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Making the Stretch

***A Report on What Constitutes Societal Well-Being
and How to Measure It***

Institute for Ethical Leadership

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Thinking about the Possible

Can you imagine a society where emotionally secure and well nourished people have found a way to live together with respect and compassion for each other; where everyone is actively involved in good work in the community; where people participate fully in the democratic process and elect ethically-minded representatives focused on service to the community; where the cities have been designed on human scale with attention to beauty and convenience of living; where people live in harmony with the natural world and take responsibility for preserving a clean, healthy environment; where the young are brought up in supportive families and go to schools in which learning is centred around core values of respect and cooperation; where people take responsibility for their health through good nutrition and exercise and have ready access to high quality medical care when required; where the economy provides meaningful work in socially responsive businesses and service-oriented public institutions; where the elders in the community are respected and valued and are provided with good quality care and housing when they require it; and where there is an equitable distribution of wealth and power throughout the society such that people feel satisfied with their lives and believe they are making a meaningful contribution?

If you can imagine such a society, can you describe in detail the conditions and activities that would be ongoing? Can you identify the measurement indicators that would have to be in place to ensure that the good conditions are maintained and that life continues in balance and harmony?

For a group of 35 people at a meeting of the Institute for Ethical Leadership in Vancouver on March 25, 2002 the answer to all of these questions was “Yes.” We had come together to consider the issue of how to measure well-being in society. Implicit in such an enquiry is the belief that people when asked can describe individual and societal well-being and propose ways to measure it. The reason for doing so is to be specific and clear about how we choose to live together in society and how we measure our success at doing it.

The question we began with was, “What should we be measuring to ensure well-being in society?” The wording of the question was carefully considered to encourage participants to be thinking about two things at the same time:

1. What do we consider to be well-being in society?
2. How would we measure it?

We worked in four groups of eight or nine people each so that everyone had plenty of opportunity to participate. A facilitator kept the group focused on operating in creative mode and a scribe captured the group flow of ideas on a mind map. The group discussions lasted for about 80 minutes and were followed by a 20-minute reporting and discussion session in plenary. Facilitators and scribes met subsequently to integrate the work of the four groups. The following synthesis captures the essence of what was discussed.

The Vision

Participants had no difficulty in talking about societal well-being. As they did so they gradually expressed, piece by piece, what kind of a society they would like to live in. Their vision of a reasonable and attainable quality of social life came together under the following headings.

Personal Well-Being

A good society begins with people who are emotionally balanced, mentally stimulated, physically healthy and spiritually free. They will enjoy freedom of choice and the freedom to be creative with the right to independence, personal privacy and security. At the same time they will recognize their interdependence and the personal responsibilities for respect, cooperation and service that go along with that.

Right Relationships

Emerging from good quality personal attributes will be a flow of right relationships among people in society. Ultimately these are anchored in the spiritual quality of love, and are expressed in friendship, partnership, respect for diversity, compassion, absence of prejudice, and respect among all members for the rights and freedoms of others. There will be a large measure of agreement on values and honouring of the virtues.

Good Government

The above personal and collective approaches to life are the foundation for participation in democracy and the election to office of ethically-minded representatives motivated by a commitment of service to others, a good ability to listen, and a capacity for thoughtful decision-making.

Economic and Institutional Life

The economic life of a well functioning society will be characterized by good opportunity for meaningful work based on actual exchange of goods and services. Businesses will operate ethically with a commitment to social responsibility with attention to the triple bottom line. Public institutions will treat people fairly and maintain a high commitment to service. The workplace, both public and private, will be spiritually stimulating as well as economically rewarding.

Livable Cities

Recognizing that people increasingly live in cities, it is important that design elements for urban living are based on livability. This means providing good access to transportation and facilities, minimizing all forms of pollution, and enacting zoning laws and regulations devoted to well-being. It also means addressing homelessness, affordable housing, and quality of housing (i.e. housing with indoor plumbing and basic services).

Healthy Environment

Intrinsic to city living described above is that people make an ecological footprint that is as small as possible. This means minimizing consumption of resources, making a commitment to recycling and reusing, maintaining good air and water quality, reducing and removing toxins from the environment, shifting to clean energy sources, making more use of public transit, and changing to private transportation that uses clean burning fuels. The overall environmental ethic will be balance and sustainability ahead of profit and exploitation. Health of the environment will be envisioned in terms of the whole biosphere from soil and oceans through to the highest reaches of the stratosphere.

Aesthetic Quality

Urban design will not only respect ecological health but also embrace aesthetic quality. This will be seen in respect for the Arts as a whole as well as in a valuing of art and artists. There will be a commitment to beautiful environments expressed in consciousness-raising architecture and sculpture and attractive parks and gardens. This is nourishment for the soul. Societal well-being is expressed through the joy that comes from being surrounded by beauty in all its forms—art, music, literature and built space—all aspects of a rich human culture.

Good Nutrition

Just as the Arts nourish the soul, so good food nourishes the body. Another measure of societal well-being is the kind and quality of the food people are eating as well as the knowledge they have of what constitutes a healthy diet. The availability and affordability of organic food are key issues, as is a supply of non-toxic water. Of particular concern here is the consumption of good nutritional food by children at home and in school.

Good Health

Good food leads to good health, which in turn provides an important measure of well-being in society. Individual responsibility for one's own health is key, but when care is required access to affordable, good quality medical services is a key measure of well-being. Reduction of other factors leading to health problems is also important, such as work related stress, environmental toxins at work, in the air and in our water.

