

Work at the nef Centre for Well-being

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My enthusiasm for the field of wellbeing research comes from my belief that its findings about what really matters in life can help to shape a better world. At a time when we need to find a way of rapidly reducing our impact on the planet and reducing inequality at a global and a national level, focusing on sustainable wellbeing for all offers the best chance of helping us find our way into a fairer, greener future.

Summary

nef is an independent think-and-do tank founded in 1986 that inspires and demonstrates real economic well-being. nef's vision is of a society where wealth is defined and measured in terms of wellbeing. This means recognising and supporting what really makes us happy – such as meaningful work, time with our friends and family, creative education, and a real sense of community. nef believes only then can we move towards a truly flourishing society.

Introduction

nef's award-winning Centre for Well-being researches policies, measurement tools and everyday actions that help us increase wellbeing. We aim to enhance individual and collective wellbeing in ways that are environmentally sustainable and socially just. Established in 2006, the centre has built on and significantly expanded nef's wellbeing programme, placing it at the heart of our policy and practice. The centre seeks to understand, measure and enhance people's experience of their lives. In particular we ask the question 'how would policy look if its main aim was to promote equitable and sustainable wellbeing?'

In relation to policy, our aim is for the concept of wellbeing to be widely recognised as a legitimate, useful and high priority policy objective. Our work directly challenges the way that the outcomes of the economic system are conceived, measured and valued. We believe the augmentation or replacement of measures such as GDP with measures reflecting individual and social wellbeing will be essential if the current economic system and policy-making process is to be radically reformed. Our 2004 *Well-being manifesto: For a flourishing society* set out some key areas for government action to promote wellbeing, including: reclaiming our time, creating an education system which produces flourishing, refocusing the health service to promote complete health, investing in the very early years, discouraging materialism and encouraging active citizenship.

At a more practical level, we aim to support individuals, communities and organisations develop understanding about the factors which help to promote wellbeing and develop tools to support the design, delivery and evaluation of services and interventions.

We undertake pioneering work on the psychology of wellbeing, capturing how people feel and how they function, because we believe wellbeing is most usefully thought of as the dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going through the interaction between their circumstances, activities and psychological resources or 'mental capital'.

Although economic output has nearly doubled in the last 30 years, life satisfaction levels in the UK and other developed countries have remained resolutely flat, with evidence that depression and anxiety are increasing, notably among young people. While governments in the developed world focus on economic development as the key route to wellbeing, a growing body of research suggests that, once basic needs have been met, this approach is flawed.

And so in 2004 nef launched *A well-being manifesto: For a flourishing society* which set out eight alternative priorities for government action to promote wellbeing.

Measure what matters

A detailed set of national wellbeing accounts would allow us to understand wellbeing better and track changes over time. Local government could

carry out wellbeing audits of their communities in order to help integrate their services and allocate their funds more effectively and efficiently.

Create a wellbeing economy

Growing the economy does not necessarily result in higher levels of wellbeing. So what directions should the economy take to promote wellbeing? High-quality work can profoundly affect our wellbeing by providing us with purpose, challenge, and opportunities for social relationships. It can constitute a meaningful part of our identity. There are many models of good workplaces whose lessons need to be drawn out and disseminated to employers. Wellbeing research provides many insights into what makes for good work.

Unemployment has terrible effects on the wellbeing of the unemployed, but also lowers the wellbeing of the employed. Hidden unemployment in the UK is high, with many incapacity benefit claimants able and willing to work but not counted in the unemployment figures. The government needs to help these often hard-to-reach groups to find meaningful work.

The wellbeing of future generations depends on not destroying our environment. We need to start moving towards a system of taxing environmental bads, such as fossil fuels, and reducing the tax burden on goods, such as work. This could pay a double dividend of protecting the environment and improving people's wellbeing.

Reclaim our time

We systematically over-estimate the amount of happiness extra income will bring us and work too many hours to get it. We fail to account for the fact that our expectations also rise with our incomes. Spending more time with our children, families, friends, and communities would bring us more happiness.

We should start taking our productivity gains in the form of time. We should end individual opt-outs to the EU Working Time Directive and thus institute a maximum 48-hour working week. We could then reduce this maximum working week until we reach a maximum 35-hour week. This could be achieved while maintaining our present standards of living within around 15 years if accompanied by appropriate pension reform and a managed migration policy. We should accompany this with increased flexible working provisions and more bank holidays.

Create an education system that promotes flourishing

The purpose of the education system should be to create capable and emotionally well-rounded young people who are happy and motivated. At its heart, education policy must acknowledge that the best way of enabling people to realise their potential is to value them for who they are rather than their performance against targets.

All schools should have a strategy to promote emotional, social and physical wellbeing. The curriculum needs to be broadened to include more opportunities around sports, arts, creativity, and other engaging activities. Early on in their lives, young people should be exposed to evidence about the kinds of satisfaction derived from different sorts of life choices, perhaps through broader study of what makes a 'good life'. An education system which promotes flourishing will lead to higher productivity, a more entrepreneurial society, and greater active citizenship.

Refocus the health system to promote complete health

There are important links between health and wellbeing. The scale of the effect of psychological wellbeing on health is of the same order as traditionally identified risks such as body mass, lack of exercise, and smoking.

