

# The Politics of Happiness – A Manifesto

## Towards the futures of one Earth

English version – a draft

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# Foreword

**Dear reader, at the present time the people on this planet consume** natural resources at a rate that exceeds the Earth's carrying capacity by 50 %. In other words, we are creating an ecological deficit that will be borne by future generations.

Ensuring the preconditions for life and well-being must be a key goal in society. Economic growth has been used as a means of improving well-being, but now growth based on excessive consumption is quickly becoming an obstacle to well-being rather than an engine for its creation.

In order to ensure that the Earth can sustain life in the future, we have to re-evaluate what we consume and how these goods are produced. The key question, however, remains this: Why do we consume? Does the growing consumption of natural resources truly produce well-being and happiness?

WWF believes that a sustainable lifestyle that is in line with the capacity of this one planet is possible without having to compromise on well-being. Well-being can increase as we adapt our economic activity to match the Earth's capacity. This requires support for new environmental innovations, shifting to production methods that are based on recycling and reusing raw materials and focusing consumption on services rather than physical goods.

Happiness and well-being have become objects of increasing interest from researchers. On the basis of recent studies, WWF believes that reassessing priorities to emphasise well-being rather than the consumption of physical goods offers an excellent way to reduce our ecological footprint. WWF Finland asked Demos Helsinki to build on this idea. How can society support the improvement of its citizens' well-being? "The Politics of Happiness – A Manifesto" is based on this collaborative effort and presents a positive message. Who would not want to ensure the happiness of people and the well-being of Earth?

WWF hopes that this manifesto will give impetus to a process in which political decision-makers and people at large will reflect upon the direction in which we wish to develop.

**Liisa Rohweder**  
Secretary General  
WWF Finland

## How does WWF define well-being?

**WWF strives for a world** in which everyone has a high level of well-being and we can enjoy healthy and happy lives while using only our fair share of our planet's resources. WWF defines well-being in accordance with the UN Millennium Ecosystem Approach. Human well-being depends on a number of factors: basic material needs, the freedom to engage in meaningful activity, the freedom of choice, health, good social relationships and safety. The eradication of poverty is also essential to the objectives of environmental preservation. Improving quality of life and well-being is a way to put a stop to the dwindling of natural resources.

Human well-being and the well-being of the environment are closely interdependent. The diversity of nature forms ecosystems that offer ecosystem services. These include nutrient cycling, soil formation, climate regulation and the production of natural resources such as food, potable water and raw materials. Ecosystem services also comprise cultural services such as beauty, spirituality and free time. Together they make life on our planet possible.

Human activity causes both direct and indirect changes to ecosystems. Due to the interdependent nature of the relationship, these changes affect human well-being. Human activity also has an impact on other species and on ecosystems in their entirety. The well-being of people and the planet is dependent on the well-being of ecosystems. We have reached a point at which increasing raw material intensive consumption no longer produces well-being in the Western world. On the contrary, it endangers the well-being of ecosystems, people, other species and our future generations.

# Introduction:

## The time for politics of happiness

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." – United States Declaration of Independence, 1776

Every one of us is in pursuit of a happier life.

A growing number of studies have been carried out in recent years on the subject of happiness. The research indicates that we are incredibly ill-equipped to assess what would truly make us happier<sup>1</sup>. We generally try to build happiness through short-term fixes such as picking up a greasy pastry at the supermarket or working longer days in the hope of earning more money. We reach out for short-term pleasures because we simply cannot perceive the long-term consequences of our actions<sup>2</sup>. It is difficult for us to intuitively assess how various changes impact our happiness.

In the meanwhile, social and human sciences are once again thriving: relevant, experimental and practical research gives us more insight into happiness than ever before. The studies highlight two fundamental observations on human nature. The first is that we are social creatures who create meaning for ourselves through comparisons with others. The second is that we adapt to changes incredibly quickly.<sup>3</sup>

Our genetic traits determine one half of our level of happiness. Even those who have been "dealt a poor hand" in terms of genetics can be happy, but it requires more effort. The other half of the factors influencing happiness are primarily made up of actions, with very little significance given to prevailing circumstances such as income level, having children or not having children, the products we consume, or our marital status.<sup>4</sup> If we operate in meaningful

communities we can be ill, divorced, childless and poor and still be happy. Similarly, a healthy member of a wealthy nuclear family can be unhappy. The politics of happiness can influence the extent to which we all have opportunities for meaningful activity.

In light of these findings it is no wonder that the trend of increasing happiness has levelled off. The growth in material well-being has not, for several decades, made the citizens of any Western country happier<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, politics are still focused on increasing income levels. We are victims of a collective syndrome of "just a little bit more and then...". It is a view that prevails despite the fact that the relationship between wealth and happiness is an illusion in today's world.

Happiness is not only the only objective with intrinsic value, but also what we genuinely desire. The majority of people value happiness more than wealth<sup>6</sup>. In a democratic society this should influence politics. Under conditions of relative poverty, eliminating material shortages contributed to increasing happiness. In that era, economic growth was indeed the politics of happiness. In wealthy modern societies such a direct route to happiness does not, unfortunately, exist. The end and the means have become mixed up.

[1] Kahneman & Thaler 2006

[2] Gilbert 2006

[3] Lyubomirsky 2009

[4] Lyubomirsky 2009

[5] Bacon et al. 2010

[6] Halpern 2010

For the time being, Finland has – largely due to the welfare state's foundation of strong social policy – been ranked highly in international studies measuring subjective happiness<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, new challenges call for new mechanisms. The politics of happiness is about developing these mechanisms and making optimal use of them.

