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CHAPTER 8

Volunteering and well-being

Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product ... if we judge the United States of America by that ... counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armoured cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.¹

Robert F. Kennedy (1968, March 18)

INTRODUCTION

In previous chapters, we examined the contributions of volunteerism in selected fields. It is now time to consider how the contributions of volunteerism affect society as a whole. The success of a country has long been assessed primarily on the basis of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Increasingly, however, the direct relationship between economic growth and social progress has been challenged. Critics are calling for alternative concepts and new indicators. In reality, this criticism is not especially new, as the above quote of Robert Kennedy from 1968 shows. The 1975 Dag Hammarskjöld Report states that: "Development is a whole; it is an integral, value loaded, cultural process; it encompasses the natural environment, social relations, education, production, consumption and well-being."² This concern has moved from academic circles into public debate and now is increasingly relevant at the highest levels of policy-making, as a consequence of the current global crises affecting economy, society and the environment.

The 2009 report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, also known as the Stiglitz Commission, represented a key moment in the evolving debate about what societies should strive to achieve. It was established at the initiative of France in order to identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress and to consider alternatives.³ Headed by prominent economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean Paul Fitoussi, this influential initiative concluded that GDP should not be dismissed. However, as an indicator of market activity, it fails to capture many factors that contribute to human well-being and societal progress. The writers argued that: "As what we measure shapes what we collectively strive to pursue – and what we pursue determines what we measure – the report and its implementation

may have a significant impact on the way in which our societies look at themselves and, therefore, on the way in which policies are designed, implemented and assessed."⁴

So why is this important for volunteerism? The Stiglitz Commission, like other initiatives challenging the economic growth paradigm, considers well-being as the ultimate goal of development. Clearly, strong and healthy economies are desirable but only inasmuch as they enable people to lead lives that bring them well-being. Among these important factors are values such as solidarity, passion for a cause and wanting to give back to society which have been identified throughout this report. In this chapter, we will look at well-being and how volunteerism impacts on it. We then look at some related policy issues.

Well-being has been described as feeling good and doing well both physically and emotionally.⁵ At the heart of well-being is "the sense of having what you need for life to be good."⁶ For our purposes we add the idea of "social well-being" as a sense of belonging to our communities, a positive attitude towards others, a feeling that we are contributing to society and engaging in pro-social behaviour, and a belief that society is capable of developing positively.⁷

Other definitions include the notion of happiness. Surveys enquire about life satisfaction and happiness of people in different ways. People have different ideas in mind when answering questions on life satisfaction and happiness. Life satisfaction is closer to well-being which is concerned with concrete issues such as health, housing and education. Happiness involves people's evaluation of their lives.⁸ The Kingdom of Bhutan has made happiness a fundamental national goal. In 2011, Bhutan led an initiative at the United Nations General Assembly that invites Member States to elaborate measures that successfully capture the pursuit of happiness

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and well-being in development to help to guide public policies.⁹ “Happiness” and “well-being” are terms which are often used interchangeably. However, happiness refers to subjective positive feelings about one’s life context and environment while well-being includes measurable parameters such as health, safety and financial security, along with feelings of connectedness and participation. In this report, happiness is considered as an integral part of well-being.

At first glance, the relevance of well-being to much of the developing world, especially to the income poor, may be questionable. When people lack incomes to provide the basics for survival, then well-being and happiness might appear a secondary concern. However, the income poor are not defined by their poverty alone. They strive to achieve well-being for themselves, their children and their communities. Ever more evidence is emerging that people in developing countries have notions of well-being that are as vivid and valid as those of people living in wealthier countries.¹⁰

The Wellbeing in Developing Countries research group is a groundbreaking initiative. It started in 2003, at the University of Bath, to develop a framework for understanding well-being. Application of the framework was tested in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand with local partners. Volunteerism is not explicitly mentioned in the conclusions of the study. However, among the key areas identified by people as impacting on their well-being were the scope to participate and take effective actions, making positive social connections and having a sense of self-worth.¹¹ In Bangladesh, being benevolent and altruistic led to well-being. In Ethiopia, it was giving advice and resolving disputes. In Peru and Thailand, it was helping one another.¹² Framing the enquiry in terms of well-being, rather than poverty, enabled the researchers to explore what the income poor have, and what they can do, instead of focusing on their deficits. The aim was to

BOX 8.1 : Gross National Happiness in Bhutan

The Himalayan state of Bhutan is the country with the most extensive experience in adopting happiness as the overarching indicator of progress. The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), first introduced in 1972, is deeply rooted in the unique historical, cultural and socio-economic background of Bhutan. Substantive elements of GNH, such as the general objective of well-being and the goal of environmental conservation, were drawn from Buddhist values while the principles of self-reliance and paternalism were inherent in traditional Bhutanese society. The concept triggered a national dialogue about progress and became a guideline for policy in Bhutan. In a Financial Times interview in 1986, the King of Bhutan said: “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product”.

