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The United Nations as Catalyst of Global Wellbeing and Happiness

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Introduction

I was inspired by the wording of a press release issued by the government of Bhutan in late August in which they frame well-being and happiness in terms of "integrated material, relational and spiritual development". I therefore offer my contribution with this conceptual understanding, and how it relates to the work of international organizations, specifically the United Nations.

Integrated material, relational and spiritual development is fundamentally concerned with appreciation of **inter-dependence** across all sectors – social, environmental, economic - and across all actors – governments, the UN, civil society, private sector, academics and citizens. It is about concern for the whole.

The founding of the United Nations in 1945 lay the basis for a framework of universal values whose realization involves evolving manifestation of both individual and collective values awareness on a global scale. These values are peace, justice, equality, human dignity and environmental sustainability, which together may be viewed as making up our global wellbeing. Such universal ideals are achieved through a deepening understanding and embodiment of these values on personal, organizational and inter-state levels. To fulfill its purpose, the UN would thus need to be an instrument for such transformation and to reflect such changes in the world. It would have to be a catalyst for wellbeing and happiness.

A number of frameworks have been posited for what this **evolution in awareness** looks like, including Abraham Maslow's pyramid, Don Beck's Spiral Dynamics, Richard Barrett's levels of human consciousness, Ken Wilber's Integral Theory, Hall-Tonna's values development, and major belief systems. Common to these is that human evolution involves growing awareness of a greater sense of self, and concern for the welfare of this larger identity. Each stage of evolution is marked by a new level of awareness, behaviours, relationships, processes and structures.

Through this lens, the world may be viewed as embarking on a stage primarily characterized by recognition of inter-dependence, both conceptually and with respect to relationships and processes, across species, communities, disciplines, sectors, institutions, departments and various previously defined classifications of separation. This is reflected in the increasing demand for more participatory processes in decision-making on local and global levels and transnational concerns, notably through the "Arab Spring" and "Occupy" movements since early 2011.

How does the UN serve as a catalyst in this process? Three main trends are:

1. The UN's progressive functioning as an inclusive system
2. Promoting peace and security and global identity
3. Efforts towards a holistic approach to development

I. The UN's progressive functioning as an inclusive system



I will ask you first to consider that the degree to which the UN can effectively facilitate inter-dependence across different sectors is related to the degree to which it is functional as an inter-dependent system itself. The less than rational historical growth of the UN's many institutions has given rise to a decentralized network of different entities with different governing bodies, structures, methods of work and priorities. Its functionality as a cohesive, efficient system is thus significantly compromised. Recent attempts at coherence include program pilot "Deliver as One" with the aim of having UN country presences operate with one leader, one programme, one budget and one office, as well as growing inter-agency initiatives.

My own organization, Global Vision Institute, serves as a catalyst for promoting values-driven systems change in the UN, working with actors through coaching, values assessments, network-building to support awareness and transformation into behaviours, relationships and organizational culture, as well as the processes, programming and policies of the international system.

II. Promoting peace and security, and global identity



Peace and security are the pre-conditions for material well-being, while a culture of peace fosters relational well-being. Also, concern for the welfare of others and for the whole, reflected in increasing global identity, similarly promotes the spiritual dimension of well-being. The UN has played a role in these through a range of activities, from the Security Council to disarmament, counter-terrorism, peace-making and preventive action, peace-keeping and peace building. The UN also works on a culture of peace, advocating non-violence, tolerance, inter-faith cooperation, and cultural diversity including through education and the media. Progress towards a global identity cultivates transpersonal advancement. The existence of the UN is testimony to aspiration beyond the local, national or regional. Nonetheless, the UN is established on the nation-state as the main actor on the global stage and the sovereignty of nation-states is the premise for deliberations. This is in part a legacy of the suffering from colonialism

and other historical aggression. In the twenty-first century however, the experience of many is less restrictive through growth in travel, communications, and trade. The centrality of the nation-state is thus being eroded. Evidence of this is found with the principle of the **"Responsibility to Protect"**, allowing the international community to intervene when national action proves inadequate, as in Libya.