In addition to the decoupling of gross national product and happiness, increased understanding of climate change and diminishing natural resources has forced us to reassess the manner in which we grow our wealth. Economic growth leads to increases in greenhouse gas emissions and the consumption of

natural resources. Studies such as the WWF Living Planet Report (2008) indicate that we are increasing our wealth in an unsustainable manner. Trends in economic growth and the total consumption of natural resources have closely followed each other everywhere in the world throughout human history. This means we are living in times of absurdity. We are taking out an ecological debt and destroying future well-being without contributing to our present happiness.

Politics is about the collective consequences of our actions. We must be able to participate in building the common good in the best possible way and to receive the best possible support for satisfying our needs. Current politics are more focused on minimising misery than increasing happiness. Better politics would guide individuals towards actions that benefit the community as a whole – towards building shared happiness. In the end, no individual's well-being is independent of the well-being of others.

[7] Bacon et al. 2010; Bok 2010; New Economics Foundation 2009

From the perspective of happiness, the four-year time span of politics is too short. Achieving genuine social change takes more time. The achievement of significant changes – such as past efforts in building the welfare state and getting women involved in working life – takes decades of determined collaboration between politicians and citizens. These days there are representatives of tax-payers, consumers, minorities, interest groups, citizens, farmers, the labour market and industrial sectors on every council and committee, but future generations and the creation of new jobs have no representation whatsoever. We have bypassed the issues of the ecological costs of our activities and the need to give due consideration to future interests.

The politics of happiness is a new political approach for those who believe that the political arena must assume a new course to build a happier life. Our current social model is not able to produce a happy future for generations to come.

Politics cannot directly make us happy. Nevertheless, it can make the pursuit of happiness possible, or even easy. Society at present is an obstacle course on the way to happiness, one complicated enough to make even the most capable seekers of happiness lose their way.

With increased knowledge from scientific research, the pursuit of happiness should be easier than before. This manifesto describes how a less hectic rhythm, participation, meaningful shared activity, the creation of a new culture of well-being and the creation of deeper human relationships can make the achievement of happiness both possible and fair.

## Values behind the politics of happiness

1. The politics of happiness is the politics of One Earth. We are using natural resources excessively and we know this cannot continue.
2. The politics of happiness is a cross-generational approach. It differs from current politics where the focus is on striving for short-term welfare through economic growth.
3. Time, communities and meaningfulness are vital resources. The politics of happiness questions the position of economic growth as the ultimate goal of our society.
4. Sustainable happiness is based on shared experiences. Responsibility for society is only possible through joint experiences. Sharing responsibility is the objective of politics.
5. The politics of happiness relies on scientific data. It can help bridge the gap between research results and politics.

# Better free time!

**Someone has made the choice for us.** Significant growth in productivity has resulted in higher wages rather than shorter working hours<sup>8</sup>. This is based on the well-intentioned idea that wealth makes us happy.

This assumption is only partly true. Cross-sectional studies indicate that the link between increasing wealth and happiness in Western countries diminishes in importance at an income level that is considerably below the average income<sup>9</sup>. The lack of time is considered a greater burden than the lack of money: higher incomes and longer working hours increase work-related stress, the sense of not having enough time and perceived class differences<sup>10</sup>. Politics that aim to increase income are not only a factor restricting happiness, but also unsustainable from the perspective of natural resources.

In a world that revolves around work and income, the consumption race has no finish line. Striving for happiness through increased capacity to consume is like urinating in one's trousers on a cold winter day: it only provides a fleeting moment of warmth. The pressure to increase our capacity to consume even dominates our free time, which is spent buying things. Productivity increases and we fill our homes with purchases that provide only momentary joy. Our lives are divided between work and free-time, or making money and then spending the money we have made. There is no room for genuine free time.

[8] Soininvaara 2007

[9] Bacon et al. 2010

[10] Schiffrin & Nelson 2008

The cause of this manic behaviour lies in our social nature. We respect high status, admire successful people and create our self image through comparisons with others. While we may not be able to stop comparing ourselves to others, we can at least strive to reassess the way we EVALUATE status and success.

## Becoming less busy pays dividends to the environment

**The thought of a slower and more relaxed** rhythm of life attracts an increasing number of people. Part-time pension arrangements, job-alternation leave,

career changes, the International Slow Movement, the increased birth rates in highest life quality countries, such as Finland and Sweden. The increase in the significance of free time and the reduced perceived meaningfulness of work are part of this cultural megatrend. They speak of our desire to seek happiness through an alternative rhythm of life. The promise of life lived on the terms of something other than work is seen as attractive.

The politics of happiness challenge our conceptualisation of time. Valuing work and supporting working are transforming towards valuing public activity. The right and obligation to act on the world outside of the home become as important as the traditional right and obligation to work.

The change begins from a new approach to time. When pressed for time, we often make poor decisions regarding food, clothing and housing, as well as happiness<sup>11</sup>. Global natural resources are becoming scarce and we can no longer afford bad decisions with far-reaching consequences. Reducing time pressure is good for both our planet and for us. We must encourage each other to engage in meaningful activity instead of focusing solely on working as hard as possible.

