Happiness Becomes a Fundamental Human Right and Goal

Jayme Illien

Throughout history, the greatest sages, including Aristotle and Buddha, have taught humanity that material life must be harnessed to meet human needs, most importantly to promote “the end of suffering, social justice, and the attainment of happiness.” (World Happiness Report 2012)

Just 200 years ago, long after Abraham, Moses, Aristotle, Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus, humanity’s claim to happiness first achieved legal legitimacy when the Declaration of Independence recognized and defined certain “endowed” and “unalienable” rights, including the right to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Thirteen years later, on August 26th, 1789, the National Assembly of France adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which also emphasized happiness as a fundamental human right and universal goal: “… [T]he natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man...[and] of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable principles, shall tend to the maintenance of the constitution and redound to the happiness of all.”

At one of the most decisive and revolutionary times in human history, ordinary citizens were declaring their independence from monarchies and the fundamental rights and universal goals endowed to all human beings, and forming new nations based on rule of law and the pursuit of happiness.

Happiness: A New Renaissance for All

In modern times, heads of state, Nobel economists, entrepreneurs, academic institutions, and other influential figures and organizations have all played significant roles in moving happiness for individuals and countries to the top of the international policy agenda. In the past fifteen years, happiness has achieved recognition as a realistic and “new,” potentially measurable, target for societies and all human beings. This new school of “happiness economics and public policy,” comprised of a wide range of breakthrough research reports, commissions, indexes, and international initiatives, attempts to ground happiness as realistic socio-economic and public policy objective for governments.

GDP, or Gross Domestic Product, which measures human progress exclusively by income, was formulated in the 1930’s in response to the 1929 Great Depression, before we knew to consider climate change or social progress in the measure of a country’s overall wealth and prosperity. Then, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, from which most economies are still recovering, raised further questions for the epistemic community about using income only to measure human progress.

In July 2006, the New Economics Foundation launched the Happy Planet Index, one of the first efforts to expand beyond GDP. The HPI (continued on page 3)
measures a country’s human well-being and environmental impact, giving progressively higher scores to nations with lower ecological footprints.

In 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy elevated happiness to a national target when he commissioned Nobel Economist Joseph Stiglitz, former Chair of President of Bill Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisers, Amartya Sen (both Trustees of Economists for Peace and Security), Jean-Paul Fitoussi, and multiple experts from the OECD to research happiness as a new metric of human progress expanding on GDP.

In 2010, UK Prime Minister David Cameron launched his country’s first effort to measure the happiness and wellbeing of its citizens. A 2010 article in the The Guardian with the headline, “Happiness Index to Gauge Britain’s Mood,” led with, “The UK is poised to be among the first countries to officially monitor happiness.”

In 2011, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) launched the “Better Life Index” comprising a decade of efforts to consolidate international measures of human happiness and well-being and drawing on recommendations of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi happiness commission.

These were among the early initiatives to measure happiness as a universal goal of all citizens in a country. The first, however, was the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan’s.

**UN Resolution 65/309: Happiness towards a Holistic Approach to Development**

The Kingdom of Bhutan had been measuring “gross national happiness” since 1970. In 2011, Bhutan officially elevated happiness to a fundamental human right and goal. Then-Prime Minister of Bhutan Jigmi Y. Thinley and then-Ambassador from Bhutan to the United Nations, His Excellency Lhatu Wangchuk, led an initiative to draft and campaign for the adoption of UN Resolution 65/309, Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development.

