

ZCB and happiness

Why reducing consumption will make Britain happier

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With planetary survival and economic meltdowns hitting the headlines, talk of increasing ‘happiness’ might sound like a pleasant and rather fluffy distraction. Yet growing numbers of people, across all sectors of society, are talking about happiness as if it really matters. Far from being a distraction, a focus on happiness may be the key to sustainable prosperity for all.

It seems to surprise people that Britain has seen 60 years of nearly constant economic growth, and yet during that time happiness and wellbeing measures hardly improved at all. This is not a coincidence.

Constant growth (as opposed to steady prosperity) requires each of us to be constantly a little bit unhappy – dissatisfied with what we have and thinking we always need more to be happy. Happiness must always appear to be just over the horizon, and more ‘stuff’ must be the pathway to it, in order for economic growth to continue year after year.

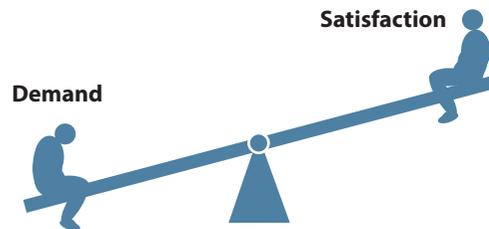
Whilst there is no correlation between perpetual economic growth and increasing happiness, there is a strong correlation between happiness and improving health, increased education, environmental improvements and reductions in inequality and crime. Happier people and populations consume fewer natural resources, learn better, and work more productively, creatively and collaboratively. They are healthier, less likely to be violent or act criminally, less dependent on welfare... the list goes on. In fact, it’s a two-way correlation: improving society and the environment makes people happy, and making people happy improves society and the environment.

This isn’t fluffy stuff. Happiness isn’t just a pleasant outcome, or even ‘just’ an ultimate goal for society. As a way to reframe the debate and focus on what

truly matters, happiness is also essential to solving most of our biggest challenges – including climate change.

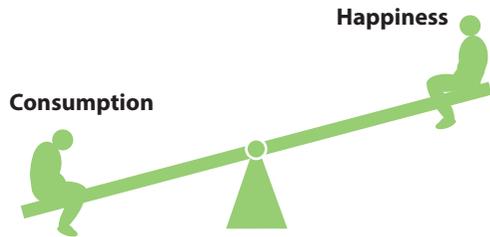
‘Demand reduction’ is a major component of the Zero Carbon Britain scenario, and a major discussion point in Green circles. How do we get people to consume less stuff, be it energy, food, fuel or the latest electronic gadget? Demand reduction is an even more sustainable approach than simply pushing for more recycling and greener power. Lower demand means fewer resources are consumed in the first place, plus fewer emissions are released into the atmosphere in the process.

Demand reduction, however, has one big hurdle to overcome – it seemingly requires people to opt for a degree of self-sacrifice. I, the consumer, will ‘give up what I’d like to have, for the greater good’, – or, even more tenuously, ‘for future generations’. It’s a hard sell, particularly when balanced against the persuasive power of the multi-billion pound advertising industry urging ever-greater consumption. But the ‘ultimate’ demand reduction tool is surely to come at it from exactly the opposite angle to the one initially perceived – reducing demand not through self-sacrifice but through greater satisfaction with what we have.



And so a happiness revolution might be the answer to the negative perception. What could we achieve if we turned away from things that advertisers say will make us happy (and don’t), and towards things that evidence shows will make us happy (and do)? It’s certainly a much easier ‘sell’ to suggest we make ourselves happier through actions that just happen to reduce demand, rather than begrudgingly put up with less happiness for the greater good. When we

reject the assumption that the route to happiness is via increased wealth and greater consumption and focus instead on the *real* pathways to happiness, we necessarily, naturally and happily consume less.



So what makes us happy? Ask someone what makes them happy, and whether they live in inner city Glasgow, rural Botswana, Palestine, Poland or Bristol, their responses will be remarkably similar. You'll hear talk of family, friends and community. A sense of belonging, purpose and value will all be high on the list. Also important are getting outside and living in a clean environment, as well as opportunities to interact and get involved, being active, learning and growing, helping others and being helped. None of these things need much 'stuff', and they show that a long-term, happy lifestyle is both low carbon and relatively low cost.

Paul Hawken estimates that "there are around 2 million organisations working toward ecological sustainability and social justice" worldwide (Hawken, 2007). In the UK alone, many thousands of exceptional and worthwhile organisations, projects and individuals are trying to tackle these big issues. But until we overcome the cause of our overconsumption – and acknowledge that our fixation on stuff is really an addiction to unhappiness – those activities can only ever be a sticking plaster on a deeper wound. Using the 'stick' of fear of the human or environmental consequences of our consumption isn't working on any significant scale. Selling the benefit from the 'carrot' of greater happiness is far more likely to persuade whole societies to change their behaviour and make different choices. Wouldn't you be more likely to forgo buying a new telly, or a new car, or a holiday

abroad, if you knew you'd be happier for it?

We've been hooked on unhappiness for over 60 years, and it's going to take quite a bit of effort to quit. Everywhere we look, every magazine and billboard, every doom and gloom headline, every point scoring political jibe, is telling us we'll be happy when we have a new car, new hairstyle, new government.... We are riddled with fear, blame and a sense of lack.

So let us change the narrative and change the question. If prosperity means to flourish and to thrive, then people of all economic levels can demonstrate prosperity (and, for that matter, people of all economic levels can demonstrate poverty). We invite the people of Britain to redefine prosperity, to see it as a matter of contentment rather than consumption.

About the organisation:

Happy City Initiative exists to demonstrate that being happier needn't cost the earth. They enable a city-scale 'tipping point' of change through innovative community projects, campaigns and training, alongside new ways to measure prosperity in society. All this combines to create a city-wide new model of progress based on flourishing lives on a flourishing planet.

