

Faced with a food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?

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Summary

If wealthy societies would chose to prioritise on the increase of well-being by stimulating growth of opportunities to recreate, develop human potential and spiritual satisfaction, they succeed in different ways. Besides the improvement in wellbeing of their citizens, they would also enable less wealthy societies to reach a situation of continued surplus. Moreover, by decoupling wealth and well-being, humankind might develop a strategy which safeguards a liveable planet while optimizing the well-being of our species. Instead of adapting our environment, it is the power to innovate our own adaptability that will have to be enhanced.

The natural context for populations of organisms to operate in, is scarcity. Species are limited in their development and spread by scarcity of resources and other negative feedback mechanisms. Humankind has been very successful in the avoidance of such mechanisms; every time nature offered a limitation to our spread or development, we found a way to circumvent it. This quality allowed us to inhabit and change the face of the earth and, for a long time, improved the well-being of large parts of our global population. Unfortunately, the limits we continued to stretch seem to have lost their elasticity; we are facing problems we cannot solve with our usual strategy.

It is often said that humans became a success through their great ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Although this is partly true, it is another feature that made the decisive difference: the power to innovate. Besides the adaptability to changing environments, the capacity to change our environment to our need made us distinct from other species. This capability stimulated our spread and the development of large and complex human societies. From the dawn of agricultural practices to the rise of urban communities, humans constantly improved their capacity to control and adapt their surroundings. This strategy was used, and worked, for ages.

In the preceding decades it became clear that our strategy also has certain drawbacks. By exploiting our environment beyond its limits, we have created a situation in which we deplete our resources and endanger natural systems. Perhaps even more pressing is the fact that we organised our society to depend on these unsustainable practices. Although food and energy production are at a level that is unprecedented in history, large parts of our population face shortages. Furthermore, our accumulated influence on atmospheric- and ecosystems has now reached a phase in which human induced changes form an eminent threat to our species. It is these problems, that force us to re-examine the long used survival strategy of reinventing our environment.

For a long time the increase in material wealth was equal to an increase in well-being. As humans reduced the scarcity of food, created shelters and developed other material means that improved their health and well-being, an increase in wealth was beneficial to them. For the first time in history a species succeeded in creating circumstances of surplus instead of scarcity. However, as time passed, more and more humans became saturated with wealth as 'real need' was surpassed by the availability of resources. Nonetheless, the increase in our wealth still is prioritized by governments, organisations and individuals alike.

As we realized a life of abundance for part of our species, we didn't succeed in providing all with sufficient resources. When taking the negative environmental, physical and mental consequences of human indulgence into account, this observation

is even more serious. Some humans may have succeeded in lifting themselves from the natural state of scarcity, humanity as a whole has not yet reached the stage in which they can truly benefit from this success.

The obvious answer to this problem is the redirection of our collective and individual focus from wealth to well-being. If asked, everyone realizes that wealth is a mere instrument to obtain well-being or happiness, therefore no one would disagree with our answer. However, as well-being is more difficult to measure than wealth, it did not yet become the predominant target. However, the improvement of well-being of citizens is included in many official strategies and systems as an aim. This implies that people and organisations are defining well-being in different ways. Hence, the argument that it is too vague to measure is not valid. Consequently, our governments could and should abolish economic growth as an holy grail and start to strive for continuous improvements in the quality of life. By doing this, they would influence the rest of society and enable a change in paradigm towards a more sustainable and preferable modality.

This said, one has to acknowledge that although an increase in wealth does not bring an increase in well-being for the wealthy, it does for the poor. While no man can define the absolute minimum material requirements to ensure happiness, all can see that without food, shelter and energy life is a hardship. Therefore, the wealth creation strategy is not outdated for every society. Poorer societies should prioritize on an increase in wealth. This increase in wealth, should however be recognized as the tool to obtain a better quality of life for their people. Therefore, the preference lies with instruments and development strategies that have proved to be sustainable and beneficial to those locally involved in it.

When following this strategy, opportunity arises. While wealthy countries move away from the economic growth dogma, less-wealthy countries have increased chances to develop. Through a reduced pressure on scarce resources, which are conserved due to a slower and more balanced consumption and use, more people can benefit from them. Furthermore, there is more room for mutually beneficial cooperation, as the competition for material wealth is reduced. One can for example think of sustainable tourism which brings options to increase well-being to the first and wealth to the latter.

This and many other strategies can be developed and implemented. They should, however, also be evaluated and adjusted. As everything, from human opinions to natural systems, moves and changes, we should not foster the illusion that we can fix all problems with a single and stable solution. Although we are obliged to decouple wealth from well-being, it would be wise to nurture diversity in approaches and allow for constant adjustment and changes. This dynamic adaptability is the only manner in which we can constantly improve our well-being while safeguarding our world and life itself. We must realise that to improve humanities well-being and to guarantee it on the long run, we have to innovate our own adaptability instead of that of our surroundings.