The politics of happiness is not only a matter of balancing work and free time, and initiatives such as the four-day work week or civic salary do not automatically resolve the problems we have regarding our use of time. People are often performance-oriented even in their free time<sup>12</sup>. Our free time is also diminished by growing distances between home, the workplace and services, not to mention the ecological effects of increasing distances. Free time easily becomes subordinated to work and is spent on recharging one's battery. Separating work and free time is difficult: work follows us home, while at work we use social media to stay in touch with friends outside work. We work during free time and do free time activities at work.

Current politics are focused on working hours and extending working life, despite the fact that retirement at a later age does not create new jobs or solve the problem of structural change in working life. The length of working life is not extended if people become fatigued at work. It is more important to focus on how retirees can spend their free time in a meaningful way and how production can be organised when work is not perceived as meaningful. In addition to youth unemployment we should be discussing how adults cope with

work and the problem of inactivity among retirees, which is the real pensions crisis.

[11] Halpern 2010

[12] Vehmas 2010

## The right amount of time

**Time is a unique resource:** it cannot be stored. We all have it, but most of us have too little of it. We say that it's important to be able to make one's own decisions concerning how to use our free time. The significance of free time has grown in the past two decades<sup>13</sup>. At the same time, the issue of free time is paradoxical. For a busy person, free time may be the key to happiness, but happiness can equally easily be lost in not having anything to do. For a person who is lonely, time can become a problem. The negative effect of unemployment on happiness has more to do with the lack of work than the reduction in income<sup>14</sup>.

[13] Liikkanen et al. 2005

[14] Clark et al. 2001

## Work and free time can easily become limited to making money and spending money.

Productivity in developed industrial countries has exceeded our ability to consume. This has us stuck on a revolving wheel of consumption and work. As far back as in the 1920s production equipment and corporations reached a point of efficiency where not everything that was produced could be sold and money was left lying in people's accounts. We now consume to ensure that there is more work for us to do, thereby wasting not only natural resources but also an inordinate amount of time and effort.

Social dialogue easily pigeonholes people into those who are successful and those who live off others, when in fact there are many more options. An increasing number of people are realising that it's possible to lead a rich life without having an assumption of continuously increasing consumption capacity. The mantra of no alternatives is crumbling away.

Changes in the definition of success according to cultural and historical factors are nothing new. The modern-day successful person now has the obligation to

show how happiness can be achieved in ways other than simply working and consuming. This can help make sustainable happiness an admirable status and an exemplary lifestyle.

## Despite increasing wealth, happiness among Finns has not increased since the 1980s.

### Slow down the treadmill of happiness

After a certain point is reached, income levels have little impact on happiness. In Finland this point was reached in the 1980s, whereafter our happiness has not increased. At the same time the national economy and individual incomes have grown at a tremendous rate<sup>16</sup>. What has increased with growing incomes, however, is the level of greenhouse gas emissions. In countries where this has not happened the explanation is simply that emissions have been exported, i.e. production has been shifted to other countries<sup>17</sup>.

There are two primary reasons for the decoupling of happiness and income levels. The first is social comparisons: your neighbour becoming wealthier is experienced as yourself becoming less affluent. Secondly, we adapt faster and better – despite our presumptions – to both positive and negative changes.<sup>18</sup> This explains why even unemployment does not always result in unhappiness. The recession in Finland in the 1990s did not have an impact on happiness despite unemployment figures going from 3% to 17% in a very short time.<sup>19</sup> If we seek success and happiness through wealth, we will never reach our goal. We will simply be running faster and faster while the treadmill of happiness gains speed.

Sweating on this proverbial treadmill is harmful to us in many ways. The exhausting pursuit of personal wealth uses up natural resources, increases stress and occupies time that could otherwise be spent on more activities that provide longer lasting pleasure<sup>20</sup>. We must find a way to slow down the treadmill by shifting our focus from work to active free time. Active free time explains why young people and the aged are happier than average<sup>21</sup>.

[15] World Database of Happiness

[16] Statistics Finland

[17] Watt 2008

[18] Lyubomirsky 2009

[19] Böckerman & Ilmakunnas 2006

[20] Kahneman et al. 2006 [

21] Blanchflower & Oswald 2008

### **Policy recommendations:**

1. Income taxation should be reformed to favour longer holidays instead of additional income.
2. The Government should establish a national time fund to develop a culture of volunteerism along with various incentives for civic activity. The time fund would reward those citizens who participate in civic activities extensively with additional holidays.
3. Consumer goods should be labelled to indicate their expected life cycle. The Consumer Protection Act must guarantee that the actual useful life of consumer goods is known.

## 2. From spaces to meaningful places

Lasting happiness is created through deep experiences and activities. They always take place in a certain space, according to the activity. The shopping centre, park and home all encourage very different activities. In the present time, spaces are characterised by an exact purpose and privacy. A private sauna, a home theatre and a spa bathroom tend to keep people apart instead of bringing them together. The politics of happiness are more focused on unique experiences, pleasant spaces, beautiful living environments, public facilities that invite people to act together, a sense of calm and places that feel like one's own. Access to and equal availability of such facilities are a precondition for a happy society.