III. Efforts towards a holistic approach to development

The term development has historically connoted largely economic dimensions, and measurement through Gross National Product (GNP) or Gross Domestic Product (GDP). UNDP in 1990 first developed the **Human Development Index** with a view to shifting the focus from national income accounting to people centered policies. This index reflected a composite calculation of life expectancy, education and income. The 2010 Human Development Report was the first to additionally calculate an Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI). Following Rio+20, efforts are ongoing to include sustainability in the index as well.

In development, the **Millennium Development Goals or MDGs** have assumed center stage since its adoption by Member States in 2000. As you all know, they target eradication of hunger and poverty, universal education, gender equality, child and maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability and global partnership. As such, it has also represented an expanded understanding of the core factors contributing to development, notably including the environment. The 2010 Millennium Summit showed uneven progress with successes in poverty reduction school enrolment, child health and survival, access to clean water and the control of HIV and other major diseases. However, concerns remained or deepened regarding hunger and malnutrition, employment, gender equality, environmental sustainability, basic sanitation, and particularly maternal mortality. Dissatisfaction with the MDGs has given impetus to addressing its ostensible shortcomings. The UN has thus begun deliberations for drafting new MDG goals to follow 2015, through inter-governmental bodies and two high-level panels. These aim to give greater focus to neglected elements of the 2000 Millennium Declaration, including the environment, food security, and human rights.



Inter-dependence in development has also been strengthened by application of the **human rights based approach (HRBA)** in UN programming. International human rights law encompasses civil, economic, social, cultural, and political rights and is inherently inter-dependent and thus supportive of integrative approaches to development. The main principles of the HRBA distill the essence of international human rights law. These include participation, accountability and non-discrimination. In giving voice to all stakeholders, the approach allows for a more inclusive system for framing problems and solutions in development and contributes profoundly to the relational dimension of development. While human rights are often politically sensitive, over sixty countries employ elements of this approach in development programming.

On **sustainable development** efforts, analyses are mixed as to whether the UN Rio+ 20 Conference in June fulfilled its promise for "The future we want". For many, the multilateral process did not deliver, despite delegates from 188 countries. Some developing countries registered their concern about 'green protectionism' in international trade, while the final document adopted did not have clear targets, diluted references to gender, and deleted the ending of fossil fuel subsidies. The conference also could not agree on a proposed annual 30-billion-dollar fund for sustainable development, given the positions of Western nations. Nonetheless, 692 registered voluntary commitments are included in the final agreement, including from municipalities, businesses and development banks, and amounting to 513 billion dollars. These covered targeted phasing out of fossil fuels, sustainable transport, businesses commitments to sustainable practices, education, and climate action in cities. A number of cross-sectoral collaborative projects were also launched across government, business, science and civil society. Rio + 20 thus yielded unexpected and potentially very useful new thinking and efforts for taking forward sustainable development globally in ways that more fully represent holistic thinking. While formal inter-governmental procedures seem increasingly to be outliving their usefulness as forums for decision-making, the UN's role as a convener is proving to serve its purpose in innovative directions.

In the UN system, the need for a **more integrated approach to development** has recently been more explicitly expressed in UN General Assembly resolution (A/RES/65/309) on "Happiness: Towards a holistic approach to development" adopted unanimously in July 2011. This sought, inter alia, to elaborate additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and well-being in development with a view to guiding public policies. The corresponding April 2012 High Level Meeting on **"Wellbeing and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm"** was hosted by the government of Bhutan. This aimed, among other things, to engender the development and application of new measures of a nation's progress that capture social, environmental and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing, in addition to the current focus on GDP/economic issues, such as Bhutan's own Gross National Happiness index or GNH. The GNH notably includes new concerns such as positive psychology and mental health in development. This Meeting has spawned a movement from among its 750 participants to take forward the ideas presented. The government of Bhutan has additionally established an International Experts Working Group, composed largely of academics, to further develop the Meeting's themes, with particular application of the GNH and to Bhutan, and also to feed into UN processes.