This resolution was a giant leap forward in the recognition of happiness in international law as a fundamental human goal. It reads as follows:

*The General Assembly,*

*Bearing in mind the purposes and principles of the United Nations, as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, which include the promotion of the economic advancement and social progress of all peoples,*

*Conscious that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal,*

*Cognizant that happiness as a universal goal and aspiration embodies the spirit of the Millennium Development Goals,*

*Recognizing that the gross domestic product indicator by nature was not designed to and does not adequately reflect the happiness and well-being of people in a country,*

*Cognizant that unsustainable patterns of production and consumption can impede sustainable development, and recognizing the need for a more inclusive, equitable, and balanced approach to economic growth that promotes sustainable development, poverty eradication, happiness, and well-being of all peoples,*

*Acknowledging the need to promote sustainable development and achieve the Millennium Development Goals,*

1. Invites Member States to pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and well-being in development with a view to guiding their public policies;

2. Invites those Member States that have taken initiatives to develop new indicators, and other initiatives, to share information thereon with the Secretary-General as a contribution to the United Nations development agenda, including the Millennium Development Goals;

3. Welcomes the offer of Bhutan to convene during the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly a panel discussion on the theme of happiness and well-being;

4. Invites the Secretary-General to seek the views of Member States and relevant regional and international organizations on the pursuit of happiness and well-being and to communicate such views to the General Assembly at its sixty-seventh session for further consideration.

As a result of Bhutan’s initiative, the first ever High Level Meeting on Happiness and Well-being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm, took place on April 2, 2012, bringing together global leaders to discuss happiness and sustainable development as fundamental and universal goals.

It was my great privilege to join Prime Minister Thinley, then-President of Costa Rica, Laura Chinchilla-Miranda, then-Prime Minister of New Zealand and current head of UNDP, Ms. Helen Clark, and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and other high-level delegates from Australia, Finland, India, Israel, Japan, Qatar, Morocco, Thailand, the UK, China, France, Luxembourg, the OECD, and the EU, to define a new economic paradigm based on sustainable development, happiness, and well-being.

As Prime Minister Clark of New Zealand announced:

“Today, Bhutan is putting before us a framework for a New Economic Paradigm, based on principles of happiness and well-being…The framework has been shaped by Bhutan’s unique experience in applying the concept of Gross National Happiness, which informs all its government policies. This approach integrates inclusive economic growth with strengthening communities, protecting the environment, [and] providing universal access to health services and education…”

At this first High Level Meeting on Happiness and Well-being: Defining a
New Economic Paradigm, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon delivered a resounding message, directly equating global happiness with the global goals of sustainable development: “We need a new economic paradigm that recognizes the three pillars of sustainable development. Economic, social, and environmental well-being are indivisible. Together they define gross global happiness.”

International Day of Happiness: The Beginning

I began traveling the world with my adoptive mother from a very young age, visiting orphans and humanitarian organizations, and meeting with government representatives. These experiences had a profound impact on me as I saw kids in horrendous conditions, kids who were just like me, except I got to leave and go back to America. I made a promise to them that I would work to do something about their situation permanently. The experience of finding permanent, loving families for children trapped in extreme poverty and orphanages inspired me to wonder about the root causes of poverty, human suffering, and more broadly, about the purpose of the human life. And so, for over thirty years, from well before Bhutan’s successful campaign to raise happiness to the top of the international policy agenda, I’ve dedicated my life to creating and spreading happiness.

The Illien Global Public Benefit Corporation was founded in 1982 with mission of Happiness for All. As the CEO, I was inspired by the leadership and initiative of the Kingdom of Bhutan and other happiness economics and public policy movements. In 2011, my team and I approached the United Nations and met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to propose the idea to expand public awareness and insure in perpetuity happiness’s place at the top of the international policy agenda through the creation of the International Day of Happiness. We drafted and campaigned for UN Resolution 66/281. It was adopted on June 28, 2012, with the support of United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and consensus of all 193 member countries. It reads as follows:

“The General Assembly,
Recalling its resolution 65/309 of 19 July 2011, which invites Member States to pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and well-being in development with a view to guiding their public policies,
Conscious that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal,
Recognizing the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in the lives of human beings around the world and the importance of their recognition in public policy objectives,
Recognizing also the need for a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth that promotes sustainable development, poverty eradication, happiness, and the well-being of all peoples,

“We need a new economic paradigm that recognizes the three pillars of sustainable development. Economic, social, and environmental well-being are indivisible. Together they define gross global happiness.”

