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# Rethinking the Good Life

*Gary Gardner and Erik Assadourian*

Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, is commonly associated with civil war and violence. But in the late 1990s, the city's reputation began to change as Mayor Enrique Peñalosa led a campaign to improve the quality of life there. School enrollments increased by 200,000 students—some 34 percent—during Peñalosa's tenure. His administration built or totally rebuilt 1,243 parks—some small, some very large—which are now used by 1.5 million visitors annually. An effective rapid transit system, accessible to all, was planned and constructed. And the city's murder rate fell dramatically: today, there are fewer murders per capita in Bogotá than there are in Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup>

By any standard, the city's advance is a developmental success. Yet Bogotá's transformation was achieved in a rather unorthodox way. When Peñalosa took office, consultants proposed building a \$600-million elevated highway, a standard transportation solution in many car-bound cities. Instead, the mayor created a cheaper yet more effective rapid transit system using the city's

existing bus lines. The system carries 780,000 passengers daily—more than the costlier Washington, D.C., subway does—and is so good that 15 percent of the regular riders are car owners. Peñalosa also invested in hundreds of kilometers of bike paths and in pedestrian-only streets. And he strengthened the city's cultural infrastructure by building new public libraries and schools, connecting them with a network of 14,000 computers. Together with the rehabilitated parks, the transportation and cultural improvements advanced a strategic goal for Bogotá: to orient urban life around people and communities.<sup>2</sup>

Peñalosa uses an unusual yardstick to evaluate his development strategy. "A city is successful not when it's rich," he says, "but when its people are happy." That statement deflates decades of development thinking in rich and poor countries alike. After all, most governments make ongoing increases in gross domestic product (GDP) a chief priority of domestic policy, under the assumption that wealth secured is well-being delivered. Yet undue emphasis on generating wealth, espe-

cially by encouraging heavy consumption, may be yielding diminishing returns. Overall quality of life is suffering in some of the world's richest countries as people experience greater stress and time pressures and less satisfying social relationships and as the natural environment shows more and more signs of distress. Meanwhile, in poor countries quality of life is degraded by a failure to meet people's basic needs.<sup>3</sup>

Rethinking what constitutes "the good life" is overdue in a world on a fast track to self-inflicted ill health and planet-wide damage to forests, oceans, biodiversity, and other natural resources. By redefining prosperity to emphasize a higher quality of life rather than the mere accumulation of goods, individuals, communities, and governments can focus on delivering what people most desire. Indeed, a new understanding of the good life can be built not around wealth but around well-being: having basic survival needs met, along with freedom, health, security, and satisfying social relations. Consumption would still be important, to be sure, but only to the extent that it boosts quality of life. Indeed, a well-being society might strive to minimize the consumption required to support a dignified and satisfying life.

## Wealth and Well-being

Wealth and well-being are less like antagonists and more like long-lost siblings. After all, the word "wealth" is rooted in "weal"—a synonym for well-being that traditionally had a community orientation. Yet wealth is now used to mean material goods and financial holdings, primarily of individuals—a far more narrow usage than its roots would imply. Building a society of well-being essentially involves recapturing the original, broad-based understanding of the term wealth.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of well-being as a personal and

policy goal is increasingly commonplace, appearing everywhere from popular magazines to official publications of multinational organizations, such as *The Well-being of Nations* by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2001 and *Ecosystems and Human Well-being* by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2003. Even the Canadian House of Commons picked up the term in legislation passed in June of 2003 entitled the Canada Well-Being Measurement Act.<sup>5</sup>

Definitions of the concept vary, but tend to coalesce around several themes:

- the basics for survival, including food, shelter, and a secure livelihood;
- good health, both personally and in terms of a robust natural environment;
- good social relations, including an experience of social cohesion and of a supportive social network;
- security, both personal safety and in terms of personal possessions; and
- freedom, which includes the capacity to achieve developmental potential.<sup>6</sup>

In shorthand form, the term essentially denotes a high quality of life in which daily activities unfold more deliberately and with less stress. Societies focused on well-being involve more interaction with family, friends, and neighbors, a more direct experience of nature, and more attention to finding fulfillment and creative expression than in accumulating goods. They emphasize lifestyles that avoid abusing your own health, other people, or the natural world. In short, they yield a deeper sense of satisfaction with life than many people report experiencing today.

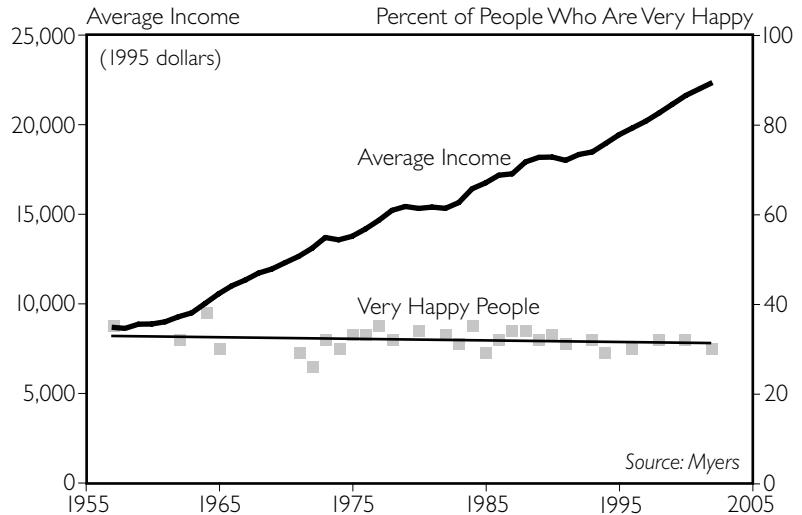
What provides for a satisfying life? In recent years, psychologists studying measures of life satisfaction have largely confirmed the old adage that money can't buy happiness—at least not for people who are already affluent. The disconnection between money and hap-

