

## **What Can and Should Governments Do for Happiness? Some Theses on Globalization and the Role of Culture**

By Stephan Doempke

Richard Layard (2003) has compiled data which show convincingly that beyond a certain level of income, more money does not make people more happy. Instead, beyond that level, other things become more important such as employment (the feeling of being needed or useful in society), job security (safety against the unforeseeable turns of fate), a good family and community life (stable sex and social relations), mental and physical health (obviously), and political and personal freedom (the opportunity for self-realization, or becoming happy in your own way). This means that people need, first of all, a security to survive, and stability and continuity in their lives.

In one of his arguments, Layard also explains that people tend to become unhappy a) because of habituation (becoming used to their situation) and b) through comparing their own situation with other people, and they will be more unhappy if they compare themselves with people living in circumstances very different from their own. This means that people also need changes in their lives, they need goals which they have a chance to realize, and they need acceptance in their community (status).

For policy-makers, the conclusions seem to be rather clear at large:

1. Provide essential services: Security, food, health, education and jobs. This is the aim of the dominating poverty reduction strategy, and it is fair and well as such.
2. Provide political freedom and the rule of law: This is the "democracy and market economy" strategy - the Western model of development. It is generally agreed, but rather far from being realized in most countries.
3. A good family and social life: This is something which few governments care about. Indeed many of them feel that it is not a government's task to provide for this, and certainly most would be prepared to sacrifice it on behalf of achieving goals 1 and 2.
4. Individual freedom to do what one likes to do, and the pursuit of realizing one's dreams: This is grossly over-emphasized in Western societies, and in possible contradiction with goal 3.

No one will deny that without the basic vital services being provided we don't have to talk about anything else. However, it will definitely be impossible to achieve those goals without democracy and the rule of law, as the examples of the post-Soviet countries, and indeed many developing countries perfectly show.

So if this is difficult, how should a government make sure that families and communities remain intact, and individuals will not simply walk over the demands of social entities in their pursuit of freedom (and happiness)?

It would seem that the task, or art, of government is to find a balance between setting rules and limits, and allowing liberties and individual expression in such a way that the country will develop organically, that traditions are upheld and modified, that new ideas are taken up, tested and integrated into society without interrupting its fine fabric.

The conditions set by the world market and globalization, by satellite TV and the "attack of the present on all other times" seem to make it almost impossible to regulate change today - both for individuals, social groups and states. The powers that be, the economic might of the big corporations – and the logic of expansion under which they operate, which turns everything into a commodity from the moon to our genes, from the water and air to even spirituality and ideas, seem irresistible. And people, as if in a collective craze, seem to be ready to give up everything they once held dear in order to participate in this senseless frenzy for things quick, cheap and easy, everything that keeps them from being themselves. They do want to be happy, of course. The mistake they make is to believe those who tell them that the way to become happy is to forget about themselves instead of searching for themselves.

Now how can any government, or any responsible body in the world attempt to make people change their course?

I would argue that the following things are important:

1. Any government must retain its right to allow people, goods and mental expressions in or refuse them. Such decisions must be taken in a way acceptable to all people of that country, and one enormously important factor in taking such decisions is time. People and governments must have the time to test new things, to develop an opinion about them. to see their short-term and long-term effects and side-effects, to balance advantages against disadvantages in order to take good decisions. In addition, there must be a cultural procedure how such decisions are taken: Such procedures may be anything from democratic votes to councils of elders or oracles, or a mix of them, but it is important that people identify with it.

Governments must be bold in order to resist the ideology of "free trade" when it will mean disruption of their people's way of life. And possibly they will have to pay with less high incomes for some. They can find ways how to remain sovereign against the demands of the WTO, i.e. through placing their countries under a special status such as biosphere reserve or World Heritage Site, which can mean exemption from WTO rules in the name of environment or culture.

2. Governments must absolutely provide for good education, both in terms of knowledge and cultivation. You rule things or they rule you.

If you have a lot of knowledge and command your own ethical and aesthetic standards, your chance to make a constructive use of the TV or internet will be high; if you don't, you will fall victim to soap operas and computer games.

While it may be easy in principle to provide knowledge (through educational institutions), much more emphasis must be placed on making people better cultural beings, or subjects. To maintain, or reestablish, effective social and cultural institutions which allow both rights and obligations, continuity and change, maybe the most difficult, most decisive single task in order to manage both outside influences and the challenges posed by non-conformist individuals within their own cultural group.

3. Spiritual experience may be one of the strongest ways to make people become responsible members of their community, to curb individual desires or greed, and to direct people's forces to constructive activities rather than destructive. Spirituality of the people, however, must not be misused for power, as has been the case in too often.

Mainly in the animistic and buddhist cultures, the enormous effect of spiritual experience on the development of the personality has always been very well understood. In this connection, puberty rites play an essential role. At the time when the ego-function of the youngsters has just fully developed, the spiritual experience tells them that the ego is only a scheme, that there are stronger realities behind it, and that their personality is much more than their ego. And at the same time when their body has just developed its full capacity - enabling them to kill and to rape - , they are being introduced into the fabric of their culture, its history and ethical standards, and they can see themselves as part of a continuum which has been there long before them and which will be there long after them. They are considered adults, with all rights, but also with all obligations. That means, at the time when they can misuse their forces, they are taught how to use them well. They are becoming social beings, learning the standards and procedures of their culture which will enable them to put everything that meets their way into perspective.

Functioning community life, cultural education and spiritual experience would seem to be essential, if not the essential factors in bringing about personalities who have the inner capacities and standards in order to take decisions about their future which will lead to true human development. If people carry such standards within themselves, they will create responsible social and cultural structures and procedures, and no government will have to decide for their people what will make them happy.

Source; Stephan Doempke