An index of nine domains was developed to make the concept measurable. It included: education, physical health, psychological well-being, time use, living standard, cultural diversity, good governance, ecological diversity and resilience and, finally, community vitality and social connections. Community vitality focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of relationships and interactions within communities. In this domain, volunteerism is an important variable to measure. In the questionnaires, Bhutanese people are asked whether they volunteer for their communities as voluntary work is understood to be integral to a vital, happy community.

Sources: Braun. (2009); Priesner. (2008).

produce more credible, respectful representations of people’s lives in order to inform development policy and practice and to create the conditions in which people can experience well-being.

The Wellbeing in Developing Countries group is now engaged with local partner NGOs in a follow-up research project in rural India and Zambia on how poverty affects well-being and how general well-being influences people’s pathways into, within, and out of poverty. The domain of well-being includes values and meanings, social connections and participation, all of which are integral to volunteerism. According to Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways (2011), “Relationship is at the heart of well-being – it is not the property

Relationship is at the heart of well-being

of an individual.”¹³ The same study also shows that “assessing well-being must therefore consider interactions amongst people and between them and the wider environment.”¹⁴

The relationship between volunteerism and well-being has been extensively studied in developed countries with conclusions largely based on information provided by individuals on the positive impact of volunteering on issues of health, depression and life satisfaction.¹⁵ This chapter will bring some clarity to the connections between volunteerism and well-being by considering the impact of volunteer action on the well-being of communities as well as of individuals.

VOLUNTEERING AND INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

Among the studies of the benefits of well-being that individuals derive from volunteerism, many have been in the field of health. These studies examine how the experience of volunteering impacts on the way people feel and how they evaluate their lives as a whole. One common finding is that people who volunteer are more likely to report being happy.¹⁶ The service aspect of the volunteer action often results in people reporting the experience of a “warm glow” which they associate with helping someone and contributing to the public good¹⁷ in addition to feeling stronger and more energetic.¹⁸ For older

persons, volunteering also leads to more positive moods,¹⁹ as well as less anxiety and fewer feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.²⁰

Some longitudinal studies tracking the well-being of individuals over time have found that engagement in volunteering leads to positive mental health.²¹ It may also result in decreased psychological stress and buffer the negative consequences of stress while enhancing life satisfaction, the will to live and self-respect.²² People who volunteer for more hours and for more than one organization experience greater well-being.²³

Other longitudinal studies have suggested that engaging in volunteering leads to better physical health.²⁴ Older adults who do not volunteer report significantly worse health than those who do volunteer. In rural China, it was found that reciprocal relationships through mutual aid led to higher levels of health. In particular, the enhanced levels of trust that may result from such mutual help were related to higher levels of general health, mental health, and subjective well-being.²⁵ Mortality rates are lower for volunteers in comparison to non-volunteers of the same age, regardless of age, marital status, education or gender.²⁶ One study found much lower mortality in older persons who reported providing practical or emotional support to others compared to those who did not.²⁷ Interestingly, giving support had a much greater impact on mortality rates than receiving support. While there is a two-way relationship between health and volunteering, with healthier people volunteering more, these studies are fairly conclusive in demonstrating that volunteering contributes to physical well-being.

VOLUNTEERING AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Volunteerism also has a significant positive impact on community well-being. It creates ties among people, increases social capital and contributes to many social factors that

BOX 8.2 : Volunteering and individual well-being

In South Africa, a study of volunteer caregivers from faith-based organizations working with people living with AIDS found that volunteers derived rewards related to self-growth and personal development. They reported satisfaction from community members liking them and expressing appreciation for their services. They felt rewarded when the services that they rendered made their patients happy and when they gained skills and competencies. The ability of volunteers to make a difference in the community contributed to their sense of happiness.

Source: Akintola. (2010).

create healthy societies in which people enjoy living. A stronger sense of community also leads to more volunteering. As such, this creates a virtuous cycle in which people volunteer, thus strengthening community ties which leads more people to volunteer. “Community” includes not only people living in close geographic proximity but also people with common needs, assets and interests. Membership of virtual communities can engender feelings of belonging and well-being. Efforts to capture people’s subjective experience of community well-being have largely focused on the social components of human well-being. Social well-being has been assessed by measures of supportive relationships and trust and belonging.²⁸ Volunteers are more likely to develop “civic skills”, to attach more importance to serving the public interest as a personal life goal and to be more politically active. Thus, in going about their voluntary activities, individuals are also cultivating an outlook that contributes to a social environment that nurtures the well-being of all.²⁹