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piness in wealthy countries is perhaps most clearly illustrated when growth in income in industrial countries is plotted against levels of happiness. In the United States, for example, the average person's income more than doubled between 1957 and 2002, yet the share of people reporting themselves to be "very happy" over that period remained static. (See Figure 8-1.)<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, the relationship between wealth and life satisfaction is different in poor countries. There, income and well-being are indeed coupled, probably because more of a poor person's income is used to meet basic needs. (See Chapter 1.) Findings from the World Values Survey, a set of surveys of life satisfaction in more than 65 countries conducted between 1990 and 2000, indicate that income and happiness tend to track well until about \$13,000 of annual income per person (in 1995 purchasing power parity). After that, additional income appears to yield only modest additions in self-reported happiness.<sup>8</sup>

If psychologists are clear about the limits of wealth for delivering happiness, they are equally clear in describing what does contribute to life satisfaction. Again and again, studies suggest that happy people tend to have strong, supportive relationships, a sense of control over their lives, good health, and fulfilling work. These factors are increasingly under stress in fast-paced, industrial societies,



**Figure 8-1. Average Income and Happiness in the United States, 1957-2002**

where people often attempt to use consumption as a substitute for genuine sources of happiness. Yet there are at least some individuals, communities, and governments that are dissatisfied with life quality and are beginning to make an effort to build lives, neighborhoods, and societies of well-being.<sup>9</sup>

## The Power of One

During the summer of 2003, some 50 million Americans signed up for a government-sponsored National Do Not Call Registry designed to prevent commercial telemarketers from phoning them. The outpouring of response to this new government program—in essence, an attempt by people to reclaim some of their time and privacy from increasingly aggressive marketing tactics—hints at the frustration many individuals feel when economic forces begin to dominate rather than serve them. Yet a small but growing number of consumers are questioning the way they shop, the amount of “stuff” crowding and complicating their lives,

and the amount of time they spend at work. These dissatisfied consumers have not yet built a coherent movement, because their actions are mostly private ones occurring in unconnected pockets in many nations. Still, the spontaneous and grassroots nature of these activities may signal a deeply felt desire by many people to build a satisfying life for themselves and their families.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most apparent expression of a desire for a higher quality of life is found in the growing numbers of people who shop with an eye toward well-being. In Europe, for example, demand for organically grown foods drove sales up to \$10 billion in 2002, 8 percent above the previous year, as a public bruised by mad cow disease and other food scares increasingly sought assurances of the safety of its food supply. Market analysts estimate that 142 million Europeans are consumers of organics, although a “loyal” core of 20 million accounted for 69 percent of the expenditures on these products in 2001. And 150 million people in Europe are either vegetarians or have reduced their consumption of meat.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, in the United States the group of consumers interested in shopping for better health and a better environment is large enough to have earned recognition by market researchers as a distinct demographic group. Dubbed LOHAS consumers—people who lead Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability—these shoppers buy everything from compact fluorescent lightbulbs and solar cells to fair-trade coffee and chocolate (products that pay a just wage to producers or that have a lighter environmental impact than mainstream purchases do). This group now includes nearly one third of adult Americans and in 2000 accounted for about \$230 billion in purchases—some 3 percent of total U.S. consumer expenditures. Although this is a relatively low share of expenditures compared with the num-

ber of people identified as LOHAS consumers, this is probably due to the few options for healthy consumption available today.<sup>12</sup>

In many countries, people are joining consumer cooperatives to leverage their market power for a higher quality of life. In Japan, for example, the 250,000-member Seikatsu Club Consumers’ Cooperative Union stocks foods free of agricultural chemicals and artificial additives and preservatives, along with household products free of toxins. The club puts its goods in reusable glass jars in order to help reduce the 60 percent of household waste that is packaging. In contrast to many supermarkets that stock tens of thousands of individual items, the Seikatsu Club co-ops carry just 2,000 items, mostly basic foodstuffs. The co-ops typically carry only one or two choices per item, but for members seeking to live a more satisfying life, the high quality, healthy foods, and reduced waste apparently compensate for the somewhat lessened choice. And Seikatsu members are not alone; some 50 million people belong to local co-ops that are affiliated with Consumer Coop International, a global body that helps facilitate training for local consumer co-ops.<sup>13</sup>

In some cases, individuals are turning to organizations for help in greening their consumption. A coalition of organizations in 19 countries known as the Global Action Plan offers training to families on reducing waste, lessening energy use, and switching to eco-friendly products. In the Netherlands, at least 10,000 households are working on redirecting their consumption; after training, these people cut their household waste on average by 28 percent. Six to nine months later, the figure was 39 percent. And in 2003, the French government launched a similar initiative, *la famille durable* (the sustainable family), that offers practical ways for people to live sustainably at home, school, and work and on vacation.<sup>14</sup>