Quality Education

Along with health care the availability of good quality education is a major component of societal well-being. Among the features of quality education is a focus on core values of respect and service. Other features are basic life skills, courses in ethical and socially responsible entrepreneurship, multiple languages, art and learning about other cultures. Access to education throughout life is also a key feature of well-being.

Community Involvement

Another marker of societal well-being is the extent to which people participate in activities throughout the community. A vigorous and healthy society is one where people have a deep sense of community and join together in groups focused on reaching and maintaining a high quality of communal life. This can be called a flow of energy in a neighbourhood or community. The emphasis is on cooperation and mutual support and reaching out to others.

Inter-generational Harmony

As a concluding and all embracing indicator a healthy and vibrant society will see a high level of inter-generational harmony in which the potential of children and youth is nourished, the work of adults is valued and rewarded, and the wisdom and lifelong contribution of elders are honoured. People of all ages will come together in a multiplicity of activities in which all can make their unique contribution. The governing ethic is one of care, compassion and respect. From its schools to its hospitals and its senior citizens facilities, a healthy society pulses with the heartbeat of a deep humanity and value for the gift of life in all its manifestations.

Measurement of Well Being

What a compelling vision of good life we have described! Is it attainable? No one in the group was under any illusions about the challenges represented by such a vision. The stretch is always between current reality and where we would prefer to be. Herein lies the creative tension that seeks to be resolved in the direction of the vision. To help us do that we need measures that tell us how well we are doing. Describing some of these measures or indicators was a second part of our discussion. Sometimes we suggested specific indicators; other times we expressed our ideas in questions. Here are the highlights of what was proposed.

Relationships

Racial prejudice—is it increasing or decreasing?

Government

How well are we doing as a participatory democracy?

How many people participate in referendums?

What percentage of people vote? What are the demographics (seniors, young adults, minorities)?

Economic

Can we measure who is actually controlling our society's resources?

What is the distribution of wealth/power/resources?

A feeling of powerlessness often contributes to a lack of well-being. How do you measure this?

Measure poverty levels.

Time the average person spends at work versus social or family time.

Can we introduce more job sharing and flexi-time programs?

Can we measure how efficient people are in their work? Inefficient use of a person's work time can contribute to a lack of well-being. What is the level of job satisfaction?

Can we measure the level of social and ethical responsibility in existing corporations and public institutions?

How many people are using soup kitchens and food banks?

City Life

Measure ease of travel

How much time do people spend commuting?

Environment

Measure the average person's access to clean water.

Measure access to green space.

How many window boxes as an indicator.

Nutrition

How many people eat whole organic food versus processed food?

Measure the negative effects of eating processed food.

What are schools feeding children? How much processed food versus organic food?

How many children know the difference between eating processed versus whole food?

How difficult is it to get organic food? How many blocks/kms. does a person have to travel on average to buy organic food?

We could measure the difference in price of organic food versus non-organic food over time by using an index.

How much public/private funding is done to support organic farming?

What is the percentage of GMO food to organic food?

Can we measure what people are eating?

Can we measure the level of public knowledge about how diet affects health?

Health

Mental illness—is it increasing or decreasing?

Can we measure work-related stress?

Can we measure how many people use over the counter and prescription drugs and to what frequency and why?

Measure obesity rates.

Measure number of doctor visits.

Measure longevity.

Education

What languages are taught in school?

How many children are familiar with other cultures/languages?

How well are we teaching children basic life skills?

How well are teaching children ethics and values?

Can we teach ethical entrepreneurship in the school curriculum?

How well are children being exposed to art in schools?

How many children continue to take an interest in art after they graduate from school?

What percentage of a school budget is devoted to art programs (or other programs)?

Measure the number of learning opportunities in a community (for children and adults and courses at community centers, for example).

Community

What is the level of public involvement in society, community, etc.? What are the demographics for seniors, youth, minorities?

Measure the number of community organizations. How well are they attended? What do they achieve?

How many helping groups are in the community?

How many community events are held (street and other events)?

How many Neighbourhood Watch projects are there?

How many playgrounds and their intensity of use?

Care of the Elderly

How many elderly are living at home?

How many care homes are there in the community?

Measure nutrition levels among the elderly.

Conclusion

If you ask ordinary people, they can tell you what constitutes a healthy society. They can also suggest ways we can measure it. That our societies work as well as they do is a tribute to the good sense and decent values of most people. However, we know we always live on the knife-edge between order and chaos, between well-being and breakdown. As we look at the world scene we see tragedies of social conflict, ethnic violence, economic inequity and all the other tensions that deny too many people the right to a good life. Can we do better? Of course we can. But it begins with ourselves, then extends out into our local communities and on to the global stage.

The intent of the exercise described in this report was to demonstrate how well a group of ethically-minded, socially conscious people can describe in a very short discussion session the requirements for well being and some measures to achieve it. The task now is to move thinking to action. One way to do this is to support initiatives like the Canada Act for the Measurement of Well-Being (www.cyberus.ca/choose.sustain) the Genuine Progress Indicator (www.rprogress.org/) and other attempts to focus attention on social programs locally and globally.

The generations of the 21st century are being challenged as none before them to become stewards of all there is. Such a responsibility demands a keenly tuned sense of what constitutes well-being and how to measure it. It is a task to be assumed with commitment and intention by governments at all levels and by the international community. This report offers its insights and support toward that endeavour.