

"The More the Merrier?": Balancing Social Wellbeing with Climate Responsibility

Authors
Abir Khribich[a]

[a] Université Côte d'Azur, CNRS, GREDEG, EUR ELMI, Nice, France

A need for capabilities to ensure sustainability …

Welcome to the Anthropocene era, where human activities shape the destiny of our planet. This epoch highlights the unprecedented influence that human activities have on the Earth's future. It is a wake-up call for us to acknowledge and address our immense responsibility to reduce the negative impacts of our actions and develop sustainable solutions. Given this undeniable reality, it is imperative for individuals, communities, and governments to unite and take urgent measures to create a sustainable and resilient future for ourselves and future generations [1, 7].

The responsibilities that citizens can and increasingly do take on to confront the various forms of planetary degradation depend greatly on their skills, their motivations, and their capabilities in general. Social wellbeing plays a critical role in developing these elements, particularly in limiting climate change. Societies that promote social wellbeing create a fertile ground for engaged, aware, and active citizens in the fight against climate change, thus contributing to a greener and more resilient future for everyone. Social wellbeing, which encompasses mental and physical health, interpersonal relationships, and a sense of community belonging, is vital for individuals to feel able and motivated to act. Indeed, citizens who are in good health are more likely to actively participate in ecological initiatives, while those who benefit from a strong social network and a good level of education tend to be better informed and more engaged in sustainable practices [13].

… But wellbeing to infinity?

Economist Manfred Max-Neef presents a framework called the "Fundamental Human Needs Matrix," which outlines nine basic needs: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, recreation, creativity, identity and freedom. To address these needs effectively, Max-Neef identifies four existential categories: being (such as maintaining good health), having (including access to shelter), doing (engaging in rest or work) and interacting (participating in community life) [9].

At the heart of this conception lies a crucial dilemma, namely, whether the pursuit of unlimited

growth in social wellbeing as a strategy to address climate change is advisable. It should be acknowledged that addressing climate change does not align with the idea of an infinite expansion of wellbeing. Basic necessities like subsistence, protection, and freedom have certain threshold levels for sufficiency.

In essence, if people used to be seen mainly as homo economicus - individuals whose happiness was based on what they could acquire materially - the understanding that we are also homo sapiens brings in a wider range of needs. This concept resembles behaviors observed throughout the animal kingdom, suggesting a biological similarity. Similar to humans, animals exhibit behaviors that lead to pleasure, indicating a commonality ingrained in the brain's reward system. The connection between anticipated pleasure and actual rewards, as demonstrated by dopamine-driven responses in monkeys during experiments, highlights a universal mechanism for learning and motivation. This indicates that while seeking material gains can bring satisfaction, our brains are also designed to pursue actions that yield emotional and psychological rewards [5].

Within humans, this tendency to seek pleasure has led to a critical juncture. We have reached a point in our development where we get so much pleasure from our lifestyles that we do not realize how much harm it is causing us. We are caught up in a never-ending cycle of extracting, processing, producing, transporting, consuming, and disposing, just to satisfy our craving for those pleasurable moments when dopamine is released [2, 11].

In the digital age, this pursuit of pleasure has discovered a fertile ground in social media. Each notification, share, or "like" can trigger a small release of dopamine, reinforcing our engagement with these platforms by activating the reward system in our brains. The algorithms that govern our feeds deliver a tailored stream of content that aligns with our past behaviors and interests, creating an echo chamber effect. If your social media activity centers on fast fashion, luxury cars, and exotic travel destinations, you're less likely to encounter content about thrift shopping, electric vehicles, or local eco-tourism, illustrating how the "filter bubble" can reinforce environmentally damaging behaviors. It allows us to inhabit a comforting digital space that rarely confronts us with the uncomfortable realities or the urgency of environmental degradation [10, 6].

It may seem contradictory initially to associate decreased public awareness with improved social wellbeing. However, it is commonly understood that advancements in technology lead to lower prices for clean technologies and consequently trigger increased consumption in other areas. For example, consumers may spend the cost savings brought about by their new, more energy-efficient boiler for a holiday abroad, which, in turn, is accompanied by increased emissions [5, 12]. As Brenda Boardman commented [4]:

"The substantial improvements in energy efficiency have been absorbed into more and larger products. At some stage, society needs to recognize that ever-higher standards of living are threatening our ability to limit climate change and, therefore, reducing our future quality of life."

Ending Stigmatization and Prioritizing Low-Wellbeing Groups

We recall the concept of "iatrogenic" from the field of medicine, which refers to the unintended side effects caused by a medical treatment or intervention. If the treatment (in this case, the pursuit of wellbeing) not only fails to heal (or fails to raise our environmental awareness) but actually leads to new problems (such as climate change), should we continue to escalate it?

Shifting our focus, in terms of policy, governments do not need to continuously increase social wellbeing to mitigate climate change. Instead, a more targeted approach can be adopted by prioritizing specific groups with lower levels of wellbeing. This strategy ensures the efficient allocation of resources to have the greatest impact on environmental issues, all while simultaneously enhancing overall social development and individual wellbeing.

Moving our perspective to a more real-world scenario, consider the choice of switching from a gas-guzzling SUV to a compact, fuel-efficient car. This is an eco-conscious move, but it might not be affordable for everyone, especially if you are on a tight budget and rely on your vehicle for daily commuting.

The reality is that there is a direct correlation between a high standard of living and environmental pressure. The more wealth someone has, the more pollution they tend to generate. Globally, the top 10% wealthiest individuals are responsible for almost half of all greenhouse gas emissions, while only 12% can be attributed to the poorest 50% [8].

To drive broader change in society and among individuals, it is important to create a compelling vision of the future that inspires people to be part of positive change. Adopting vegetarian diets, driving electric vehicles, and reducing consumption are important steps but not enough, if our volume of consumption remains unchanged and these environmentally friendly options are not accessible to all members of society, rather than just a select few privileged individuals. A paradigm shift is needed which requires strong political choices and uniting consumers around ecological concerns. We need to construct an inclusive ecological framework that acknowledges the requirements of all groups, without marginalizing individual behaviors or overlooking our distinct differences [3].

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