

WELFARE AND ITS RELATION TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTION

Maarten A. Mentzel

Leiden Institute for Social Scientific Research (LISWO), University of Leiden,
Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden, The Netherlands

Abstract

The article argues that the currently dominant idea of material welfare is at odds with a lifestyle that does justice to basic human values. Measurement of welfare needs to attach importance to a good environment. With regard to the subjective counterpart: social research on the *experience* of welfare - the quality of life - in various Western countries shows clearly that intangible values are very important in the lives of most people. In a process of globalization of economy and cultural supplies, it will be important to strengthen *democratic* concern with the environmental question. The legitimation of political authority in (inter)national negotiations will depend on the attention paid to welfare and quality of life as a public affair.

1. A CHANGING WELFARE CONCEPT

In welfare theory the main stream of research is directed towards the way a society provides for individual and collective needs. Welfare, defined by the dictionary as 'a state of prosperity', varies with both time and culture. The dominant interpretation of 'welfare' in Western democracies is *economic* welfare as a component of total welfare. Indispensable for a new orientation is first of all a model that can illuminate and quantify prevailing ideas of economic or material welfare. Concepts like well-being, quality of life and a 'good life' are used to refer to the welfare experienced subjectively by individuals.

In the context of the rise of Modernity one can understand how this material interpretation of welfare came to dominate. In the West people have come to emphasize active processing and use of natural resources. A second element is the concept of welfare during recent decades. Increase in national income is used not only to measure economic growth, but also to indicate rising welfare. Although welfare and national income are related, the level of welfare is obviously not synonymous with national income. After all, economic growth has been achieved to a great extent at the expense of the quality of the environment. The literature supporting this proposition leads to the conclusion that the old concept of 'growth' is no longer appropriate. Population growth and increa-

sed material welfare threaten the environment. *Environmentally sustainable economic growth* (1991) is one of the many studies that conclude clearly: 'The world has reached limits'.¹

In the early seventies several researchers advocated a new concept of welfare, in which external effects of production processes and consumption patterns that were not priced would be given weight.² In the meantime we know for sure that the striving for more and more - the idea of growth - underlies the dominant lifestyle in the West. The Declaration of Rio (1992) proposes using a new measure for growth.³ During the UNCED it was recognized that the capacity of the environment is limited and that a re-orientation in the Western world with regard to material lifestyles and consumption patterns is necessary. Moreover it was affirmed that under current consumption and production patterns in the North a just distribution of the global environmental space is not possible. Western culture, with its consumption and production patterns, has spread around the world. Since the Club of Rome's *Limits to growth* (1970) much attention has been paid to this, but how people experience welfare has been insufficiently examined. Not until the eighties did the discussion get started. What does new research have to say about this? The following two sections treat both the idea of a new, 'sustainable' lifestyle and its limits.

2. LIFESTYLE

Dominating the current image of humans - as shown by John Passmore in *Man's responsibility for nature* (1974) - is the anthropocentric perspective on the environmental question. In a relation towards nature in which humans are central, the main preoccupation will be how to manage the environment. If this does not change, science, technology and the capitalist economy will lead to the self-destruction of the existing order. Therefore, individuals as well as governments are starting to realize that there are natural limits to the expansion of the science-technology-capital system.⁴ In contrast, in a more ecocentric perspective on the environmental question the emphasis will be on cooperation with nature.

What recent developments can we identify that exhibit this new mentality and lifestyle? ⁵ Obviously, what is happening in the sphere of standards and values is only part of a host of developments - in population, economics, politics, science, technology, physical planning - which together must change in order for there to be a sustainable future. By this we mean a future in which distributional considerations (including inter-temporal distribution) and welfare maximization insure the preservation of the environment.