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And in the United States, the Center for a New American Dream urges people to live a life of “more fun, less stuff.” Through its Turn the Tide program, the Center encourages people to follow a simple nine-step environmental conservation plan, involving such actions as switching to water-efficient faucets and eating less meat. The 14,000 members of this initiative report saving more than 500 million liters of water and preventing over 4 million kilograms of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond a shift in shopping habits, many consumers are trying to simplify their lifestyles in broader ways—a process sometimes called “downshifting.” Analyst Cecile Andrews describes the motivation for these individuals: “A lot of people [are] rushed and frenzied and stressed. They have no time for their friends; they snap at their family; they’re not laughing very much.” Many, she says, “are looking for ways to simplify their lives—to rush less, work less, and spend less. They are beginning to slow down and enjoy life again.”<sup>16</sup>

Estimates of the numbers of downshifter are imprecise, but interest in simplifying appears to be growing. In seven European countries, the number of people who have voluntarily reduced their working hours has grown at 5.3 percent each year over the past five years, for example. And the trend toward simplicity is expected to continue. The number of people in these same countries who could at least partially embrace a voluntary simplicity lifestyle is expected to grow from about 7 million in 1997 to at least 13 million in 2007.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, two research surveys in the United States in the mid-1990s suggested that around a quarter of the population were working to simplify their lives, although the extent of course varied greatly from person to person. And the media have registered growing interest in the topic. Articles in U.S. news-

papers about simplifying lifestyles grew three- to fivefold between 1996 and 1998. In 1997, the Public Broadcasting System aired a documentary called *Affluenza*, which treated consumerism as a contagious disease and offered suggestions for inoculating yourself against it. The program was very popular and was later distributed in 17 countries.<sup>18</sup>

Yet individual initiatives are only part of what is needed to build a society of well-being. Individual efforts alone do not necessarily help to build strong, healthy communities (although they can free up time that could lead to greater community involvement), nor can they address the structural obstacles to genuine consumer choice—the lack of organic produce in the supermarket, for instance. Some critics even argue that, pursued in isolation, individual initiatives can be counterproductive. An “individualization of responsibility,” as political and environmental scientist Michael Maniates notes, distracts attention from the role that such institutions as business and government play in perpetuating unhealthy consumption. Moreover, to the extent that individuals see their power residing primarily in their pocketbooks, they may neglect their key roles as parents, educators, community members, and citizens in building a society of well-being.<sup>19</sup>

The need for individuals to act collectively to improve their quality of life led a group in Norway in 2000 to launch a campaign entitled 07-06-05. Campaigners are rallying Norwegians to count down to June 7th, 2005, the one-hundredth anniversary of Norway’s independence from Sweden, and to once again declare their independence—but this time from the “time poverty” that has accompanied the ascendancy of the consumer culture.<sup>20</sup>

In the United States, an alliance known as the U.S. Simplicity Forum is trying to mobilize the millions of Americans struggling with

too much to do and too little time. They organized Take Back Your Time Day on October 24th, 2003, urging Americans to leave work early, arrive late, take longer than usual lunches, or even skip work altogether. Thousands joined events at neighbors' homes, local churches, meeting halls, and universities to discuss the time poverty facing the average American. The date was deliberately chosen—it was nine weeks before the end of the year—to remind Americans that they are some of the most overworked people in the industrial world, putting in 350 hours more on the job (that is, nine workweeks) each year than the average European.<sup>21</sup>

Organizers hope to use the energy of the American initiative to start a popular movement centered on reclaiming time for a higher quality of life. The campaign would seek to reform national vacation laws, working hours, and other measures that would free up time for the neglected elements of life, such as family, friends, and community. As Take Back Your Time Day coordinator and *Affluenza* producer John de Graaf explains, "The Time Movement is about looking beyond GDP as the measure of a good society and understanding that the real purpose of our economy is not material growth without end, but a balanced, fulfilling, and sustainable life for all."<sup>22</sup>

## The Ties That Bind

Humans are social beings, so it is little surprise that good relationships are one of the most important ingredients for a high quality of life. Harvard Professor of Public Policy Robert Putnam notes that "the single most common finding from a half century's research on the correlates of life satisfaction... is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections." Thus individual efforts to build a satisfying life are more likely to be successful if some of them involve fam-

ily, friends, or neighbors. Fortunately, individual efforts and community efforts often work hand in hand. The person who works fewer hours each week finds more time for family, friends, and community. And community ties, which are strengthened, for example, when neighbors share tools or babysitting responsibilities, can reduce family expenses and help people lead simpler lives.<sup>23</sup>

People who are socially connected tend to be healthier—often significantly so. More than a dozen long-term studies in Japan, Scandinavia, and the United States show that the chances of dying in a given year, no matter the cause, is two to five times greater for people who are isolated than for socially connected people. For example, one study found that in 1,234 heart attack patients, the rate of a recurring attack within six months was nearly double for those living alone. And a Harvard study of health and mistrust in the United States concluded that moving to a state with a high level of social connections from a state where the level is low would improve a person's health almost as much as quitting smoking.<sup>24</sup>

A particularly impressive example of the relationship between social connectedness and health comes from a study of the town of Roseto, Pennsylvania, which caught the attention of researchers in the 1960s because its rate of heart attacks was less than half the rates in neighboring towns. The usual causes of such an anomaly—diet, exercise, weight, smoking, genetic predisposition, and so on—did not explain the Roseto phenomenon. In fact, people in Roseto scored worse on many of these risk factors than their neighbors. So the researchers looked for other possible explanations and found that the town had a tight-knit social structure that had produced community-initiated sports clubs, churches, a newspaper, and a Scout troop. Extensive informal socializing was the norm. Eventually

