



Interview with Nic Marks, expert in the field of well-being research

Nic Marks undertakes innovative research in the use of well-being indicators in public policy environments and was involved in creating The Happy Planet Index.

Q: Can you briefly explain what the Happy Planet Index (HPI) is and why we need such an index?

NM: The Happy Planet Index is a measure of sustainable well-being. We have big problems of sustainability, climate change... So far, most of the sustainability movement has concentrated on what has gone wrong, but in a way they don't talk about how people live their normal lives; i.e. people want to be happy and live healthy lives. So how do you indicate this and respect what people want in their lives, taking into account the issues that we face? The idea behind the HPI is to have an indicator for the future, looking at how much well-being, how much good life we can produce for ecological use.

Q: If we are to use happiness as a benchmark, how can the term then be defined? Is it universal?

NM: It is an interesting word, because some people would say it's far too fluffy, you can't measure it, it's intangible, it's private, and it's not public. But it does actually represent one of people's deepest wishes in their lives. I think the word happiness is how the general public

thinks about it. So it's a very interesting space. From a psychological, perspective happiness and the way we use it, certainly in the English language, can be used in two ways. One is as an emotion; to feel happy, and the other is as a cognitive reflection; I am happy with something, I am happy with my life. When you start getting into measuring statements, do you measure affects, emotions, or do you start to measure how well peoples life are going? For the Happy Planet Index, for instance, we have used the Gallup measure, which takes into consideration how happy you are with your overall life.

Q: In your TED talk you also speak a lot about what individuals can do to increase happiness. Can anything be done by the world's governments to promote happiness?

NM: Governments and cities are very influential in creating the conditions in which people live their lives. If you think about it at a local level, people experience much more locally than they do nationally. The built environment and local spaces are a really important well-being agenda. Because it's close to home. Why isn't government taking into account how much quality of life it produces rather than, 'it's the economy, stupid!'.

Q: How can we at the UN promote happiness? What can we do?

NM: Measurement is one thing. I think the Bhutan sponsored motion to the UN on gross national happiness is very timely. The UN obviously has huge influence with the Human Development Index by framing what development is about. But we also need to think that development is not just about money, we have to think about the whole person. If you are a person in Kenya living on marginal land, you have to walk far to get water so moving is a really good idea. From traditional orthodox development thinking, in giving them water and housing, their life has gotten better. But if you destroy their culture at the same time, you probably moved them backwards in terms of the human spirit. So introducing ideas such as happiness into this is actually respecting that people's experience of life is very important. Happiness is about opening up space, it is about opportunities. When you are in a good mood, you put your energy into things; you smile at people, which means you build relationships. It is a really important part of how human beings communicate and build collective solutions to things. Happiness can both be part of the process and the goal.