

The Post's Outlook Section Submission: World Wide Wellbeing

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Today, the words *Arab Spring* still trigger images of violence, social unrest, and impoverished living standards -- the very antithesis of a region that was ostensibly enjoying a vigorous economy with steadily climbing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per Capita ratings from 2005-2011. While most observers viewed this robust GDP as a sign that life was good in the region, a handful of others were tracking the (Gallup) Wellbeing Index, which plummeted from a high of 24-25 percent in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively, to less than half over the same time period. Buoyed by a healthy GDP, it is not surprising that so few were paying close attention to the dropping wellbeing indices, although severely diminished wellbeing proved to be a better indicator of the impending, sharp decline in Arab society.

Why would a "wellbeing" index provide a stronger signal than GDP of the dangers ahead? We believe that the questions and responses on the wellbeing index paint a much better picture of what is really going on with an individual's health, wealth, relationships with family and community, and their job satisfaction. Essentially, it creates a more complete and accurate snapshot of the state of social conditions, providing a barometer for measuring just how much a person is enjoying a better life.

A wellbeing assessment really takes a person's overall temperature: inquiring how people perceive their future, how they regard their physical and emotional health, what they think about the quality of conditions at work and at home — as well as how they're faring economically. While the GDP is far from useless, it is very limited. Think about meeting some old friends or colleagues at a class reunion. If you asked them how they're doing, would it be enough if they just told you they recently got a salary increase or took a cut in pay?

When leading global economists began advocating for more robust ways to measure the quality of our lives and the gathering of statistics that capture key fundamental measures of wellbeing, a cadre of individuals from different parts of the world and representing multiple business disciplines decided to take action. The genesis of a World Wide Wellbeing (WWW) movement was underway, and much groundwork has taken place over the past two years. While collectively steeped in the 1930's economic fundamentals of Simon Kuznets, a Russian immigrant internationally regarded as the founding father of the GDP, we too began to question whether this time-honored index was really the best gauge of the human condition. It did not take long for us to conclude that there had to be a better data set for assessing what really matters beyond economics and other practical things: namely, our quality of life as each person defines it, with measurements that span happiness and personal fulfillment.

The venerable GDP may not be the ultimate arbiter of how a country and its citizens are faring, but measuring wellbeing allows us to see a richer picture of a country's economic, social, and political status. Thankfully, the Gallup-Healthways Wellbeing Index and the OECD Better Life Index both assess wellbeing in countries worldwide. In fact, global research shows that people with higher wellbeing have higher employee engagement/productivity, incur lower health care costs, and are more resilient in the face of challenges such as unemployment. Also, higher wellbeing has been associated with outcomes indicative of stability and resilience — healthcare utilization, intent to migrate, trust in elections and local institutions, daily stress, food/shelter security, and volunteerism. We embrace the excellent work of both Gallup and OECD in providing these wellbeing metrics, as well as the work of many other wellbeing efforts already underway, advanced by organizations including The United Nations, Johnson & Johnson, The Institute for Healthcare Improvement, The Samueli Institute, and The WHO Sponsored Commission on Social Determinants of Health. By connecting to these advocates for wellbeing and exploring opportunities to move the dial, we collectively strengthen the movement.

From our perspective at WWW, it will be important to develop actionable approaches that influence progress. An initiative of this magnitude really requires a more structured movement to introduce and advance programs that actually change wellbeing in the 21st century. Citizens need to be inspired and committed to establishing positive behaviors that lead to individual and collective productivity – at home, on-the-job, and throughout society. Constituents need to be convinced that they can readily transition from working in silos to raise their levels of individual happiness and personal satisfaction to embracing a more unified approach where all are aligned around common goals for the good of the people and the countries in which they live. With a consistent and unified effort, the prize is a win-win scenario that optimizes wellbeing.

This level of innovation will likely result from the very people we want to serve. The key will be to take existing practices and methodologies, leverage them at the country level, and deliver a collective impact. As we are learning, this type of large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, and the combined efforts of those who can go beyond their individual agendas in favor of a collective approach to improving wellbeing across-the-board and focused on a particular geographic region. This undertaking requires many different players to change their behavior in order to solve a complex problem. For example, public health entities should embrace the private sector as partners to positively influence wellbeing. After all, employer goals are aligned with public health goals, and the workplace is an excellent venue for influencing wellbeing.

While this sounds like a tall order, turning wellbeing data indices into an actionable agenda is, in fact, very much within reach. What is required is the introduction of programming that will influence the wellbeing indices, seizing opportunities to create a bottom-up and top-down movement that transforms societal behavior and engages individuals to take action. We have achieved large-scale social change with similar tactics on many fronts, such as the social consciousness around smoking or the green movement to protect our ecosystem. To achieve collective impact, there are five conditions that together produce true alignment and lead to powerful results: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations.

Step one will be to identify the causes and problems that impact the progress of wellbeing, paying attention to the data and what it is communicating. Follow-on activities should focus on marshaling public, private, and individual resources to take action and jump-starting synergies that foster partnerships between public and private sectors. Organizations that have tools to power these activities should step forward. Instituting public policy “fixes” to enhance opportunities for improved wellbeing will enhance progress.

Ignoring the impact of wellbeing – regionally and globally -- and not taking action may have grave consequences. We’ve witnessed the shock effects of a low wellbeing index: violence, conflict, inability to cope with natural disasters, health problems, etc. Could we have predicted the fallout of the Arab Spring based upon a nosedive in the wellbeing index?

Was the plunging wellbeing index in the Ukraine also a wake-up call? A better state of wellbeing may have generated a better outcome for all.

Perhaps we are advised to look over our own shoulders, start paying attention to the indices, and initiate activities. The World Wide Wellbeing (WWW) organization embraces this purpose, and has already brought together bright minds worldwide to take on this challenge. More research is required, in addition to the dedication of time, energy and resources. After all, doesn't everyone deserve a better life?