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researchers gave credit to the strong social ties of the residents—most were from the same village in Italy and worked hard to maintain their sense of community in the United States—for the higher levels of health. The sad postscript to the story is that starting in the late 1960s, as social ties weakened in this town and across the United States, the heart attack rate in Roseto rose, eventually surpassing that of a neighboring town.<sup>25</sup>

**Strong social ties are especially helpful in promoting collective consumption, which often has social and environmental advantages.**

Researchers offer various explanations for the link between social connectedness and lower risk of health problems. Some are quite practical: connected people have someone to depend on if they run into health problems, thereby reducing the likelihood that sickness will develop into a serious health condition. Social networks may reinforce healthy behaviors; studies show that isolated people are more likely to smoke or drink, for example. And cohesive communities may be more effective at lobbying for medical care. But the connection may run deeper. Social contact may actually stimulate a person's immune system to resist disease and stress. Laboratory animals, for example, are more likely to develop hardening of the arteries when isolated, while animals and humans in isolation both tend to experience decreased immune response and higher blood pressure.<sup>26</sup>

International development professionals also now acknowledge that strong social ties are a major contributor to a country's development. The World Bank, for instance, sees social connectedness as a form of capital—an asset that yields a stream of benefits useful for

development. Just as a bank account (financial capital) yields interest, social ties tend to build trust, reciprocity, or information networks, all of which can grease the wheels of economic activity. Trust, for example, facilitates financial transactions by creating a climate of confidence in contractual relationships or in the safety of investments. A World Bank study of social contacts among agricultural traders in Madagascar found that those who are part of an extensive network of traders and can count on colleagues for help in times of trouble have higher incomes than traders with fewer contacts. Indeed, the connected traders say that relationships are more important for their success than many economic factors, including the price of their traded goods or access to credit or equipment.<sup>27</sup>

A lack of social capital also seems to be connected with poor economic growth at the national level. Stephen Knack of the World Bank warns that low levels of societal trust may lock countries in a "poverty trap," in which the vicious circle of mistrust, low investment, and poverty is difficult to break. Knack and his colleagues tested the relationship between trust and economic performance in 29 countries included in the World Values Survey. They found that each 12-point rise in the survey's measure of trust was associated with a 1-percent increase in annual income growth, and that each 7-point rise in trust corresponded to a 1-percent increase in investment's share of GDP.<sup>28</sup>

The role of social glue in facilitating economic transactions is especially evident in microcredit initiatives such as the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, which provides small loans to very poor women who lack the collateral to borrow from a commercial bank. Participating women organize themselves into borrowing groups of five, and each group applies to the Bank for loans, often of less than \$100. The women count on knowledge of



their neighbors' dependability when they extend invitations to join the group. This information function—something commercial banks spend money on when they compile an applicant's credit history—is an example of how social capital can lower the costs of financial activity. Social ties are also meant to serve as collateral for the loans. Because women are jointly responsible for repayment, and because a default puts all five in jeopardy of disqualification for future loans, each woman is subject to strong social pressure to repay.<sup>29</sup>

The economic payoff of these types of social connectedness has made microcredit successful in many parts of the world. The Grameen Bank claims that 98 percent of its microcredit loans are repaid, a better record than in most commercial banks. Grameen has inspired the spread of microcredit globally. An initiative known as the Microcredit Summit Campaign has set a goal of enrolling 100 million people in microcredit programs by 2005. By the end of 2002, they were more than halfway there, with 68 million people participating.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond improving health and facilitating economic security, strong social ties are especially helpful in promoting collective consumption, which often has social and environmental advantages. A good example of this is co-housing, a modern form of village living in which 10–40 individual households live in a development designed to stimulate neighborly interaction. Privacy is valued and respected, but residents share key spaces, including a common dining hall, gardens, and recreational space. Started in the late 1960s, more than 200 co-housing communities have been established in Denmark. The movement has spread to the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Australia, Canada, and the United States, where 50 new co-housing interest groups are established each year (although more than half of these do not

survive to see a community established, because of the steep challenges involved, including gaining permits and financing as well as building the community).<sup>31</sup>

In a co-housing community, houses often share common walls with neighboring homes and are clustered around a courtyard or pedestrian walkway. Cars are typically confined to the perimeter of the community property. The design means that these communities often use less energy and fewer materials than neighborhoods full of private homes. A study of 18 communities in the United States in the mid-1990s found that, compared with before they moved into co-housing, members owned 4 percent fewer cars, while their ownership of washers and dryers dropped by 25 percent and of lawnmowers by 75 percent. The average living space per household in the 18 communities—including each unit's share of the common room area—was about 1,400 square feet, two thirds as big as the average new U.S. home in the mid-1990s. Shared basement space for mechanical services and common entryways for adjoining dwellings reduce living space with little sacrifice of livability. And building in tight clusters allows yard space to be shared without a major loss of privacy. As a result of these features, the average co-housing community in the study used only half as much land per dwelling as in a conventional suburban U.S. development.<sup>32</sup>