1. Decides to proclaim 20 March the International Day of Happiness…”

UN Resolution 66/281 then requests the UN’s Secretary-General and all of its member states, as well as other UN agencies, international organizations, civil society, and global citizens to promote the day through education and public awareness-raising activities and to observe and celebrate it in an appropriate manner.

Success

The launch of the International Day of Happiness marks another major turning point in humanity’s ultimate quest. Since its inception in 2012, the International Day of Happiness has been a tremendous success. Each year, the happiness movement grows exponentially larger.

My first memorable Happiness Day moment was celebrating with Ndb Mandela, grandson of Nelson Mandela, Chelsea Clinton, and thousands of empowered youths at TEDxTeen in New York.

In 2014, Pharrell Williams expanded the Happiness Day celebrations when he partnered with the United Nations Foundation to create the first 24-hour music video for his hit song, “Happy,” and asked people all over the world to submit videos of themselves dancing to the song. This campaign inspired global citizens as far as Iran, Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt and the UAE to participate.

That year, UN Secretary General Ban Kimoon gave a statement directly equating happiness with serious global policy challenges like ending conflict and poverty, and making clear happiness for all is a human right:

“Happiness may have different meanings for different people. But we can all agree that it means working to end conflict, poverty and other unfortunate conditions in which so many of our fellow human beings live.

Happiness is neither a frivolity nor a luxury. It is a deep-seated yearning shared by all members of the human family. It should be denied to no one and available to all. This aspiration is implicit in the pledge of the United Nations Charter to promote peace, justice, human rights, social progress and improved standards of life.”

In 2015, Pharrell addressed the world’s youth from the UN General Assembly, declaring, “Happiness is your birthright.” He also teamed with Google to throw a ‘Global Happy Party,’ appearing in cartoon form in Google Hangout sessions around the world. This campaign, along with other
“Happiness may have different meanings for different people. But we can all agree that it means working to end conflict, poverty and other unfortunate conditions in which so many of our fellow human beings live.

corporate and grassroots initiatives, generated over 300 million impressions on the day across all websites and social media.

Perhaps the greatest moment of the 2015 Happiness Day celebrations came when United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “Happiness for the entire human family is one of the main goals of the United Nations.”

The Secretary-General’s words could not have been more timely, coming just six months before the largest-ever gathering of global leaders at the 70th anniversary of the UN General Assembly to adopt “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” These Global Goals for Sustainable Development follow from the Secretary General’s call for a new economic paradigm for sustainable development and gross global happiness. The 17 goals target 169 objectives promoting global happiness and provide the essential blueprint by which civil societies, businesses, and governments can pursue happiness over the next 15 years and beyond.

**Humanity’s Greatest Quest is Just Beginning ... Again**

In a 2015, *The Huffington Post* published a piece titled, "The Path to Happiness: Lessons From the 2015 World Happiness Report." In it director of the UN Sustainable Solutions Network Jeffrey Sachs wrote, "We are at an early stage in the new science of happiness and life satisfaction, and at an even earlier stage in thinking about the implications for public policy. Yet the ancient sages and the latest research both tell us to keep moving forward, to put happiness back at the center of our public concerns.”

We live in a new age of unlimited possibilities and breakthrough public policy initiatives that point to an increasingly bright future for the happiness of all global citizens. Illien Global Public Benefit Corpora-tion looks forward to engaging with more global partners, like-minded organizations, and individuals to celebrate the next International Day of Happiness on March 20th, 2016. We are especially excited by the potential for future Happiness Days to advance greater global awareness of every individual’s human right to happiness. Please visit our official website at [www.happinessday.org](http://www.happinessday.org) to find out how you can help make March 20th, 2016, the happiest day of all time.