The use of space is a highly political issue. It either facilitates or prevents our activities, well-being and happiness. Unique experiences contribute to happiness by providing people with experiences of something greater than them. People who identify objectives beyond their personal interest are happier than others<sup>22</sup>. Uplifting and grand experiences can even bring about permanent change in people. Such grand experiences may be spectacles (the Olympics, parliamentary elections, or the Eurovision Song Contest), aesthetic by nature (the sound of thunder, an involving film, nature, or a sports car) or liberating (the end of an unsatisfactory relationship, the ability to make choices against one's own interest, or feeling the exhilarating sense of speed). These types of experience bring people together and turn spaces into meaningful places.

[22] French & Joseph 1999

### Happy places

We are used to being able to modify the places that are important to us without having to ask for other people's opinions or permission. When we give up that which is shared, the need for self-expression drives us towards a lonely and isolated life. A visit to an average school, health centre or bus station reveals that we are largely unable to create shared spaces that would be perceived by

people as their own. Architecture, spatial planning and city planning fail to consider the notion of shared experiences as a precondition for happiness and drab public and shared spaces fail to support the well-being and satisfaction of the 21st century man.

People want to live according to their dreams. Societal structure is spread out as cities and other spaces of shared life fail to offer the opportunities needed for this. The lack of quality public spaces also results in fewer quality encounters between people. At present, the public space puts us on a collision course with people with whom we have little in common, and residential areas are not planned with well-being and happiness in mind.

The need for expressing oneself and enjoying one's environment calls the ability of professionals responsible for planning, constructing and maintaining our cities into question. Spatial planning that supports happiness must start with a focus on people, experiences and intended use – not on mass, a building or a structure. This new attitude calls for collaboration methods, technology and applications that facilitate agreement on the use of shared space. Dense urban structures provide a foundation for rich services and a vibrant environment. The key challenge is to make living in densely populated areas a positive thing. This requires adaptable yards, housing that supports privacy, rail traffic, peaceful public spaces and child-friendly cities.

In the politics of happiness, public space facilitates the formation of peer groups. The significance of peer groups increases as fewer people have access to positive communities of families, colleagues or friends. In addition to recreational activities and shared interests, peer groups provide a foundation for developing human relationships and a prerequisite for shared activities in an open setting. Without shared activities there is no happiness. Experiential places provide the best possible preconditions for shared activities. This refers to places that are considerably different from the public spaces we have at present. We need a renaissance of public spaces. One must ask questions regarding where people feel content and happy and in what kinds of settings meaningful encounters can happen.

### **From private to public**

Space that is experienced as one's own is private and adaptable. Privacy can be seen as a controlled closing and opening of oneself to interaction with others. Lack

of privacy results in a sense of confinement, while too much privacy tends to isolate. The ways of seeking one's own space range from a walk in nature to driving in a private car. Privacy is also needed in the construction of one's own identity. Striving to create one's own space has led to increased use of energy for transport and heating, resulting in a tremendous increase in the consumption of natural resources. People end up wanting and using twice the amount of space they would need. As cities fail to offer the feeling of having one's own space and an enjoyable environment, we have seen an escape to suburban residential areas and communities of summer homes. It is obvious that some ways of seeking privacy are ecologically more sustainable than others.

The objectives of ecology and happiness are somewhat linked in this aspect as well. Studies indicate that those who spend approximately one hour commuting in their own car must earn almost twice as much as those who walk to work to reach an equal level of happiness<sup>23</sup>. Living close to work reduces the ecological footprint and increases perceived happiness.

Finns have a reputation of being a people that values the ability to make it on one's own. Quiet and shy individuals are considered virtuous in Finland. In the heady years of the past decade there has been a significant increase in the time and investment put into one's home, decorating it and doing chores and other work around the home. The desire to build or expand one's home has often exceeded the level of ability people have for it. We can adjust the atmosphere in the home through individual items and surfaces, but designing a good space is less understood. The more time we spend at home, the more belongings we tend to gather in the home. We need space, our own yard and our own peaceful surroundings due to the fact that public spaces fail to provide a sense of privacy and ownership.

[23] Stutzer & Frey 2008

## **Lack of quality shared spaces leads to a virtual “arms race” between individual homes.**

The general perception of a need for space is directly linked to shared spaces being seen as not sufficiently pleasant, incapable of inviting citizens to meaningful joint activities or the formation of a community. The yards of housing companies have become parking lots and shopping centres make up a

tremendous share of public space. Traditional neighbourhood stores were significantly better able to function as a scene for meaningful encounters. Good shared spaces and services give us personal living space in the same way as square metres of space in our homes do, but they do it more efficiently in terms of the use of natural resources and the contribution they make to happiness.

**Participation and happiness** are inexorably linked. Democracies are happy countries. The modern man requires a deeper level of participation, beyond simply voting in elections, to adapt the spaces he uses and the practices prevalent in society in order to attain happiness<sup>24</sup>. In addition to encouraging participation, urban nature directly contributes to well-being and even health<sup>25</sup>.

The quality of public spaces currently available is perceived as poor and people don't feel the spaces are their own<sup>26</sup>. As shared spaces can't be adapted, we naturally focus on our private space. This is a radical change: the average size of homes has grown since the 1970s, yet the average number of people per household has dropped by a third<sup>27</sup>. Traffic noise also tends to have a negative effect on the quality of spaces and the feeling of privacy. When urban structure is condensed, traffic noise is reduced.