But perhaps the greatest contribution of co-housing communities to a high quality of life is the social ties they create. The communities are self-managed, which encourages interactions and sharing. Children typically have many adults watching as they play, as well as an abundance of playmates and babysitters. Most of the communities offer two or more common meals per week, with on average 58 percent of members attending. Interestingly, in contrast to “time-saving” meals offered by food companies, which typically feature highly

processed and packaged foods such as instant mashed potatoes or frozen pizza, the co-housing approach to common meals saves time without sacrificing on food quality. At the Nomad Cohousing Community in Colorado, for instance, where there are two community meals a week, residents spend 2.5–3 hours every five to six weeks helping with cooking and cleanup. Compared with cooking a family meal each day, this occasional sharing of effort frees up 9 hours of labor for every family over six weeks.<sup>33</sup>

In many developing countries, too, collective consumption is more feasible in communities with a strong social base. (See Box 8–1.) A World Bank study of 64 villages in Rajasthan, India, for example, found that conservation and development of watersheds was more successful in villages that exhibited strong levels of trust, informal networks, and solidarity than in villages that had fewer of these social assets. And in Bangladesh, cooperative garbage collection programs (where local government failed to provide it) were undertaken and successful in areas where certain forms of social capital—in this case, norms of reciprocity and sharing—were well developed.<sup>34</sup>

## Creating Infrastructures of Well-being

When individuals or communities seek to enhance their quality of life, they may be handcuffed by the set of choices available to them. Organic produce, reusable beverage bottles, or mass transit obviously cannot be bought if they are not offered for sale. The rules and policies that determine the set of choices available, such as oil subsidies that make fossil energy cheaper than wind power, zoning laws that encourage sprawling development, or building codes that frown on the use of recycled building materials, are

essentially the “infrastructure of consumption.” Creating a higher quality of life requires us all—individuals and communities—to help create new political, physical, and cultural “infrastructures of well-being.”<sup>35</sup>

Some governments are beginning to use their authority to help create a political environment conducive to well-being. The most basic of their initiatives is to properly assess community or societal health, as the city of Santa Monica is doing through a Sustainable City Plan. In place since 1994, the plan aims to decrease overall community consumption, especially the use of materials and resources that are not local, nonrenewable, not recycled, and not recyclable. It also seeks to develop a diversity of transportation options, to minimize the use of hazardous or toxic materials, to preserve open space, and to encourage participation in community decisionmaking. The plan uses 66 indicators to measure its progress, such as solid waste generation, cost of living, share of major streets with bike lanes, percent of tree canopy coverage, voting rates, share of residents who volunteer, greenhouse gas emissions, number of homeless, and crime rates. Many of Santa Monica’s initial targets have been met or exceeded, according to the city, and more ambitious goals have been set for 2010.<sup>36</sup>

At the national level, the standard tool used to measure societal health, GDP, is much too narrow to serve as a yardstick of well-being because it sums all economic transactions, regardless of their contribution to quality of life. It also ignores entire swaths of nonmarket activity that contribute to individual and community well-being, such as the child care provided by a stay-at-home parent. Throughout the 1990s, researchers worked to develop alternative measures, such as the Ecological Footprint, the Genuine Progress Indicator, the Human Development Index, and the Living Planet Index, to com-

**BOX 8-1. THE GAVIOTAS EXPERIENCE: MAKING WELL-BEING A PRIORITY**

Gaviotas is a village of 200 people in rural Colombia with a global reputation for innovative development. Governing their approach is a strong concern for the quality of village life and for the natural environment. For starters, villagers ensure that basic needs are met: residents pay nothing for meals, medical care, education, and housing. All adults have work, whether in the various village enterprises that manufacture solar collectors and windmills, in organic and hydroponic agriculture, or in forestry initiatives.

Social needs are addressed as well, through the rhythm of daily activities. Members work together in village businesses and regularly eat together in the large refectory, even though each home has a kitchen. Music and other cultural events are a regular part of village life. With survival and social needs met in abundance, the atmosphere is peaceful: the community has had no police force, jail, or mayor in its 33-year history. Community norms are set by members and enforced through social pressure.

Gaviotas is known worldwide for its many inventions, including a water pump that village kids work as they ride their seesaw, windmills designed for the gentle breezes of the Colombian plains, a pressurized solar water heater, and a pedal-powered cassava grinder. The

technologies enhance the quality of life of these villagers, but also of other interested communities. As a matter of principle—and in line with their primary interest in advancing quality of life, not just in generating wealth—the villagers do not patent their inventions, which are made widely available. Thousands of the windmills have been installed by Gaviotas technicians across Colombia, and the design has been copied throughout Latin America.

For the villagers, well-being also means treading lightly on the environment. Gaviotas is now self-sufficient in energy, making ample use of solar and wind power and of methane produced from cattle manure. Its air-cooled and solar-heated former hospital (now a water purification center) was named by a Japanese architectural journal as one of the 40 most important buildings in the world. Its agricultural activities are organic. And it is the center of the largest reforestation project in Colombia, having converted tens of thousands of hectares of savannah to forest, from which villagers extract and sell only resin, even though logging would be more lucrative. The villagers believe that a healthy forest generating modest resources is better than a depleted one that yields a temporary bonanza.

SOURCE: See endnote 34.

plement the perspective of GDP. (See also Chapters 1 and 7.) One such effort, the Well-being Index developed by sustainability consultant Robert Prescott-Allen, is noteworthy for its comprehensiveness. (See Box 8-2.)<sup>37</sup>

In addition to recalibrating yardsticks for societal health, governments are using their extensive legislative and regulatory powers to shape the way people consume and the values a society internalizes regarding consumption. Eliminating perverse subsidies and adopting pollution taxes, for example, have already

proved useful in creating a cleaner environment and a higher quality of life in many European countries. (See also Chapter 5.)

