The keystone function of energy in the global Society mechanically generates economic spillovers when it enters into crisis, as well as having disastrous social impacts.

As for the food crisis, it can roughly be explained by the following factors: population growth, environmental pressures, un-adapted (trade and subsidies) policies, water shortage and definitely by the global energy crisis.

Population growth and increased demand for energy evolved hand in hand and so has food. In certain places the agricultural policies and farming methods bring high and steady yields over time, while in others, poor policy-driven practices fasten soil erosion, accelerate water shortage and ultimately provoke food riots and political unrest.

For instance, the adoption of un-adapted agrofuels policies by industrialized countries has severe consequences for low-income countries. Their contribution to climate change mitigation, energy security and agricultural development shadowed their potential negative impacts. According to some studies, agrofuels have been responsible for up to a 30% rise in grain prices<sup>iii</sup>.

In any case, lack of dialogue, regional egoism, and poor communication among agricultural partners at global level - on trade policies - and local level - adapted methods

and crops – could lead to serious economic, political and social implications and could aggravate the already fragile environmental conditions.

As seen, the food and energy crisis are anything but straightforward. Explained through a short historical perspective or contemporary issues, the two crises have mutual causes influencing each other and shaping most parts of the Society. From health care to water supply, from agriculture fertilizers to food riots and political stability, food and energy are guiding individual perceptions in a Society. Yet, one of them is slightly more preponderant. It appears that the food crisis does not have much influence over the energy one while energy has its way to control most of today's Society components. This controversial facet of our Society provides, in my opinion, a good example of the current alienation: energy prevails over food and individual well-being.

How can a Society improve its well-being when basic elements of its system, even though alienated, stopped delivering?

Many of the driving-forces of the energy and food crisis are beyond the reach of a unique solution. It would be arrogant, even dangerous to find in an exclusive solution a sustainable response to improve Society's well-being overtime. The reliance of Society towards a supreme element – energy – led to the current crisis. By increasing the importance of equivalent factors individuals will be inclined to derive well-being from the satisfaction of new preferences.

In a practical terms the idea means for instance investing in technologies less energy-dependant, that in turn will reduce the pressure on the environment and liberate natural resources for alternative use. But also targeting higher yield by adopting sound policies that value local farming, education and ultimately social cohesion.

In general, Society well-being is based on good social and environmental conditions, economic stability and a fine perception of them by its members. Food and energy security, health, water supply, political stability, equity, social cohesion, leisure, self-sufficiency, employment, justice are factors that must be targeted to duplicate the source of well-being. Energy-related factors will continue to play an important role in tomorrow's Society; they should not, however, be the only ones.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)

<sup>ii</sup> Alternative Measures of Well-Being, OECD SOCIAL, EMPLOYMENT AND MIGRATION WORKING PAPERS NO. 33 Romina Boarini, Asa Johansson and Marco Mira d'Ercole p. 9

<sup>iii</sup> Biofuels, International Food Prices, and the Poor - Joachim von Braun Director General, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), p.5