

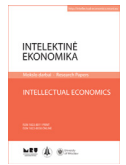


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Intellectual Economics 9 (2015) 30–42



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The ecovillage experience as an evidence base for national wellbeing strategies

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Available online 18 August 2015

Abstract

Overarching policy objectives for national wellbeing are currently being developed by national governments, replacing the objective of economic growth. Maximising the quality of people's lives, their happiness or subjective wellbeing has, however, been the conscious strategy of ecovillages. With up to a half-century of empirical experimentation, ecovillages offer an evidence base that can be utilised to benefit the wider society. In order to facilitate the research needed for appropriate government policies to deliver a high level of national wellbeing, this paper attempts to shed light on some twenty different elements—the common attitudes and practices of ecovillages—which have allowed them to succeed in this endeavour. Further research on the wellbeing of ecovillages is suggested to enable the wider society to focus on the process of achieving a higher level of wellbeing for sustainable development.

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JEL classification: D63; I3; O35; Q01; Q56

Keywords: Wellbeing; Ecovillages; Quality of life; Flourishing; Happiness; Sustainable development.

1. Introduction

The widespread criticism of economic growth as an objective of economic and national development policy has finally led to the mainstream acceptance that the wellbeing of its inhabitants must logically be the ultimate goal of any democratic state. We now see an increasing interest in the adoption of policies that promote national wellbeing as a comprehensive objective. Grinde (2009) points out that the quality of life or happiness has traditionally been important in Japanese society. But it is Bhutan that led the way with the king's ground-breaking promotion of "gross national happiness". Other states, such as Malaysia and Norway, have followed suit in showing interest in similar policies (Beal & Rueda-Sabater, 2014). The UK chose to take a leading role in formalising policies around this new thinking when in 2006, Prime Minister David Cameron declared "it's time we focused not just on the GDP, but on the GWB – general wellbeing" (Wellbeing in four policy areas, 2014). Now an overarching national wellbeing strategy

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.intele.2015.07.001>

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is emerging which will replace the earlier focus on economic growth. Focusing on wellbeing, which may seem to be obvious for an outsider, is in fact, revolutionary. To create a high level of wellbeing, a society needs to rethink many of the accepted sector policy objectives and budgeting practices. Fostering sustainable wellbeing requires a supportive environment to promote the collaborative use of resources across sectors, space and time. This requires an intricate balance between the individual and collective good. While a number of studies are now being done on the subject of policies and strategies for wellbeing, we are basically relying on theory, as no country has fully integrated the wellbeing of its inhabitants as an all-encompassing objective for its governance.

Having said this, there is a rich half-century of “policy implementation” experience where wellbeing has been used as the ultimate goal in smaller communities or ecovillages focused on this goal around the world, which is poorly understood and utilised. For example, it has been documented that the kibbutzim of Israel have better health, wellbeing, and life expectancy among their members compared to the outside population, at least when comparing their elderly (Grinde, 2009). Without expressly stating a wellbeing policy objective, ecovillages have tested and refined ways to use the available built, human, social and natural capital to achieve the greatest possible wellbeing with the given resources. To manage this implementation, they have developed techniques and procedures to retain a balanced and integrated approach to planning, budgeting and execution, so that all aspects are taken into account. It is this participatory and holistic governance, which remains a rare example, which could help national governments who are now trying to create such cross-sectoral, intergenerational strategies from scratch. Ecovillages are able to combine both economic and non-economic objectives in one wellbeing-focused governance process. Maximising the quality of people’s lives, their happiness or subjective well-being, is the predominant aim of nearly every ecovillage. With up to a half-century of experience, ecovillages have evidence-based, cross-sectoral policies, and have tested effective budgetary solutions that can be of service to the wider society. As Grinde (2009) points out, these national-level applications are important, because it seems unlikely that the majority of the population will settle in ecovillages or similar places.

Before going further, the use of several terms used here should be defined. The World Health Organization has given us the definition that “quality of life” is “an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns”. It is a broad ranging concept that, in a complex way, is affected by a person’s physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationship to the salient features of their environment” (Oort, 2005).” A second follow-on term, “Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) was defined by Deiner (2009) as “the general evaluation of one’s quality of life”. The concept of subjective wellbeing has three components according to Deiner. He refers to personal assessments of one’s life satisfaction, one’s frequent experience of pleasant emotions and the rare experience of negative emotions (Deiner, 2009).

Quality of Life and Subjective Wellbeing both function as scales of measurement from low to high, yet it is, in fact, just the high quality of life and high level of wellbeing together which is the desired objective itself, so that understanding how to achieve higher levels in these measurements becomes the key issue. Thus, a third concept to define is “flow” or “flourishing”. Flourishing is more than just a high level of wellbeing, and is not equal to it. Seligman (2011) has developed the PERMA theory of wellbeing where Positive emotion, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning and positive Accomplishment (PERMA) are characteristics of a state of flow or flourishing which represents a high level of wellbeing and is relatively easy to identify. Flourishing is that state in which “an individual thrives, stressing the importance of healthy relationships, pathways to achieving flow, the development of a connection to something larger than the self, and other qualities that make for an optimal life” (Pluta, 2012). Used as a measurement tool, it would be possible to quantify the degree of flourishing, providing better information on how to facilitate reaching this state. Hubbert and So (2009) used a model similar to Seligman’s PERMA to measure the percentage of flourishing citizens in 23 European countries. Flow or flourishing is thus a desired state for an individual or community to achieve, requiring additional research to better illuminate how society can promote this high state of wellbeing. This paper will mainly use the term “wellbeing”, which should be understood as both subjective and holistic, including all aspects that contribute to an individual’s or the community’s feeling of wellbeing (Huppert & So, 2009).

2. Materials and methods

To expose the potential for using the experience of ecovillages in wellbeing policy formulation, this paper will try to identify areas where ecovillages have invested time and effort in transforming contemporary structures and

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