A sustainable lifestyle finds expression in the main spheres of life, at home, at the work place, in the traffic system, in leisure activities and travel. Principles of a sustainable lifestyle may include:

- attention for the value of intangible aspects of life
- happiness is related to the development of one's talents
- acceptance of self-imposed limitations

- shorter working hours
- sharing of paid work, household and nurturing activities by both men and women.⁶

These considerations have repercussions at a more fundamental level as well. A lasting change in lifestyle or mentality requires a change in the framework of collective meanings under which people live, too. If these collective meanings - including the value assigned to the environment - do not change, then superficial changes in lifestyles will not achieve the desired effect.

One approach to designing an image of humans that is consistent with a sustainable lifestyle, is the conception of fundamental human functional capabilities. Martha Nussbaum has drawn up a list of capabilities which are basic to human life. A minimal theory of the good can be designed that is consistent with this list of basic capabilities. This list should be further examined, for instance by redefining the 'good life' or the 'quality of life'.⁷ Moreover, empirical research is needed on the usefulness of this list as a starting point, as we will see in the next section.

3. MEASUREMENT OF WELFARE

'The' lifestyle in Western society includes both a set of consumer activities and a set of preferences. These two sets need to be described, thereby separating the economic from the socio-psychological aspects and also adjusting the sets to the various social groups in society. By comparing different countries in the West, a coherent and empirically sound view of various Western lifestyles can be presented which together make up Western culture. (For a world-wide overview, see for instance the *World Development Report 1992*.) The crucial point is to identify the connection between well-being and environmental space. This method of identifying components of well-being and measuring them by use of indicators or by surveys can bring together new data on Western societies.

Four recent studies have been done along these lines:

(1) A Swedish study, based on surveys in 1968, 1974 and 1981, explores questions of poverty and inequality. Searching for what causes people to experience a sense of well-being, the findings of this study emphasize people's capacity to satisfy their needs or, more generally, 'to control and consciously direct [their] living conditions'. The redistributive function of the state is emphasized: 'a redistributive model of social policy should cover the basic needs of all citizens'.⁸

(2) Another Swedish study of the quality of life is a comparative research based on interviews held in the seventies in Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway.⁹ Having, Loving and Being are the labels used for central necessary conditions of human development and existence.

'Having' refers to material conditions. The indicators measure economic resources (income and wealth); housing conditions; employment; working

conditions; health; education. 'Loving' can be assessed by measuring attachments and contacts in the local community; attachments to family and kin; active patterns of friendship; attachments and contacts with fellow members in associations and organizations; relationships with workmates. And 'Being' may be characterized as personal growth as opposed to alienation. The indicators measure the extent to which a person can participate in decisions and activities influencing his life; opportunities for leisure-time activities; opportunities for meaningful work, and opportunities to enjoy nature, either through contemplation or through activities such as walking, gardening, and fishing.

(3) Also from Scandinavia is the 'well-being' index drawn up in the nineties in Norway. The central question is: What makes life worth living? The results show that the following factors are decisive: social relations; good health; a clean environment and scenic experiences; and meaningful work. In the fifth place is material possessions.¹⁰

Most important for the improvement of society are the first and the third factors mentioned, *interpersonal relationships* and the *state of nature*. These have deteriorated during the last 30 years.

(4) A last example of empirical research on how people experience welfare is a calculation of the consumption level per country. This method is based on the premise that the contours of an ecological society cannot be sketched by making a sum of individual consumption patterns. In The Netherlands, *Milieudefensie* (associated with *Friends of the Earth*) believes that the two most important goals of ecological change are to reduce consumption of natural resources and to lower the expectations of the material side of the 'good life'.

Research along these lines will be an essential supplement to the seminal findings of Partha Dasgupta. These focus on the conditions in which people live and die in rural communities of poor countries.¹¹ Common to the four studies outlined above is the questioning of economic growth and the search for a shift away from economic growth; it is precisely the emphasis on economic growth that undermines the intangible values which are so important in the lives of most people.

4. WELFARE AS A PUBLIC AFFAIR

However convincing a new framework may be, translating ideas into reality requires political decision making.

At least two points deserve attention: the relation between national and international decision making and the relation between short-term and long-term policy.

