



WHAT WORKS?

Speech
by
the President of Iceland
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Excellencies,
Dear guests,

It gives me great pleasure to address you tonight. The two prominent concepts associated with your endeavour, an index of social progress, and the quest for what works in society, make great sense. All sorts of attempts have been made to evaluate the success of societies and civilisations. It is very hard to do this without posing the question: What is success in this context? When can you say that a society is successful? What is progress?

The GNP, Gross National Product, is probably the best known international indicator of economic success. Indeed, it may have become a holy grail in the eyes of some leaders who want above all to make their people richer. But GNP is not the be-all and end-all of success. How about GNH instead? In 2008, the government of Bhutan introduced their concept of Gross National Happiness. Therefore, the following article was written into the Bhutanese constitution: “The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness.”

Similarly, in 2011 the UN General Assembly passed a Resolution (65/309) titled “Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development“. And last year, the government of Dubai also acknowledged this notion by establishing a Ministry of Happiness. It is important to keep in mind that this trend is not the same as the fallacious

doctrine, taught by rich people throughout the ages, that money isn't everything, that it is really a burden to be rich. No, this is closer to the thought that for individuals, families, regions to fare well, more is needed than money regularly changing hands in their country as a whole – which is pretty much what the GNP measures.

Furthermore, we in the Western world enjoy more material prosperity than most other peoples, we are far better off than our ancestors. Worryingly, increased wealth is confined in the hands of the very few, the mega rich. Also, despite physical safety and material wellbeing, too many people find it hard to be happy. It is no laughing matter but as the U.S. cartoonist “Kin” Hubbard once quipped: “It’s pretty hard to tell what does bring happiness. Poverty and wealth have both failed.”

It must be our task, still, to find out what makes us happy, as individuals, as a society. “The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.” We can surely support that principle, put forward by Jeremy Bentham, the famous British philosopher. But we need to find the right way, and we need a roadmap. The Social Progress Index can guide us, as it seeks to measure such indicators as Access to Basic Knowledge, Personal Rights, Tolerance, and Inclusion. Of course, it is not enough to measure these crucial aspects of civil society. By doing so, however, we can at the same time promote them, advance the cause of human rights, welfare, and hopefully, happiness.

Dear friends – and in particular, dear guests from abroad: “How do you like Iceland?” There was a time when we Icelanders asked every foreign visitor this question, eagerly anticipating the welcome reply that he or she loved the country and the people, and thus became an instant Íslandsvinur – friend of Iceland. We have grown more mature and self-confident. Moreover, according to some surveys, you are at present in the world’s most tolerant, progressive and eco-friendly country in the world. There is no need for boasting, the facts speak for themselves, do they not? Let me add immediately that even if this description of Iceland is true, there is always more work ahead. But allow me to express the hope as well that you like Iceland and that you will use the time here to make the world a better place. That is one huge task but – to conclude – it must not overwhelm us. Let’s keep in mind the wisdom of Hávamál, the ancient Norse poem we preserved here in Iceland:

The unwise man is awake all night,
and ponders everything over;
when morning comes he is weary in mind,
and all is a burden as ever.