Low population density contributes to unhappiness. The amount of time spent commuting and waiting by people living far from workplaces and services results in a significant reduction in perceived happiness on a daily basis.<sup>28</sup>

[24] Skidmore & Bound 2008

[25] Kytta et al. 2009; Lappi 2007

[26] Karisto 2004

[27] Statistics Finland 2008

[28] Halpern 2010; Stutzer & Frey 2008

**We have the right to adapt our living environment. It makes us happy.**

**Policy recommendations:**

1. Urban planning must be user-focused. The initiative in developing the urban environment must be shifted to the users, i.e. the residents. The residents' involvement must be a part of the planning and implementation of both existing and new spaces from the very early stages.
2. The degree of use of schools, municipal agencies and libraries must be increased by opening them up for broader use. These spaces, which are produced by public funding, must be made into shared spaces for the community by expanding on their user base and the times during which the facilities can be booked, rented and borrowed.
3. Designers to the fore! The name of the designer of each building, both public and private, should be prominently displayed on site. Furthermore, neighborhood resident panels need to be established in order to recognise and reward urban planners for creating positive spaces.

# 3. Doing meaningful things together

The happiest moments in life are often related to doing meaningful things together. Working towards a shared goal with others is a source of healthy confidence and belief in one's own ability to influence things. We have a need for self-actualisation as part of a meaningful and greater whole. We are happy when we get to participate in building our own – as well as shared – well-being<sup>29</sup>. According to studies, the presence of opportunities for democratic participation – regardless of the extent to which they are actually pursued – increase our level of happiness<sup>30</sup>. We also know that loneliness and a sense of isolation radically diminish the preconditions for our happiness<sup>31</sup>.

In the politics of happiness, the experiences of doing meaningful things together are created on a broad basis in different aspects of life. Traditionally, the sense of being a useful and productive person has stemmed from employment and work around the home. In addition to this, there is a strong tradition of voluntary community work and organisational activities. We want to feel useful and significant to the communities and organisations we perceive as important, regardless of whether we get paid. Until now, doing things together has included paid employment, recreational pleasures or civic activities in support of things perceived as important. In the politics of happiness these are seen as essential psychological phenomena that contribute to increased happiness.

[29] Bacon et al. 2010

[30] Frey & Stutzer 2000

[31] Lyubomirsky 2009

## The beat to which recreational Finland moves

While citizens have faith in democracy as the best possible system for society, confidence in politics and one's own ability to influence matters are diminishing<sup>32</sup>. This also has a negative impact on happiness<sup>33</sup>. At the same

time, interest in voting and confidence in the expertise of officials are becoming weaker. One reason for this crisis is the trend of professionalisation of politics and institutions and a sense of growing distance between them and civic activity. Restoring confidence in politics requires that politics once again begin from people doing things together.

Society has traditionally supported doing things together by supporting employment among citizens. The focus has been on ensuring that people are given the ability to work and stay at work. In the future this will no longer be sufficient, as fewer people will participate in paid work. In terms of the traditional classification of how people spend their time, we are already seeing a shift towards a Finland where free time is more significant than ever. The growing number of retirees in itself challenges us to find ways to support civic activity and other forms of people doing things together.

Not all those who are of working age and have the ability to work find sufficient experiences of success in their jobs. As such, it is important to offer a diverse range of activities that people can do together. In today's world the unfortunate ones are no longer necessarily the people who are struggling financially, but rather the people who have few opportunities and skills for doing things together with others. Education should focus on developing these skills as well as building lasting happiness.

In a good society, both schools and workplaces encourage people to engage in organisational activities, helping around in their neighbourhoods, community care programmes and other activities with their peers. A great deal of valuable work would not be done if it were not for people doing things together voluntarily. This is the engine that keeps things like children's sporting activities, Wikipedia and peer support services for the chronically ill running.

The significance of activities with peers will grow in terms of both the individual and society. There are more and more things that cannot be produced through publicly funded service provision – they are either too expensive or inefficient to produce professionally and often fail to accomplish the desired individual result. Instead, public institutions could support citizens' participation in activities with their peers. Finding ways to provide this support is one of the major challenges facing the politics of happiness.

[32] Kuusela & Rönkkö 2008

## Everyone is able to help others

We have been under the impression that social development refers to everything becoming professionalised and people doing things together becoming replaced by paid services. At the same time we are concerned about weakening trust between citizens. To many, life feels like a completely meaningless and lonely race.

Remedying the situation requires that we value doing things together through actions: participating in voluntary work with neighbours to clean up common areas, coaching children's sports or helping prepare the catering for a party. The best way to begin this type of participation is identifying one's own skills and abilities and finding a way to put them to use in doing things together and for the common good. Everyone has the ability to do something that helps others. By putting our skills to use and teaching them to others we can make ourselves feel needed. Research shows that this increases happiness.<sup>34</sup>

Participating in common activities, such as maintaining or improving the living environment, one can make the environment feel more like one's own. By making a personal contribution to improving the environment, people get the opportunity to share their experiences and connect the shared space with personal meanings. This also serves to make people feel more responsible for their living environment.

We all have an obligation to participate in creating new ways of participating and doing. If traditional ways are not sufficiently attractive, new ways must be developed. The opportunities for doing can change when we spend more time on things that make us feel useful and happy. Change begins from understanding that doing things together is an essential building block for sustainable happiness. This can help us learn the skill of spending free-time together. [34] Post 2005

## Society must support all ways of working and acting together, not only paid employment.

### The carbon footprint of one euro

[Carbon intensity: kg CO<sub>2</sub> eq / \$]

kg CO<sub>2</sub> eq

Towards services!

