

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

Summary

“Well-being is only real when shared“ is the core idea of this essay. Food and energy crisis as a comprehensive problem requires complex solutions based on personal ethics, developed in creative community environment, applied in municipal, regional and national policy and shared by global population. All the scales are entities, where we can find problems as well as solutions. Taking a journey across several levels of human spatial organization, I emphasize the need of self-sufficiency and sharing as complementary principles. My message is to find a balance between these principles taking into consideration subsidiarity as a key concept.

Intro

I'm walking through deserted land. The big Sun is hammering thousands of deathrays into my exhausted body. The last drops of water I saw several days ago. Now they're creeping as cruel shadows in my mind. I'm hungry. But I don't need too much; a glass of water, a slice of bread and a piece of human touch.

Level 0

Food and energy crisis is global reality of today. However, its consequences differ widely – according to regions as well as to scale. From individual to global scene, the crisis takes various forms and requires various solutions. I'm convinced that several principles must be respected universally – sufficiency, self-sufficiency and sharing. Sufficiency prevents us from consuming more than we need. Self-sufficiency relieves our dependency on the structures we can't influence. And finally, just like happiness, well-being is only real when shared.

Level 1: Individual

Personal well-being is a state of mind. State of harmony between human needs, expectations and their fulfillment. Indeed, after their fulfillment, needs and expectations tend to grow. In the North, the task is to define the upper limits of our needs. In the South, the task is to fulfill the bottom limits of people's needs. Well-being is not welfare. Personal well-being is formed by satisfaction and is connected to the ethics. Bad consciousness is a barrier for improving personal well-being. But elimination of bad consciousness is its precondition. Environmental ethics based on recognizing values of living ecosystems is essential for applying systematic solutions described below.

Level 2: Community

Community as a space of mutual interaction of individuals represents the most flexible platform for solving local problems. Community can become a seedbed of members' creativity and cooperation. Instability of world food prices and dependency of local population on international corporations' decisions led many communities into creating various forms of self-sufficient economy systems such as LETS (Local Exchange Trading System). Despite certain scepticism shared by many economists these systems have improved the quality of life in numerous communities around the globe. In 1998 a group of slum dwellers in Fortaleza (Brazil) joined together in an association Banco de Palmas. They created a strong incentive to keep commerce local and enabling entrepreneurs to establish business that would help the local economy thrive. Excellent picture of community well-being!

Level 3: City

Life in the city can be exciting. The city is a melting pot for diverse population. Diverse social and ethnic groups, not four-lane asphalt roads are vibrant arteries of the city organism. City well-being are neither shining neon lights, nor shining shopping-centres, nor depersonalized extensive suburbs. On the other hand, hard to find city well-being in slums of the South, where children strive to survive with guns in their hands. City well-being is a smile of fruit vendor on the corner, heartbeat of street tap dancer and shining faces passers-by, or a drop of tender rain in the park. High residential density can become a clue of energy-saving and efficiency due to more intensive utilization of urban space. Preference of public transport instead of individual together with even dispersion of services and green zones can increase the quality of urban life and decrease its energy consumption at the same time.

Level 4: Region

I consider regional scale as a form of spatial organization at subnational level. The solidarity principle claims that being closer to the problem brings more effective solution. I understand regional well-being as well-functioning system of connections in compact area cooperating with the view of common interest, cooperation of towns and cities with their hinterland, creating unique identity and certain level of self-sufficiency in the region. Regional cohesion increases the potential of an area to overcome unfavourable conditions in time of crises. For instance, coordination of activities in rural microregion in the sphere of renewable energy sources can lead to creating self-sufficient energy loop bringing benefit to all participating subjects.

Level 5: State

The natural gas crisis in January 2009 in Central and South-eastern Europe exposed the weakness and vulnerability of countries predominantly dependent on one importer of this strategic raw material. The crisis clearly showed the importance of sound international relations and sharing. National well-being can therefore be understood as a state effort to increase its self-sufficiency in the line with diversified sharing. The clue to achieving this goal is responsible domestic and foreign policy pursuing ecological reform and preference of sustainable ways of development. The state has a legislative power to foster economic instruments with the aim of internalizing the environmental costs as if nature mattered. These instruments help to create the environment favourable for development of more energy-efficient technologies, which along with a change of consumption patterns decrease state dependency on external factors such as fluctuating energy prices.

Level 6: World

World as an entity is a level where no potential partners for cooperation are to be found. World is one and solution of the crisis needs to be discovered on its surface. Self-sufficiency and sharing become identical. At this level, conflicts between individuals or states come across as totally pointless. Also the existence of a food and energy crisis itself indicates disharmony between mankind and worlds' ecosystems. Global well-being in terms of harmony between a human and his environment excludes the possibility of outbreak of a crisis. The dynamic equilibrium of the world ecosystems doesn't allow us to pass certain threshold. Clearly, the food and energy crisis is only human crisis. Our task is to find the right balance, what we can afford and what we can not.

Outro

The mosaic of human well-being seems to be complete. On my journey across the desert of knowledge I went through a process of identification with human beings and their spatial forms, in which they exist and interact. I realized that my own well-being is not well-being itself. Because human well-being is only real when shared. The essence of the crisis solution is closer than I thought – in a head of every human being.