

Unit 4 NIC MARKS

The Happy Planet Index

Part 1

And really, this is what I've done with my **adult life**¹—is think about how do we measure happiness, how do we measure well-being, how can we do that within environmental limits. And we created, at the organization I work for, the **New Economics Foundation**,² something we call the Happy Planet Index, because we think people should be happy and the planet should be happy. Why don't we create a measure of progress that shows that? And what we do, is we say that the ultimate outcome of a nation is how successful is it at creating happy and healthy lives for its citizens. That should be the goal of every nation on the planet. But we have to remember that there's a **fundamental input**³ to that, and that is how many of the planet's resources we use. We all have one planet. We all have to share it. It is the ultimate scarce resource, the one planet that we share. And economics is very interested in scarcity. When it has a scarce resource that it wants to turn into a **desirable outcome**,⁴ it thinks in terms of efficiency. It thinks in terms of **how much bang do we get for our buck**.⁵ And this is a measure of how much well-being we get for our planetary resource use. It is an efficiency measure. And probably the easiest way to show you that is to show you this graph.

Running horizontally along the graph is "Ecological footprint," which is a measure of how much resources we use and how much pressure we put on the planet. More is bad. Running vertically upwards, is a measure called "Happy life years." It's about the well-being of nations. It's like a **happiness-adjusted life expectancy**.⁶ It's like quality and quantity of life in nations. And the yellow dot there you see, is the global average. Now, there's a huge array of nations around that global average. To the top right of the graph are countries which are doing reasonably well and producing well-being, but they're using a lot of planet to get there. They are the U.S.A., other Western countries going across in those triangles and a few **Gulf states**⁷ in there, actually. Conversely, at the bottom left of the graph, are countries that are not producing much well-being — typically, sub-Saharan Africa. In **Hobbesian**⁸ terms, life is short and brutish there. Average life expectancy in many of these countries is only 40 years. Malaria, HIV/AIDS are killing a lot of people in these regions of the world.

But now for the good news! There are some countries up there, yellow triangles, that are doing better than global average, that are heading up towards the top left of the graph. This is an aspirational graph. We want to be top left, where

¹ A person's "adult life" usually begins after they graduate from school and start working.

² For more about the New Economics Foundation, see neweconomics.org.

³ Marks uses the term "fundamental input" to refer to what each nation uses in its effort to make its people happy.

⁴ A "desirable outcome" is a positive result, usually one that has been aimed for.

⁵ The expression "bang for your buck" refers to how much value you get for the cost of something. It is often used to talk about the monetary value of something, but Marks is speaking about how much we benefit from using the planet's resources.

⁶ A "happiness-adjusted life expectancy" is a figure that takes into account the expected level of happiness in a life, not just the number of years someone is expected to live.

⁷ The "Gulf states" are countries in the Middle East on the Persian Gulf.

⁸ The term "Hobbesian" refers to Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), a British philosopher who wrote that man is mostly motivated by selfish reasons.

good lives don't cost the Earth. They're Latin American. The country on its own up at the top is a place I haven't been to. Maybe some of you have: Costa Rica. Costa Rica—average life expectancy is 78-and-a-half years. That is longer than in the U.S.A. They are, according to the latest **Gallup World Poll**,⁹ the happiest nation on the planet—than anybody; more than Switzerland and Denmark. They are the happiest place. They are doing that on a quarter of the resources that are used typically in [the] Western world—a quarter of the resources. What's going on there? What's happening in Costa Rica? We can look at some of the data. 99 percent of their electricity comes from renewable resources. Their government is one of the first to commit to be **carbon neutral**¹⁰ by 2021. They abolished the army in 1949—1949. And they invested in social programs—health and education. They have one of the highest literacy rates in Latin America and in the world. And they have that **Latin vibe**,¹¹ don't they? They have the social connectedness. The challenge is, that possibly—and the thing we might have to think about—is that the future might not be North American, might not be Western European. It might be Latin American. And the challenge, really, is to pull the global average up here. That's what we need to do. And if we're going to do that, we need to

pull countries from the bottom, and we need to pull countries from the right of the graph. And then we're starting to create a happy planet. That's one way of looking at it. . . .