Electricity Driving a car A meat dish Housing: (maintenance charges) (rents)  
Education Culture Hospital services

€ bn

Source: The Envimat and euro's carbon footprint projects; [www.ymparisto.fi/syke/envimat](http://www.ymparisto.fi/syke/envimat); Suomen ympäristö 20/2009.

**Work is perceived as less meaningful and rewarding despite the quality of work improving.**

How we spend our money and time has drastic effects on happiness and the environment. As a rule, money spent on health, sports, learning, culture and human-centred services related to doing things together pollutes and consumes energy the least<sup>35</sup>. Doing and experiencing things together increase the extent to which activities are enjoyed. To the level that those engaged in team sports have a significantly higher level of endorphins than those doing solo sports<sup>36</sup>.

Working is not a guaranteed route to happiness. For one thing, people in full-time salaried employment are already a minority in the Finnish population, as will soon be the case in most of the world. In addition, ever since the early 1990s, Finns have perceived work as less and less meaningful and rewarding, despite the fact that opportunities to influence matters and improvements in equality have resulted in the quality of work improving<sup>37</sup>. Therefore, even now the majority of us finds pleasurable activities on a daily basis outside of work<sup>38</sup>. As such, it is no wonder that participating in voluntary organisations is a greater contributor to happiness than wealth<sup>39</sup>. [35] Seppälä et al. 2009 [36] Cohen et al. 2010 [37] Ministry of Employment and the Economy 2008 [38] Kahneman et al. 2004 [39] Helliwell & Putnam 2005

## Policy recommendations:

1. Education should involve more practices that support doing things together. Organisational activity and other forms of doing things together must be included in all existing curricula. At present, the school system barely teaches these skills at all. In addition to behaving properly and being quiet, students must be taught the skill of giving and receiving feedback.
2. Introduce municipal academies for officers and operate them in conjunction with universities. In the future, public sector professions should not be categorised into profession-specific tasks such as teachers, nurses and police officers. The municipal officer is, above all, a person who facilitates the resolution of difficult and systemic problems. The key objective of a municipal academy is to have officers adopt this broader view of their role.
3. The national defence forces should gradually be transformed into a civic camp for everyone. Civic service would be short in duration but recurring. It would inform citizens on which civic needs are the most urgent at any given time and what forms of civic activity exist for resolving the identified needs. The purpose of the civic camp is to improve skills, produce new functional groups and bring people of different demographics together.

# 4. The culture of well-being

Good health gives a person the opportunity for a long and enjoyable life. Being free of human suffering caused by pain, distress and fear creates a foundation for happiness. We adapt quickly to many types of changes in health, even significant ones, but the negative effect of problems such as chronic pain, sleep disorders and mental health issues on happiness is undisputed<sup>40</sup>. A restless night has a significantly greater impact on our happiness the following day than the amount of money in one's pocket in the morning does<sup>41</sup>. What is interesting is that the same things contribute to both health and happiness. A person's ability to be the master of their own life and actively guide and adapt lies in the core of both. Good health has also an extended effect due to the fact that a healthy person is able to assess the impacts of his actions beyond his own immediate sphere of influence.

Healthcare constitutes a major national expense in the Finnish economy, using up a significant proportion of the society's resources. Paying for healthcare maintains the present culture of work and consumption that is based on consuming natural resources. The money we spend on healthcare does not, however, return directly to tax payers in the form of longer lives, healthy years of life or happiness. Investing in personal counselling and the prevention of illness, on the other hand, produces both well-being benefits and economic savings, according to research<sup>42</sup>. We also know that a pleasant, healthy and thriving environment contributes to the prevention of illness. A clean environment and experiences of nature have been shown to promote overall health and happiness<sup>43</sup>.

[40] Bok 2010 [

41] Kahneman & Riis 2005

## Preventive communities

In Finland, a great deal of money is spent on healthcare. Despite this, the health impacts of other political decisions are barely assessed. A more comprehensive and systematic approach to understanding the mechanisms behind health and illness would most likely reduce the amount of resources spent on healthcare as well as the problem of diminished happiness due to illness.

In a society built around the politics of happiness the objective is to create a new culture of well-being. This means supporting and guiding people, both mentally and physically, to adopt healthy lifestyles. The new culture of well-being is built through strengthening the communities and organisations that seem to have a key role in preventing and treating illness. Therefore we need a new division of responsibilities between professionals and laymen.

We need to ask: What is the patient's own contribution to getting better and what can the professionals do? How can the significance of the patient's immediate circle of people in promoting health be emphasised more? In addition to giving a prescription to engage in physical exercise, a preventative doctor should give a prescription to strengthen existing communities or find new communities that have an essential role in treating the patient's medical condition.

The science of medicine is largely specialised, so its sometimes difficult people are not yet seen as psychophysical entities. According to research we are able to define the relationship between our health and our happiness to a greater extent than our doctors<sup>44</sup>. This indicates that health – like happiness – cannot be defined by an external evaluation. Medicine must pursue the formation of a more holistic human view. It seems more and more a fact that the mind and the body are not separated from one another, we just think they are by intuition.

Furthermore, our mental and physical health should not be discussed separately from society and politics. The prevalence of mental health disorders is a clear example of the misery that modern society can produce. Mental health problems such as stress and depression can incapacitate a person, the effect of which can be felt through human relationships in society at large. Overcoming mental health disorders is often beyond an individual's personal capabilities. Therefore, their treatment and prevention is dependent on relevant change in

both society and politics. Politics are based on happiness research is one solution to creating a society that better promotes mental and physical well-being.