Questions relevant to the *national* level: What instruments can be used? Has politics a role in it? Can politics manage this process of change, or must the public opinion first change? But this last approach, however important it is, has

been tried for many years without much effect. Therefore many leading researchers have argued for a paradigm shift towards a reduction in the consumption culture. Instead of just talking about the necessity of economic measures, it is preferable to shift to positive incentives for austerity.

And at the *international* level one of the important questions is: how to invest institutions with sufficient authority to present an appealing vision of sustainable welfare - welfare that both includes distributional considerations and covers the value of nature - and to incorporate this vision into international and supranational decision making processes. Above all it is clear that responsibility as a political category deserves much attention.

In the first case a view towards the future of *national democracies* is needed; in the second case a view of the *globalization process* deserves attention. The role of collective and political action and the role of restricting demand deserve an analysis, in so far as sustainable welfare in relation to quality of life is involved. In short, research in the fields of both political and welfare theory together with social inquiries help to clarify the seeming contradiction between the maximization of the quality of life and the quality of nature.¹²

5. LITERATURE

This paper is part of the SWPA project, by the author in cooperation with J.W. de Beus (University of Amsterdam) and H. Verbruggen (Free University of Amsterdam).

E. Allardt 1993, "Having, Loving, Being: an Alternative to the Swedish Model of Welfare Research", in: Nussbaum & Sen, pp. 88-94.

P. Dasgupta 1993, *An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

A. Dobson & P. Lucardie (Eds.) 1993, *The Politics of Nature. Explorations in Green Political Theory*. London: Routledge.

R.B. Douglass, G.M. Mara & H.S. Richardson (Eds.) 1990, *Liberalism and the Good*. London: Routledge.

Dutch Committee for Long-Term Environmental Policy (DCLEP) (Eds.) 1994, *The Environment: Towards a Sustainable Future*. Dordrecht etc.: Kluwer.

R. Erikson 1993, "Descriptions of Inequality: the Swedish Approach to Welfare Research", in: Nussbaum & Sen, pp. 67-83.

Environmental Resources Limited 1993, *The Best of Both Worlds: Sustainability and Quality Life Styles in the 21st Century*. The Hague: Ministry of the Environment.

R. Goodland, H. Daly, S. El Serafy & B. von Droste (Eds.) 1991, *Environmentally Sustainable Economic Development: Building on Brundtland*. Paris: Unesco.

D. Hareide 1991, *Det Gode Norge*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.

- 1994, "Has the Quality of Life Improved in Western Europe?" Ms.

F. Hirsch 1977, *Social Limits to Growth*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

R. Huetting 1980, *New Scarcity and Economic Growth*. Amsterdam: North-

Holland Publishing Co.

M. Mentzel & P.B. Lehning 1994, "A Political Basis for a Sustainable Society", in: DCLEP, pp. 443-462.

L. Milbrath 1993, "Redefining the Good Life in a Sustainable Society", in: *Environmental Values* 2, pp. 261-269.

M. Nussbaum 1990, "Aristotelian Social Democracy", in: Douglas et al., pp. 203-252.

T. O'Riordan (Ed.) 1995, *Environmental Science for Environmental Management*. Harlow: Longman.

T. Scitovsky 1976, *The Joyless Economy: an Inquiry into Human Satisfaction and Consumer Dissatisfaction*. New York: O.U.P.

World Bank 1992, *World Development Report. Development and the Environment*. Oxford: O.U.P.

6. REFERENCES

1. Goodland, Daly, El Faleh & von Droste 1991.
2. Huetting 1980; Hirsch 1977; Scitovsky 1976.
3. Cf. O'Riordan (Ed.) 1995, Ch. 1, 'The Global Environmental Debate', pp. 20f.
4. Dutch Committee for Long-Term Environmental Policy (DCLEP) 1994, p. 11.
5. Dobson & Lucardie (Eds.) 1993.
6. Environmental Resources Limited 1993.
7. Nussbaum 1990.
8. Erikson 1993.
9. Allardt 1993.
10. Hareide 1994.
11. Dasgupta 1993.
12. Cf. Mentzel & Lehning 1994.