And many governments in Europe are helping workers and families to carve out extra time each week. Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Norway now have 35- to 38-hour workweeks, which in addition to freeing up valuable time for workers often help to create new jobs. The Netherlands has two particularly creative approaches to paring back working hours. Employers

**BOX 8-2. MEASURING WELL-BEING**

The Wellbeing Index uses 87 indicators to measure human and ecological well-being—ranging from life expectancy and school enrolment rates to the extent of deforestation and levels of carbon emissions. The 87 indicators can help countries identify the areas in which their quality of life is suffering. Values from the array of indicators are standardized and summed into a single score for ease of comparison across 180 countries.

The results are revealing: some two thirds of the world's people live in countries with a bad or poor rating for human well-being. Only Norway, Denmark, and Finland receive the highest of the five rating levels. Meanwhile, countries with a poor or bad environmental rating cover almost half of Earth's land area. And no country receives a good environmental rating.

The Index's separate measures of human and environmental well-being help crystallize an ideal development goal: to improve people's lives with the least possible environmental impact. Indeed, the Index reveals that meeting people's needs can be done at a range of environmental price tags. The Netherlands and Sweden have roughly the same human well-being score, for example, but the Netherlands scores much lower on environmental health. This suggests that *how* a nation meets its development goals is as important as *whether* it meets them.

SOURCE: See endnote 37.

so that more time is available to meet the heavy demands of caring for young children. In addition to reforms of the workweek, many countries provide generous paid family leave to new parents. Sweden, for instance, grants 15 months of leave per child at up to 80 percent of salary, compared with the 12 weeks of unpaid leave that is offered in the United States.<sup>38</sup>

Government interventions like these are likely to create a less stressful home environment. Finland, for example, has very strong policies supporting the employment of mothers, including paid parental leave, tax relief for child care, publicly funded child care, and other measures. (In one study, Finland ranked first among 14 nations in provision of these benefits.) A 2001 study of the psychological benefit to parents of these measures found that, in contrast to the United States, where parenting tended to be associated with poor psychological well-being because of the stress involved and lack of family support, parenting in Finland correlated either neutrally or positively with psychological well-being. For fathers, the results were strongly positive, but for mothers somewhat less so, indicating that support for them could be strengthened.<sup>39</sup>

Central to changing the legal and political infrastructure of well-being is achieving clarity about the importance of providing public services. The increased priority given to private consumption in many countries in recent decades has often given public services a bad name. But societies pay a social price when private consumption is pursued at the expense of public investment. A 2003 report by the Fabian Society in the United Kingdom demonstrates this. Privatizing public schools, the report noted, can lead to the best schools attracting the best students, while the worst schools get a disproportionate share of disciplinary cases. Privatized bus services can leave unprofitable routes unserved and prof-

give the same benefits and promotion opportunities to part-time and full-time workers, making part-time work attractive for many. And the government encourages parents with small children to work the equivalent of no more than 1.5 jobs between the two of them,

itable routes overcrowded, sending more people into their cars, as happened when U.K. local bus services were privatized.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, deciding which goods should be publicly provided is a knotty political problem, but one the public can and should be involved in. An inspiring example of public involvement in setting priorities for government funds comes from Porto Alegre, Brazil. Officials there have used a “participatory budget” process since 1989 to involve citizens directly in decisions on how to allocate the municipal budget. The process has produced greater governmental transparency and accountability, a reduction in the share of city revenues consumed by salaries, and a reduction in the share of contracts allocated on a patronage basis. It has also led to increases in the amount of money spent on education, basic services, and urban infrastructure—initiatives that have improved residents’ quality of life. In addition, the process has mobilized more people each year, with 40,000 of the 1.3 million residents participating in the 1999 budget process. Most get involved by joining neighborhood meetings, so the process has helped to increase grassroots involvement, allowed new local leaders to emerge, and empowered some of Porto Alegre’s poorer communities. Participatory budgeting has now spread to 140 communities—2.5 percent of Brazil’s municipalities.<sup>41</sup>

Attention to the design of physical infrastructure is also critical to improving quality of life. Car-centered suburban dwellings, for example, have long been criticized for weakening community cohesion, in part because of the time required to commute to work. Social scientist Robert Putnam has noted that each additional 10 minutes of daily commuting time is associated with a 10-percent decline in involvement in community affairs. With the average American adult now spend-

ing 72 minutes a day behind the wheel, often alone, community cohesion is bound to suffer. In 2003, sprawling suburban developments were also criticized for their adverse effects on health. A U.S. study of more than 200,000 people in 448 counties found that those living in low-density suburban communities tended to spend less time walking and weighed 6 pounds more on average than those living in densely populated areas. Suburbanites were also found to be as likely as cigarette smokers to have high blood pressure.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, urban design can deter—or attract—cyclists. Surveys in the United States indicate that a principal reason Americans give for not cycling is that they regard the practice as unsafe. And it is. Measured per kilometer of travel, cycling in the United States is more dangerous than any other form of transportation. Yet the accident rate for cyclists in the Netherlands and Germany is only one quarter the U.S. rate, largely because those nations invest in bike lanes, stoplights that favor cyclists, and other infrastructure developments that make cycling safe. The Netherlands has doubled the length of its network of bikeways in the past 20 years, and Germany has tripled its network.<sup>43</sup>