[42] Martuzzi & Tickner 2005

[43] New Economics Foundation 2005

[44] Okun & George 1984

**Health – from talk to culture** Health is a social matter that unifies people. Like the weather, it is one of the most common topics of discussion when Finns meet each other. Communities define what kind of life is perceived as normal and routine. One cannot simply give health to another, nor can one fully build one's own health. As such, health should not be seen as a matter that is centred on the individual. The individual can, however, contribute to the creation of a culture of health and well-being and support others in making better choices in terms of their consequences on happiness.

Focusing on routines is of primary importance. Changing routines and habits is an essential phase in improving happiness<sup>45</sup>. This can only be accomplished if our habits become visible from the perspective of health. The individual always needs to be informed and willing to take action, as there is no universal solution to health. Even when a treatment plan devised by a professional exists, improvement of health requires the individual to assume an active role. This can be, for example, commuting to work as an opportunity for physical exercise, or being conscious of a healthier diet when grocery shopping. Spurring oneself to action may require purchasing equipment to boost motivation or getting a personal treatment plan – something to make the learning of new habits and routines possible.

[45] Lyubomirsky 2009

**A restless night has a significantly greater impact on our happiness the following day than how much money we have in our pocket in the morning. Healthcare costs are increasing while well-being is not.**

The money spent on healthcare is not in proportion to health and well-being<sup>46</sup>. Additional investments in healthcare no longer increase life expectancy<sup>47</sup>. A similar lack of a causal relationship can be seen between investments in healthcare and happiness<sup>48</sup>. Despite all this, healthcare costs continue to rise. Studies indicate that experienced health correlates with social equality and confidence<sup>50</sup>. For instance, there is a correlation between an uneven income level and the prevalence of various psychological disorders<sup>51</sup>.

The majority of resources invested in healthcare are directed at treating illnesses rather than preventing them. This is despite the fact that prevention is the most cost-effective method of improving our health<sup>52</sup> and an effective way to boost happiness<sup>53</sup>. According to estimates by the World Health Organisation, in 2020 depression will be the second most significant illness globally in terms of reducing the number of healthy years of life<sup>54</sup>. In Finland, special attention must be paid not only to mental health disorders, but also to lifestyle illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, alcoholism and diabetes. The measures that help in their prevention – such as engaging in physical exercise and eating a diet rich in vegetables – are often also choices that are good for the environment.

[46] Bok 2010

[47] OECD 2009

[48] Veenhoven 2000

[49] National Institute for Health and Welfare

[50] Wilkinson & Pickett 2010

[51] Pickett et al. 2006

[52] Puska

[53] Halpern 2010; Bacon 2010

[54] WHO

## Policy recommendations:

1. Choice architecture should be included as a tool in politics. The traditional notion of “public enlightenment” should be replaced by facilitating the making of sensible choices and offering them to people. The public sector should recognise that in addition to controlling prices, societal norms and information, there are numerous other means of control and guidance available. For instance, sustainable and healthy nutritional choices can be facilitated by placing meat pastries at the far end of the counter, and better choices right in the beginning of the cafeteria lunch line.
2. Company bicycle benefits with zero taxable value for all public sector employees. Policies related to company car benefits should be tightened, accepting only work-related travel.
3. Healthcare policy should span different sectors of politics and emphasise quality of life. The amount of medical treatment given strictly to extend life should be questioned. Every adult citizen should be encouraged to make a living will.

# 5. Friends, neighbours and family

One of the most radical changes in the 20th century was the "liberation" of people from mandatory institutions and the shift towards human relationships based on choice: from the traditional concept of family to the serial family and being single and from the immediate community in one's physical vicinity to communities formed around recreational activities and work. The significance of the family as a defining force in the individual's life has weakened in the past decades, but close human relationships are increasingly valued and appreciated. There is even talk of "neofamilism". Close human relationships and the formation of communities help raise people's sense of security and boost social capital, which is the most resilient of all forms of capital and has a greater impact on happiness than economic capital<sup>55</sup>.

Recent studies indicate that exclusion is closely linked to loneliness: lonely individuals tend to be more prone to developing mental health disorders, exposure to health risks and financial difficulties. Loneliness is the lack of opportunities to do things with others. The factors contributing to loneliness include the increased number of people living on their own, working life becoming harsher, marriages becoming shorter and the family model being largely restricted to the nuclear family. Loneliness tends to be a particular burden on the unemployed and the aged<sup>56</sup>.

Every human culture believes that children bring happiness. However, measuring the effect children have on happiness suggests a different story. Couples are at their happiest before they have their first child<sup>57</sup> and again when the last of their children moves out from the family home<sup>58</sup>. This applies especially to women<sup>59</sup>. Studies indicate that women feel happier when eating, exercising, shopping, taking a nap or watching a television than when caring for their children<sup>60</sup>.

The question is not about children, but rather the nuclear family model. In modern society, children do not add to meaningful human relationships, but

instead can isolate the family from the rest of society, confining it to the workplace and home. Nevertheless, providing support for meaningful, quality human relationships – such as the family and close friends – is largely justified by research on happiness<sup>61</sup>. A broken family background is often transferred from one generation to the next, makes access to other communities more difficult and erodes trust in the durability of human relationships. Therefore, it is common for the less fortunate to drift out of the reach of meaningful human relationships.