That means the NHS and other health institutions need to continue to broaden their focus to promote complete health, which is defined by the World Health Organization as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. To do this, we need to accelerate the move towards a preventative health system. We also need to tackle mental health far more systematically.

Treating people holistically means that health professionals need to go beyond just curing the biomedical causes of disease to thinking about the social and psychological aspects of how patients are treated. All health institutions should have some system in place to involve patients as partners in the business of delivering health; there needs to be investment in training frontline staff on good practice around this. Local authorities could promote healthier communities through encouraging local organisations, such as healthy living centres, to take the wellbeing agenda forward.

Invest in the very early years and parenting

Children need a lot of responsive individual attention in their first years, preferably from their parents. Cost-benefit analyses show that investment in the age group zero to three will repay itself many times over, due to reduced health, education and social costs in the future. Parental leave should be extended to cover at least the first two years of a child's life. This could be taken by either parent, or potentially shared between them. High-quality childcare should be subsidised for those parents who need, or wish, to work. Parents should also be actively supported to be the best parents they can be. This will require a mixture of community support, good local facilities, and education.

Discourage materialism and promote authentic advertising

Materialism is not only bad for the environment, it also undermines our wellbeing. We should ban commercial advertising aimed at the under-eights, and have a strong

code of conduct for such advertising for the under-16s. A society more engaged in meaningful pastimes is likely to be less focused on the illusion that material goods will bring it happiness. We should endeavour to make the wellbeing choice the easy choice by increasing support for cheap and local leisure provision, such as sports centres and arts venues, as well as informal open spaces and parks.

Strengthen civil society, social wellbeing and active citizenship

Being actively engaged with communities has been shown not only to give us a personal sense of wellbeing but also to have positive knock-on effects for others. This bolsters the case for government to support different sorts of community engagement and civil society organisations and spaces through, for example, a citizen's service, a participation income, and mutual solutions such as reward cards and time banks.

'The impression, which slowly dawns on one as one reads this manifesto, is that, if this is all true, then really what we're facing is the need for a significant revolution in the way we organise just about everything in our society. Unlike most previous calls to revolution, this one proceeds logically, calmly and remains always grounded in an appeal to that thing we all care about in a very deep and uncomplicated way: happiness. I can't commend the work highly enough.'

Alain de Botton, author and philosopher

Projects

Some of our key projects are:

- **The (un)happy planet index.** Launched in July 2006, *The (un)happy planet index* report provides a very different way to look at the wealth and poverty of nations. The index – known as HPI – is a completely new metric that measures the ecological efficiency with which, country by country, people achieve long and happy lives. We released the second report in the series, *The European (un)happy planet index*, in July 2007 and a second global index in July 2009. www.happyplanetindex.org
- **National accounts of wellbeing.** The report *National accounts of wellbeing: bringing real wealth onto the balance sheet* presents a radical new way of assessing national progress to guide the direction of modern societies and the lives of the people who live in them. Launched in January 2009 with an accompanying website www.nationalaccounts.org, it calls for national governments to measure people's experiences, feelings and perceptions of how their lives are going and to do so on a regular, systematic basis.
- **Five ways to wellbeing.** In 2008, the Centre for Well-being was commissioned by the government's Foresight Project to review the inter-disciplinary work of more than 400 scientists from across the world. The aim was to identify a set of evidence-based actions to improve wellbeing, which individuals would be encouraged to build into their daily lives. *Five ways to wellbeing: the evidence* sets out our findings and encourages people to connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give. www.neweconomics.org/projects/five-ways-well-being
- **Measuring wellbeing in policy: Issues and applications** was also undertaken on behalf of the government's Foresight Project. The work reviewed different approaches to measuring wellbeing from the perspective of their utility for policy-making, looking at the strengths and limitations of each.
- **Local wellbeing: Can we measure it?** reports on work undertaken for the Audit Commission in collaboration with the Young Foundation, LSE, and the Improvement and Development Agency to explore options for measuring wellbeing at the local authority level. It explores how subjective assessments can be used to complement existing quality of life data at a local level and in doing so aims to support local authorities and their partners in the shift to the new performance assessment framework, Comprehensive Area Assessment.
- **A joint initiative with Action for Children** (formerly NCH) launched its report, *Backing the future*, in September 2009. This work aims to re-shape the way in which the government invests in the future of our society through our children. It demonstrates the long-term cost savings of taking a more preventative approach to investing in children and young people, and involved working collaboratively with young people, service providers, policy makers and politicians throughout. www.neweconomics.org/publications/backing-future
- **Work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)** explored the relationship between sustainable development and wellbeing and looked at the policy implications of the findings. This project was commissioned by Defra as part of government's commitments in the 2005 sustainable development strategy *Securing the future*.
- **Work with the Sustainable Development Commission** reviewed the environmental dimension of children and young people's wellbeing. This involved an evidence-led review, exploring research on the linkages between the environment and physical and psychological wellbeing as well as an analysis of the experiences of nine local authorities in embedding sustainable development in the delivery of services to children and young people. This project was undertaken to help inform the SDC's work on the sustainable development aspects of *Every child matters*.