When they are well designed, cities can become attractive places to spend time, which encourages greater civic interaction. Both factors tend to boost quality of life. By converting streets into pedestrian thoroughfares, mixing housing and shops, creating plazas and parks, and taking other steps, city centers can be stimulating places to be. In Copenhagen, for example, outdoor cafes, public squares, and street performers attract the public in the summer, while skating rinks, heated benches, and gaslit heaters on street corners make winters enjoyable. And the city has gone out of its way to make cycling easy, not only by providing bike lanes, but also by making bicycles available for a modest deposit

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that is refunded when the bicycle is returned.<sup>44</sup>

Such design innovations happen when a city is serious about making quality of life a priority. One demonstration of such seriousness comes from Austin, Texas, which used an incentive program known as the Smart Growth Criteria Matrix to control where and how growth took place and to enhance quality of life. The city used a series of criteria to score proposed development projects, with high-scoring projects qualifying to have city fees waived. Analyst Guy Dauncey describes the incentive criteria this way:

You can win more points for a downtown location, and for a location within one block of a transit stop or two blocks of a light rail station. There are points for...smaller setbacks, front porches, back lanes, narrow streets, and a community orientation. There are points for mixed residential, office and retail use, for residential units above commercial, and for encouraging street level pedestrian uses. The Matrix also offers points for being bicycle friendly, for traffic calming, for greenways and affordable housing, for using local contractors and architects, for water and energy efficiency, for incorporating a neighbourhood food market and other retail stores, for preserving heritage structures, and for re-using existing buildings. There are points for landscaping, streetscaping, for being consistent with local neighbourhood plans, and for local participation and support.<sup>45</sup>

Some businesses are also starting to recognize that they can make their own physical infrastructure more amenable to the well-being of employees. At the new world headquarters in Kansas for Sprint, a telecommunications firm, cars must park in garages at the edge of the corporate campus, requiring employees to walk some distance into work. Buildings feature slow elevators, which

encourages people to use the stairs. And the eating area in the complex is located away from the offices rather than conveniently in the middle of them, so that employees must put some energy into getting to their food. This innovative design reflects an understanding that advancing well-being is not always synonymous with maximizing convenience or comfort.<sup>46</sup>

New political and physical infrastructures of consumption are being supplemented by a budding new cultural framework, particularly in promoting an ethic of consumption for well-being. In this regard, people are increasingly active in demanding a higher ethical standard of advertisers. In Sweden, all advertising is forbidden in programming directed at children, a particularly impressionable group. And in the United States, cigarette ads have been forbidden on television for decades. The European Union recently expanded its ban on ads for cigarettes on television to cover more media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and the Internet by 2005, as well as sporting events by 2006. Setting boundaries for advertising is a sensitive topic, given concerns that such parameters might limit free speech, but these examples demonstrate that countries can strike a healthy balance between protecting speech and public health.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, advertising itself is being used as a tool to fight the high number of consumption messages bombarding consumers. The Canadian group Adbusters sponsors TV "uncommercials" that encourage viewers to reduce consumption, leave their cars in their garages, or turn off their televisions. Some governments are placing ads or public service announcements on television and other media to encourage more-sustainable consumption, as the Thai government has done through humorous TV commercials urging consumers to use less energy and water. The

U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) takes a different approach, working with advertisers to develop ads that encourage people to use sustainable products. (See Box 8–3.)<sup>48</sup>

Education is also important in reshaping culture for a higher quality of life. Australia and Canada now mandate a media education curriculum in their schools. These programs help make students aware of how the media and advertising shape their values and culture. And students are taught how to differentiate between reality and marketing hyperbole—whether in commercials or embedded in programming. Consumption education, in particular, may be a necessary corrective to advertising’s incessant proclamations of the desirability of consumption. In Brazil, the nongovernmental group Instituto Akatu has worked with schools, businesses, and Scout troops to educate participants to

“consume consciously.” The organization uses a variety of tools—from the Internet to pamphlets, comic books, and games—to teach the environmental and social consequences of consumption and to tell people how to lobby governments to press for changes in policy that will help promote conscious consumption.<sup>49</sup>

## Getting to the Good Life

Lurking beneath growing dissatisfaction with the consumer society is a simple question: What is an economy for? The traditional responses, including prosperity, jobs, and expanded opportunity, seem logical enough—until they become dysfunctional, that is. When prosperity makes us overweight, overwork leaves us exhausted, and a “you can have it all” mindset leads us to neglect fam-

### BOX 8–3. ENCOURAGING ADVERTISERS TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABILITY

Marketing is a powerful tool that is often implicated in stimulating consumption—and, therefore, in undermining efforts to build a sustainable world. But the U.N. Environment Programme is trying to turn marketers into allies by enlisting them to promote sustainability. In 1999, a UNEP Forum on Advertising and Communication was established to raise awareness of “sustainable consumption”—consumption that improves life quality while minimizing social and ecological inequities—and to encourage advertisers and marketers to promote it.

Key business associations within the advertising and marketing industry have responded by developing pro-sustainability publications in cooperation with UNEP and by organizing special sessions on sustainable development at their international congresses. For example, the advertising agency McCann-Erickson published with UNEP a leaflet called “Can Sustainability

Sell?” targeted at companies and marketing professionals to convince them that “far from depressing sales, sustainable principles could be essential to protect both brand health and future profitability.” In partnership with Sustainability and UNEP, the European Association of Communications Agencies prepared a guide for advertising agencies that describes the growing international market for sustainable consumption. And the World Association of Research Professionals has ordered a survey on consumer attitudes toward sustainability issues.