[55] Bok 2010

[56] Moisio & Rämö 2007

[57] Walker 1977

## Down with loneliness!

**Removing the structures of loneliness** is a key challenge for the politics of happiness, much in the same way as removing the class structures was in the 20th century. With increasing wealth, population density in urban settings has decreased and services are now a greater distance from the home than before.

[58] Myers 1992

[59] Feeney 1994

[60] Kahneman et al. 2004

[61] Lyubomirsky 2009

The significance of neighbours has practically been completely lost in many cases.

Finnish housing policy has been focused on supporting the life of the nuclear family. Restrictions on energy and natural resources challenge the idea that a single family house such as those built in the early 2000s, located far from services, jobs and neighbours, could be sustainable. The impact on well-being must be examined from a broader perspective than just focusing on the nuclear family's need for space – for the sake of both happiness and the consumption of natural resources. The risk of exclusion related to loneliness cannot be reduced simply through family policy, although more broad-based provision of marriage counselling and couples therapy could improve the happiness of many people.

The Finland of the future must increasingly focus on how nearby communities, circles of friends and various peer communities can be used to strengthen the safety net perceived by individuals and families. An important element in this is the planning of city districts, villages, city blocks and housing concepts. They can be used to encourage people to interact with others more extensively. Complementing existing residential areas by adding services that are close to their users can optimally create a kind of a heart for the community, a place for encounters between people residing in the same area. The objective is not simply to bring together different social classes and increase mobility between them, but also the concrete goal of preventing exclusion among individuals.

Living arrangements for older people is another important issue. Older people are the most prone to being lonely. Residential communities and various forms of intergenerational living can help to prevent people from being left alone. Solutions can be developed by allocating support and subsidies to experimental housing arrangements, by offering planning and counselling assistance as part of public services and by making complementary construction in existing residential areas easier. Public services and other institutional structures are rarely developed to bring people together. Could the school building house municipal offices, should the national defence forces be replaced by civic service or should the retirement home be located in the same building as the nursery school?

### Expanding the sphere of sharing

People are not very good at applying statistical probabilities to their own lives. They believe that their relationship with their significant other lasts forever while knowing that the average duration of relationships has decreased significantly and most marriages end in a divorce<sup>62</sup>. Other human relationships and happiness can suffer if happiness is only sought through marriage and children. While they may initially boost happiness, this levels off in a matter of years and happiness falls back to the person's previous level<sup>63</sup>. Relationships and the family cannot be the only form of intimate human relationship. Without other human relationships, the individual's safety net is weak. Building and maintaining friendships is vital. People's own choices about how they spend time ultimately determine how friendships are maintained and developed.

The ability to trust others is largely developed in early childhood. As such, it is important to expose the child to diverse adult contact. The key is to learn to do

things together with others. The child grows to participate in communities when he is involved in hobbies, volunteer work and recreational activities. Supporting practices that contribute to the ability to work with others as well as the development of self-respect is good policy from the viewpoint of happiness. Individuals with a healthy level of self-respect and confidence are less likely to be drawn to the rat race that runs on natural resources.

[62] Kontula 2009

[63] Gilbert 2006

**Loneliness is the lack of opportunities to do things with others.**

**There is an acute need for a new kind of sharing and tolerance.**

**If everyone on this planet consumed as much as we Finns, we would need 2.5 Earths just to maintain our lifestyle<sup>64</sup>. Sharing is not only sensible from the perspective of using natural resources, but also because helping others and sharing creates pleasure not unlike that received from sex and contributes to our happiness<sup>65</sup>. In all cultures, sharing is the method of interaction favoured by free individuals – as opposed to e.g. payment, hierarchy or reciprocity<sup>66</sup>. The politics of happiness must create an atmosphere of tolerance that supports sharing. Many studies point to a correlation between tolerance for various minority groups and the happiness of the population as a whole<sup>67</sup>.**

[64] WWF 2008

[65] Post 2005

[66] Fiske 2006

[67] Bok 2010

There is an acute need for sharing. For instance, equipping summer homes with modern equipment and the increase in the number of second homes pose a significant challenge in terms of the consumption of natural resources. The average size of summer homes has grown and nowadays nearly half of them meet the criteria of a second home with electric heating and water closets<sup>68</sup>. It seems impossible that asceticism alone would solve this problem. Happiness and quality of life must be sought through new ways of sharing and places that

consume fewer natural resources. The sharing of resources no longer happens naturally through traditional avenues. The fact that nearly half of Finns live alone is an unfortunate indicator of this<sup>69</sup>.

[68] Berghäll et al. 2008; Rytönen & Kirkkari 2010

[69] Statistics Finland 2008

### **Policy recommendations:**

- 1.** Increase taxes on unused space. Space should be taxed according to its degree of use. By sharing space, its use becomes cheaper for both individuals and corporations. Research and development investment should focus on the development of technologies and services for sharing.
- 2.** Cars should not be where children are. Cities should be developed to become more child friendly to allow families to feel safe and secure living in the urban environment. This helps prevent the dispersion of the societal structure and the degeneration of nearby communities.
- 3.** Create a new godparent system that would allow people to take time off from work to care for not only their own biological children or parents, but others as well. Society should employ tax incentives and other methods to encourage the expansion of the concept of family beyond that of the nuclear family.

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