Another concept relating to community well-being is resilience: collective capacity to engage and mobilize community resources to respond to, and influence, change.³⁰ One study has shown the links between community stability and well-being in forest-dependent communities.³¹ It has been suggested that local economic resilience has three dimensions: community resources, active citizenship and strategic action.³² Social ties, and the resources to which they give collective access, sustain community life and bolster resilience when underpinned by trust, reciprocity and belonging. In good times, they strengthen local economies. In more difficult times, the impact of risk factors beyond people’s direct control can be reduced by the capacity of a community to engage and mobilize its resources to respond positively to, and influence, change. As has been seen in other chapters, this occurs, for example, when a disaster strikes or when violent

BOX 8.3 : Well-being through volunteering in Brazil

For the Associação de Apoio à Criança em Risco (ACER) (Children at Risk Foundation), local economic development of poor neighbourhoods such as Eldorado, in the city of Diadema, Brazil, has to come from within the community. A new project focuses on the untapped potential in 13 to 16 year-olds. By 16 years of age, most young people have to make a living. Prior to that age, they are largely overlooked in the community despite having ideas and energy to contribute. Nearly 600 students at the Simon Bolivar school participated in workshops on five key themes: local economic development, mapping community assets, my sustainable school, project management and five ways to well-being. Through these workshops, the young people explored what matters to them, their interdependence on others and nature, and their own capabilities to make changes that can make a difference. They discussed and identified what they felt would contribute to economic, social and environmental well-being and to the well-being of their community.

ACER offers these young people the support of a youth worker who is trained in coaching techniques. Their role is to unlock the natural resourcefulness and energy that help young people to believe in themselves. Groups of young people have led projects to clean up the school, provide the publicity for a Halloween party organized by a local theatre group, and design a workshop to teach children and teenagers how to make Christmas ornaments out of reused and recycled materials. This group held 15 meetings to consolidate ideas, arrange materials and research, and practice ways of making objects from recyclable materials. One young person, Talia, pointed to the importance of the coach “who believed in us at all times.”

The coach can help cultivate positive energy and willingness for future action by actively seeking to support the psychological and social well-being of the young people. ACER is using surveys to assess changes in how the young people feel as the project progresses. The surveys consider their sense of competency, autonomy and relatedness to others, as well as their personal resources of self-esteem, resilience and optimism.

Sources: Jonathan Hannay [Charity Director, Children at Risk Foundation, São Paulo, Brazil], Interview. (2011, February, 14); ACER. (2010, 2011).

People have better health, do better at school and experience less crime when they live in neighbourhoods characterised by high levels of informal types of volunteerism

conflict erupts. Volunteering can also help to reduce crime. The direct connections, and the knowledge that neighbours have of one another, provide a "natural surveillance."³³

Similar outcomes have been found for volunteer action outside of the organizational context. People have better health, do better at school and experience less crime when they live in neighbourhoods characterised by high levels of informal types of volunteerism such as helping older persons or taking part in local community initiatives.³⁴ In a study of a national sample of African Americans in the United States, social support networks of family, friendship, church and neighbours were found to contribute to people's life satisfaction and happiness.³⁵ In a study in urban Ethiopia, direct social networks and the ability to rely on others in case of emergency was related to subjective well-being and happiness.³⁶

WELL-BEING AND POLICY

Well-being is now making inroads into national policy. Bhutan was mentioned earlier (see *Bhutan Gross National Happiness*) as an example of a country that has long had quality of life considerations at the heart of

its policy. Since 2004, conferences have been held on Gross National Happiness around the world including in Bhutan, Brazil, Canada and Thailand. Participants discussed findings from research that related to policies on well-being and the development of indicators to measure happiness.

The notion of *buen vivir* in the Andean region reflects well-being concerns of indigenous people and stresses harmonious coexistence with other people and with the environment. Working together through volunteer action to attain common goals based on such values as tolerance and respect is an integral part of the lives of indigenous people around the world. This development is of particular interest to this report. Practical implementation remains challenging, however, since the generally accepted indicators of progress cannot capture this dimension. Therefore, new indicators are necessary. It must be said that there is much debate as to what *buen vivir* actually signifies in terms of practical implementation as it is a notion that rejects generally accepted indicators of progress.³⁷

Several countries have focused on the well-being of young people. A 2007 World Bank-supported study in Brazil looked at how Brazilian young people were coping with their transition to adulthood. It examined health, school performance, connections and socio-economic conditions. The 2010 Human Development Report of Egypt, with its focus on drawing young people into mainstream society, proposed an annual Wellbeing Index.³⁸ It assesses progress on a range of indicators and feeds into policies related to young people to ensure that their potential contribution to development is fully realized. Civic participation, for which youth volunteerism is seen as one contributing factor, is included among the indicators.³⁹ The Index of Wellbeing of Canada identifies and publicizes what impacts on the quality of life of Canadians. Community vitality is one of the key indicators and volunteering is one of the main parameters considered.⁴⁰