It must be acknowledged that happiness is viewed by many as a frivolous concern of rich countries when weighed against the overwhelming basic needs that pervade large parts of the world and historical global inequalities. It is important for us, as advocates of the New Economic Paradigm, to demonstrate that it equally addresses these needs, by asserting the undeniable realization that the kind of development currently being pursued is neither sustainable nor ultimately conducive to human fulfillment. We can draw reference to significant research such as those indicating that happiness becomes stable after a certain income level. As such, new patterns must be advanced to allow us to achieve both our material and non-material well-being, while simultaneously curbing excesses and re-focusing growth on communities whose material well-being needs are yet to be met. It is important to show that the new economic paradigm applies to all, and that it is for everyone.

Most explicitly in recognition of happiness in the international system is the UN General Assembly unanimous adoption in June 2012 of a resolution on an **International Day of Happiness**, declared for 20 March. This recognizes the need for a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth that promotes sustainable development, poverty eradication, happiness and well-being of all peoples. We look forward to seeing how this day unfolds as one of observance for new understanding, new relations and new action.

It is here that you as civil society and individuals can perhaps play a significant part. Although there is limited room for direct involvement in formal UN processes, NGOs can undertake awareness raising, advocacy, joint implementation of programs, provision of technical expertise, participate in conferences, and enter into consultative status with specific UN departments. The International Day of Happiness is a useful platform for taking forward global wellbeing and happiness in your own ways. A committee of the Movement has been set up and seeks to coordinate activities, from surveys, indices and metrics, to film and the arts, speakers, education, panel discussions, and updates on application. We welcome your engagement.

Conclusion



The United Nations holds a special place in the pursuit of global well-being and happiness. The organization most fully and legitimately represents the world's aspirations for peace, justice, equality, human dignity and environmental sustainability, the elements that underlie our collective well-being. To a significant degree these ideals have historically been addressed separately and through myriad inter-governmental bodies and entities. More recently, global evolution towards recognition of inter-relatedness among the different sectors is gaining expression in the UN as well, while similarly making room for a fuller range of actors.

In understanding peace and security as providing the pre-conditions for global well-being and happiness, and the culture of peace as supportive of relational development, we note the UN's work on peace and security. In viewing expanded global identity as also contributing to spiritual development, we note the increasing acceptance of the principle of the responsibility of the international community to protect populations when national action proves inadequate.

Most specific to the theme at hand are efforts towards a holistic approach to development. UNDP in 1990 first developed the Human Development Index with a view to shifting the focus of to people centered policies. The Millennium Development Goals in 2000 contributed to a more comprehensive depiction of development, and a number of UN deliberations are underway to take forward the lessons from the MDG experience with new goals following 2015.

Sustainable development efforts at the UN with the 2012 Rio plus 20 were somewhat stymied by the divide between developing and developed countries. While inter-governmental outcomes were very modest, the meeting itself spurred greater appreciation for the roles of non-state actors and cross-sectoral initiatives.

The 2011 General Assembly resolution on "Happiness: Towards a holistic approach to development" ushered in another level of consideration of the elements of well-being. The corresponding 2012 Meeting "Wellbeing and Happiness: A New Economic Paradigm" further promoted concern and inspired a movement towards integration of these concepts. With the first UN International Day of Happiness to be held in March 2013, it remains to be seen how the international community will embrace this new conceptualization of development.

The UN has thus served as a catalyst in traditional and innovative, as well as profound and unintended ways. It now take its place alongside other actors in more fully integrating the factors for a new development paradigm, acknowledging that we all have a role in co-creating our collective well-being and happiness.

For fuller coverage of the Second International Seminar on Happiness, see [here](#)