



PASCAL International Observatory

Briefing Paper 14

Integrating happiness in sustainable learning cities

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Executive Summary

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the enhanced interest in sustainable development, have served to focus interest on how happiness and well-being can be enhanced in communities as important dimensions in good sustainable development. This increased interest has been fuelled by metrics available for most countries through the World Happiness Reports (WHRs) produced every year since 2012. The reports show the high performance of the Scandinavian countries, and the connections between low levels of happiness and poverty and disadvantage. The 2017 World Happiness Report concluded that happiness should be seen “as the proper measure of social progress, and the goal of social progress”.

While the Scandinavian development model with its high happiness levels is attractive, a recent issue of the National Geographic on The Search for Happiness compared Denmark, Singapore, and Costa Rica and showed that happiness can be enhanced in different ways. The 2016 WHR identified six factors driving happiness.

Developments in positive psychology provide guidance on ways to enhance happiness in communities, including observing the distinction between pleasures and gratifications made by Seligman. Gratifications through activities such as volunteering and community collaborative projects should be built into all stages of the lifecycle in learning communities, and are particularly valuable for active ageing.

Happiness and well-being should be explicit objectives in learning city/community development with policies and activities to build purpose and meaning into lives. Building mindful learning cultures in communities should be expressed in personal development, local community action, and in fostering empathy, civic sentiment, and global consciousness.

Linking sustainability with happiness and well-being in communities

The emergence of sustainability as a key objective of development, in the context of the UN SDGs, has raised the question of whether sustainability goes along with enhanced happiness and well-being in communities. Annual World Happiness Reports produced since 2012 now provide metrics to clarify these important development questions.

The economist Jeffrey Sachs has commented on the relationships in the following terms.

While the language of the 2030 Agenda is about goals, timelines, human rights and sovereign responsibilities, the agenda clearly embodies an implicit theory of human well-being, specifically that well-being will be fostered by a holistic agenda of economic, social, and environmental objectives, rather than a narrow agenda of economic growth alone. (Sachs, 2016:4).

This assertion that connects a theory of human well-being with a holistic approach to development, as in the UN 2030 Agenda, raises a spectrum of important issues for work on learning cities. The holistic approach to learning cities which has been developed by PASCAL in its work on [EcCoWell](#), has been taken further in the EcCoWell 2 concept which adds happiness to the original EcCoWell dimensions. The EcCoWell 2 experience will be significant in confirming whether a holistic approach to learning city development brings benefits in enhanced happiness and well-being.

The 2017 World Happiness Report took this analysis further and asserted that happiness should be seen “as the proper measure of social progress, and the goal of social progress” (World Happiness Report 2017:3). This question should be examined in future work on learning cities so as to clarify the position of happiness and well-being in sustainable development.

Some implications of recent work

Evidence from annual World Happiness Reports since 2012, associated with the UN SDGs, has enhanced interest in happiness and well-being as important factors in sustainable development. The metrics in these reports are available for more than 150 countries, supplemented by chapters on selected subjects such as the chapters on China and Africa in the 2017 WHR.

There are a number of implications that appear consistently in these reports.

- The Scandinavian countries include 5 of the 10 best performing countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland).
- The poorest countries are among the least happy countries, adding the inequality of happiness to the growing list of inequality concerns.

The authors of the 2016 Report concluded that three quarters of human happiness is driven by 6 factors: strong economic growth, healthy life expectancy, quality social relationships, generosity, trust, and freedom to live the life that is right for you.

The availability of the analysis and data in these reports has encouraged a number of publications drawing on this information. An issue of the National Geographic in November 2017 compared happiness in Denmark, Singapore, and Costa Rica, showing that it is possible to enhance happiness in different ways.

- Denmark illustrates the typical Scandinavian approach to social democracy with concepts such as *lagom*, and strong lifelong learning, building a culture and society that protects individuals from unhappiness.
- Singapore illustrates the impact of a strong strategic approach to economic, social, and environmental development sustained over time by leadership.
- Costa Rica shows a different approach to happiness in a Latin American context in a country that encourages a balanced approach to life and work with joy, health, faith, and family central.

Each of these examples shows high levels of trust and quality social relationships. The Scandinavian approach is well illustrated by the Swedish concept of *lagom* (everything in moderation) which “awakens our consciousness and implores us to keep asking questions. It wants us to live with intention and an inquisitive mindfulness that keeps examining our actions, keeps improving our lifestyles, keeps protecting what we cherish” (Akerstrom, 2017: 162).