BOX 8.4 : Living well

Indigenous communities in the Andes boast an alternative growth model that they call *sumak kawsay* in Quecha, translated as *buen vivir* in Spanish. Literally "good life" or "living well" in English, the concept is based on long-standing traditions of solidarity and respect for others and for the environment rather than individualism and materialism. It reflects a shift from economic progress to a more humanistic view with a focus on quality of life. At its core is collective well-being and the satisfaction of basic needs in harmony with the natural resources of the planet. *Sumak kawsay* was formally enshrined in the Ecuadorian constitution in 2008. In 2009, *buen vivir*, or *suma qamaña* in Aymara, was incorporated into the constitution of Bolivia as an ethical and moral principle to be promoted by the state.

Sources: Gudynas & Acosta. (2011); Davey. (2011).

The Happy Planet Index of the New Economic Foundation in the United Kingdom is a global index that combines environmental impact with well-being for a country-by-country measurement of the environmental efficiency with which people live long and happy lives. It shows that high levels of resource consumption do not produce high levels of well-being.⁴¹ The 2010 *Human Development Report* includes an index of well-being and happiness using Gallup World Poll data citing life satisfaction as well as measures of purpose, respect and social support. Well-being is a central concept in the global project on Measuring the Progress of Societies of the OECD. This project has been raising awareness and mobilizing political support for better progress measures.⁴² Such measures include the richness of people's interactions within their communities. Volunteerism is present through the values that it represents and the sense of meaningfulness and purposefulness that it gives to people's lives.

Well-being is thus increasingly seen as a useful and important concept that can guide and inform development policy. Consensus is building around the idea that an understanding of well-being could better promote development effectiveness. However, little work has been done so far to identify mechanisms and ways of working that directly support well-being outcomes for individuals and communities as they develop economically. There is "little clarity on how to translate [well-being] into practice at programme and project level."⁴³

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

There is a widespread view today that GDP does not provide an adequate picture of a society because it does not account for the well-being of individuals and their communities. Nor does it include activities that have an economic value but that fall outside the market and therefore have not, traditionally, been reflected in national accounts, as

discussed in Chapter 2. In the search for alternative development models, well-being is rapidly gaining respectability as a useful concept to guide and inform development policy. It offers "a unique opportunity to improve the ways in which our policies are made and breathe new life into the democratic process."⁴⁴

There are various definitions of well-being and different views as to what it should include. It is certainly about connecting the development process to factors that reflect a better way of life for everyone. As we have seen, for volunteerism, the question of relationships is paramount. Our own well-being is intrinsically linked to what we contribute to the lives of others. Where mainstream economics fosters values of self-interest and competition to achieve maximum satisfaction, a focus on well-being finds greater reason to value compassion and cooperation, both core values of volunteerism. The discourse on quality of life and well-being, and its place in the evolving development paradigm, must recognize the solidarity and reciprocal values of volunteerism as part of the dynamics that enhance human well-being.

The way forward is to pay particular attention to the contribution of volunteerism to "healthy societies that are good to live in", as described earlier, or what the Canadian Index of Wellbeing refers to as "community vitality". A healthy society is one in which importance is given to formal and informal relationships that facilitate interaction and engagement and thus engender a sense of belonging. It is also one in which there is broad participation by all sections of the population. As we have seen elsewhere in this report, communities with these characteristics do better in moving forward to meet common aspirations. They are better able to build their resilience to withstand the shocks and stresses that the income poor, in particular, encounter on a regular basis.

Understanding of well-being could better promote development effectiveness

Making the connection explicit between volunteerism and well-being would help to ensure that policy takes into account all options for action

The following chapter will examine some aspects of the evolving development framework and the emergence of well-being as a key element. However, we can already state that policymakers need to incorporate volunteerism into the ongoing discourse. In many ways it is implicitly there already. Yet making the connection explicit between volunteerism and well-being, and linking with researchers and practitioners working in the field of volunteer engagement, would help to ensure that policy takes into account all options for action.

The research community needs to extend its work on volunteerism. It needs to cover the impact of volunteer action on the well-being of communities and societies to a far greater extent, especially in the developing world. Volunteer involving organizations should be proactive in publicizing the impact of their work. This impact is not limited to the volunteers themselves and the people and causes to whom the volunteer action is directed. Organizations need to look at the overall contribution of their efforts to the health of their societies.