

Human needs versus happiness

Ian Gough

Visiting Professor

London School of Economics

In this paper I argue that happiness and subjective wellbeing are hopelessly limited concepts in the era of the Anthropocene. Threats to planetary biophysical boundaries, coupled with egregious inequality between and within nations, require a concept of wellbeing that applies to different cultures and future generations. For well-known reasons (adaptive preferences, cultural bias etc) happiness cannot meet these requirements.

Instead I propose an alternative concept of human wellbeing, the satisfaction of human needs. I argue that human needs are objective, universal, plural, non-substitutable, satiable and cross-generational. In this way the concept enables us to grapple with the difficult choices that confront the world today when faced with global warming and environmental degradation. Need theory can also provide a firmer foundation for the Sustainable Development Goals, agreed by all countries at the United Nations, as a measure of sustainable development and a guide to future policies.

Recent relevant publications:

Gough, I. (2015) Climate change and sustainable welfare: the centrality of human needs. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 39, 1191–1214.

Gough, I. (2017) "Recomposing consumption: Defining necessities for sustainable and equitable wellbeing" *Royal Society Philosophical Transactions*.

Gough, I. (2017) *Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Ltd.