The Swedish approach to *lagom* is enhanced in some ideas built into the 2017 *UNESCO Cork Call to Action* for learning cities, which is also directed at building a mindful learning culture.

We aspire to build mindful learning cultures in our cities that foster global consciousness and citizenship through local action to implement the SDGs (UIL, 2017).

In addition to the WHR, there is considerable interest in the Gross National Happiness Index developed by the Kingdom of Bhutan, together with the happiness targets for the country. This composite index covers four pillars and nine domains. A report by the Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research on the 2015 national survey on the index reported progress since 2010 with 91.2% of Bhutanese “narrowly, extensively, or deeply happy” (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2015). Bhutan, like EcCoWell 2, adopts a holistic approach to happiness, so that there will be value in keeping in touch with Bhutan’s progress

Recent developments in positive psychology also have value in orienting learning cities to ways of enhancing happiness and well-being in their communities. Seligman makes a useful distinction between pleasures and gratifications.

- *Pleasures are the bodily pleasures that come through the senses and are momentary in time.*
- *Gratifications, on the other hand, engage us fully so that we become immersed and absorbed in them. They give meaning to our lives...* (Seligman, 2002: 102-113)

This is an important distinction for learning cities and communities. While pleasures can have a useful role in building happiness into learning cities, e.g. through cultural festivals, gratifications in such activities as volunteering for worthy causes bring a more lasting sense of happiness and well-being and add meaning to lives. Gratifications are particularly important in active ageing strategies.

Ways of building meaning into people’s lives in all stages of the lifecycle is a central challenge for learning cities in enhancing happiness. A useful recent book by Emily Smith on *The Power of Meaning* identifies four pillars of meaning: belonging, purpose, storytelling, and transcendence (Smith, 2017: 41). While belonging and purpose are well known in community building, storytelling and transcendence when well used can take initiatives to a new level.

Happiness has been added to the dimensions of the EcCoWell 2 concept. This will require considerable innovation and development to find good ways of progressing happiness in different contexts.

Sachs in the *2016 World Happiness Report* explores the connection between happiness and sustainable development asserting that a holistic approach to sustainability, while recognising that the causes of human well-being are complex, is most likely to be the path to sustainable happiness (Sachs, 2016: 2-3).

Implications for policy and practice

The increased significance of happiness and well-being in the context of sustainable development objectives has a range of implications for learning city policy and practice.

- Happiness should be an explicit objective in learning city development drawing on insights from the World Happiness Reports and positive psychology and related disciplines.
- Such strategies should recognise the value of gratifications for well-being in all stages of the life cycle with active ageing recognised as a priority.
- Learning cities should aim to bring a sense of purpose and meaning into peoples’ lives with collaborative community projects having a particular value.
- The mounting evidence on happiness and well-being points to the value of local community action, such as learning neighbourhood initiatives, in bringing a sense of belonging and purpose to lives.
- Research is showing the importance of place in fostering happiness and well-being: this should be a key objective in learning city planning.
- Learning cities should aim to build a mindful learning culture that combines personal development and local action with fostering empathy and global consciousness.

Recommended action

- Learning city initiatives should have regard to the policy implications listed above in enhancing happiness and well-being in their communities.
- PASCAL should collaborate with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in monitoring the significance of happiness and well-being in EcCoWell 2 and in implementation of the Cork Call to Action.

Key sources

World Happiness Report 2016. Retrieved 12 November 2017 from <http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016>

Chap 2 The social foundations of world happiness.

Chap 4 Sachs, J. Happiness and sustainable development: concepts and evidence.

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Chap 1 Overview

Chap 3 Growth and happiness in China

Chap 4 Working for happiness in Africa

Chap 5 The key determinants of happiness and meaning.

Akerstrom, L. (2017) *Lagon*. London: Headline Publishing Group.

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The PASCAL International Observatory can help promote and validate innovative solutions. Experts in our Learning Cities Network can:

- *Address university leaders at the Vice-Chancellor level, city leaders including mayors, the administrators who do things, and policy-makers at regional and national level.*
- *Reach the development and philanthropic sectors by producing a stand-alone report and an active web site.*
- *Inform and engage local business leaders who can help define educational and skill needs and promote entrepreneurship especially among young people.*
- *Identify research priorities for foundations and national research councils.*

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