Why is it, on the radio news every evening, I hear the FTSE 100, the Dow Jones, the **dollar-pound ratio**¹²—I don't even know which way the dollar-pound should go to be good news. And why do I hear that? Why don't I hear how much energy Britain used yesterday, or America used yesterday? Did we meet our 3 percent annual target on reducing carbon emissions? That's how you create a collective goal. You put it out there into the media and start thinking about it. And we need positive **feedback loops**¹³ for increasing well-being. At a government level, they might create national accounts of well-being. At a business level, you might look at the well-being of your employees, which we know is really linked to creativity, which is linked to innovation, and we're going to need a lot of innovation to deal with those environmental issues. At a personal level, we need these **nudges**,¹⁴ too. . . .

Part 2

What are the five things that you should do every day to be happier?

⁹ The Gallup World Poll is a global survey that collects data and opinions on a range of topics.

¹⁰ Something that is “carbon neutral” sends zero carbon emissions into the atmosphere.

¹¹ Marks uses the term “that Latin vibe” to describe the lively, warm atmosphere associated with Latin nations and its' people.

¹² The “dollar-pound ratio” refers to the strength of the British pound versus the U.S. dollar.

¹³ A “feedback loop” is an economic term that refers to a situation where the product or output is used again as input.

¹⁴ A “nudge” is a gentle push. Marks is using it here as a synonym for “reminder.”

We did a project for the **Government Office of Science**¹⁵ a couple of years ago, a big program called the Foresight program—lots and lots of people—involved lots of experts—everything evidence-based—a huge tome. But a piece of work we did was on: What five positive actions can you do to improve well-being in your life? And the point of these is they are not quite the secrets of happiness, but they are things that I think happiness will flow out the side from. And the first of these is to connect, is that your social relationships are the most important cornerstones of your life. Do you invest the time with your loved ones that you could do, and energy? Keep building them. The second one is be active. Fastest way out of a bad mood: Step outside, go for a walk, turn the radio on and dance. Being active is great for our positive mood. The third one is take notice. How aware are you of things going on around the world, the seasons changing, people around you? Do you notice what's **bubbling up**¹⁶ for you and trying to emerge? Based on a lot of evidence for **mindfulness**,¹⁷ cognitive behavioral therapy, very strong for our well-being. The fourth is keep learning and keep is important—learning throughout the whole life course. Older people who keep

learning and are curious, they have much better health outcomes than those who start to close down. But it doesn't have to be formal learning; it's not knowledge-based. It's more curiosity. It can be learning to cook a new dish, picking up an instrument you forgot as a child. Keep learning. And the final one is that most anti-economic of activities, but give. Our generosity, our altruism, our compassion, are all **hardwired**¹⁸ to the reward mechanism in our brain. We feel good if we give. You can do an experiment where you give two groups of people a hundred dollars in the morning. You tell one of them to spend it on themselves and one on other people. You measure their happiness at the end of the day, that those that have gone and spent on other people are much happier than those that spent it on themselves.

And these five ways, which we put onto these handy postcards, I would say, **don't have to cost the Earth**.¹⁹ They don't have any carbon content. They don't need a lot of material goods to be satisfied. And so I think it's really quite feasible that happiness does not cost the Earth. . . .

¹⁵ The Government Offices of Science is a U.K. organization whose role is to advise the government by providing up-to-date science reports to inform government policies.

¹⁶ Something that is “bubbling up” is coming to the surface. Marks is using it to refer to ideas, thoughts, and awareness.

¹⁷ “Mindfulness” refers to a state of being connected with a present situation both mentally and emotionally by giving it your full attention.

¹⁸ Marks uses “hardwired” to point out that something is physiologically a part of our makeup.

¹⁹ The expression “don't have to cost the Earth,” which Marks uses twice at the end of his speech, is used to explain that something doesn't have to be expensive. However, Marks is also using this as a pun, to point out that to be happy, one does not have to use up all of the Earth's resources.