Moreover, UNEP is cooperating with specific industry sectors—notably, the automotive, tourism, and retail sectors—to help them develop innovative marketing strategies that would further promote sustainable options.

—Solange Montillaud-Joyel,  
U.N. Environment Programme

SOURCE: See endnote 48.

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ily and friends, people start to question more deeply the direction of their lives as well as the system that helps steer them in that direction. The signals emerging in some industrial countries—and some developing ones as well—suggest that many of us are looking for more from life than a bigger house and a new car. People long for something deeper: happy, dignified, and meaningful lives—in a word, well-being. And they expect their economies to be a tool to this end, not an obstacle to it.

**Everyone will need to become practiced at wrestling with a key question: How much is enough?**

Societies with a high quality of life are people-centered, with proper attention given to promoting interactions among human beings. Urban areas designed with attention to pedestrians, to leisure, and to human expression, for example, would bring people together in constructive and satisfying ways—for public concerts, festivals, or simply the informal interactions made possible in outdoor markets. Economies would have a local character, so that produce, talent, and goods unique to the region would be favored over imports from distant shores. By strengthening the web of relationships between farmer and city dweller, artisan and client, producer and consumer, local economies have a “human-scale” character that far-flung economies often lack.

Nurturing relationships requires time and may involve corralling many of the “time thieves” of modern life, starting with work. Experience in several European countries has demonstrated that the 40-hour workweek is clearly not sacrosanct, so that people can arrive home earlier or have longer weekends to spend with their children or friends. And housing that is not spread out in scattered sub-

urbs could prevent the daily commute that robs many people of astonishing amounts of time: a commute of more than an hour a day, the norm for many American suburbanites, means a worker spends the equivalent of six workweeks in transit each year. Society’s focus on time-saving devices, the use of which has only led to more frenzied lives, needs to be replaced with simpler, time-saving lifestyles.<sup>50</sup>

A well-being society would offer consumers a sufficient range of genuine choices rather than a large array of virtually identical products. Businesses would be encouraged through economic incentives to deliver what consumers really seek—reliable transportation, not necessarily a car; or tasty, seasonal local produce rather than fruits and vegetables shipped in from another country; or strong neighborhood relationships in lieu of a large house with a big yard. Choice would be redefined to mean options for increasing quality of life rather than selections among individual products or services.

For individuals, genuine choice would likely include the choice not to consume. Everyone will need to become practiced at wrestling with a key question: How much is enough? Responses will vary from person to person, but a guideline worth considering is one from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu: “To know when you have enough is to be rich.” Consumers who embrace this ancient wisdom take a large step toward escaping the tyranny of social comparison and marketing that drives so much of today’s consumption.<sup>51</sup>

People in a well-being society would also develop close relationships with the natural environment. They would recognize the trees in their parks and the flowers in their yards as easily as they identify corporate logos. They would understand the environmental foundations of their economic activity: where their water comes from, where their garbage goes, and whether coal, nuclear, or renewable



energy runs the power plant that generates their electricity. They would likely enjoy developing projects at home that help them to live more intimately with nature—a rain-catching cistern, for example, or a compost bin or vegetable garden. In short, they would learn to love nature and to become advocates for it. As the late Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould once said: “We must develop an emotional and spiritual bond with nature, for we will not fight to save what we do not love.”<sup>52</sup>

Finally, a society focused on well-being would ensure that everyone in it has access to healthy food, clean water and sanitation, education, health care, and physical security. It is virtually impossible to imagine a society of well-being that does not provide for people’s basic needs. And more than that, it is inconceivable that a well-being society would be satisfied with its own success if others outside its borders are suffering on a broad scale. Indeed, those societies that rank highest in the Wellbeing Index, especially in northern Europe, also have some of the world’s most generous foreign aid programs.<sup>53</sup>

Making the transition to a society of well-being will undoubtedly be a challenge, given people’s habit of placing consumption at the apex of societal values. But any move in this direction starts out with two strong advantages. First, the human family today has a base of knowledge, technology, and skills far surpassing anything previous generations have known. Ironically, this base is the product of an economic system oriented toward high levels of consumption. But our twentieth-

century consumption-oriented development choices, however misguided, can be redeemed now by ensuring that today’s stocks of knowledge and technology are invested in well-being rather than in continued material accumulation for its own sake.

A second advantage is simple but powerful: for many people, a life of well-being is preferred to a life of high consumption. Former Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers of the Netherlands captured this fundamental reality when he noted that in their effort to build a high quality of life, the Dutch work limited hours: “We like it that way. Needless to say, there is more room for all those important aspects of our lives that are not part of our jobs, for which we are not paid, and for which there is never enough time.” The desire for a higher quality of life may be more imperfectly formed in other industrial societies, but the signals are there: workers who want free time more than a pay raise, shoppers who choose organic food and other “ethical” products, people who seek stronger family relationships. When the components of a well-being society are made available, the reception is often strikingly positive.<sup>54</sup>

By nurturing relationships, facilitating healthy choices, learning to live in harmony with nature, and tending to the basic needs of all, societies can shift from an emphasis on consumption to an emphasis on well-being. This could be as great an achievement in the twenty-first century as the tremendous advances in opportunity, convenience, and comfort were in the twentieth.

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