

Spring-time happiness

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Today, 20 March, Spring begins. Hopefully ending the cold and snow of last winter.

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20 March is also the day that the UN have declared International Day of Happiness. That sounds vague and woolly.

Or not? Increasingly, we become aware that, when measuring Gross National Product (GNP), we overlook essential elements. Namely those elements that concern general well-being and that cannot be directly quantified.

Elements that count external effects of growth and consumption and that give appreciation to the intangible values in life that, all too often, seem to be violated. Inspired by Bhutan, the only country in the world that pursues Gross National Happiness, European nations also started to look for more inclusive measures of the concept of wealth.

At the beginning of his presidency, France's former President Nicolas Sarkozy had a commission of renowned economists consider how to measure the economy more inclusively.

See the bilingual website of the Stiglitz Commission (officially: the Committee for the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress). And UK Prime Minister David

Cameron, not exactly a woolly radical with leftist sympathies, recommended a more comprehensive measurement of progress in society.

In Brussels this evening, the Palace of Fine Arts organises a discussion dedicated to the International Day of Happiness.

In the Netherlands, the training arm of the employers' association VNO-NCW, De Baak, today organises an event dedicated to happiness. There is even an entire branch of economics that deals with well-being beyond the figures on GNP.

Bruno Frey and Richard Layard are known exponents of 'happiness economics'. What should we do with the International Day of Happiness in the middle of the crisis?

Should we not grow out of debt and consume more? Growth instead of economic decline is indeed required in the Member States which tumbled backwards during the crisis and suffer heavily under the economic and social impact of budget cuts and necessary structural reforms.

But in Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain, Italy and Cyprus more is needed than old-fashioned growth. Smart, green growth, with emphasis on sustainability, and alternative economic activities may be the answer to stagnation, recession and depression.

Better education, with attention that 'costs' time, and better healthcare that is human-centered instead of focused on protocols and profits, do contribute to a better economy.

A return to consumerism and the tendency to 'more, more, and more', which have plunged us into the crisis, is not desirable. On the contrary, we need awareness of other opportunities for development. More 'to be' and less 'to have'. An International Day of Happiness may help us to stand still and open the mind to such other possibilities.

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