

POVERTIES AND SATISFIERS: A SYSTEMS LOOK AT HUMAN NEEDS *Creating a New Democracy*

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Summary

All systems have needs, whether the systems be people, families, communities, cities, economics or ecosystems. System needs are complex. They exist simultaneously, and must be addressed systemically and holistically, rather than via narrow selection and "targeting". Satisfaction of those needs is the central meaning of Sustainable Development.

Unsatisfied needs indicate the existence of poverties. In this paper, we emphasise that simple solutions to address poverty or poverties are seldom adequate to address the complexity of such situations. Satisfiers of poverties need to be identified via procedures that are guided by ethical principles clarified through community processes.

A framework to address this situation is described. In so doing we hope to set the scene for a new democracy which is not just about voting but about setting the agenda - together.

Basic Needs of People

In recent years, social development workers in Central and South American countries have produced some important ideas, directly relevant to the issues we are addressing. For example, Manfred Max-Neef [1] has asserted that "*Development is about people and not about objects*". If we accept this position, the first question that arises is: *How can we determine whether one development process is better than another?* Traditionally this has been done via *measures of the quantitative growth of objects* such as GDP. Nowadays, we see the need for an *indicator of the qualitative growth of people*. But what does that mean? Max-Neef responds: *The best development process will be the one which allows the greatest improvement in people's quality of life.*

The second question is, therefore, *What determines people's quality of life?* To Max-Neef, *Quality of Life depends on the possibilities people have to adequately satisfy their fundamental human needs.* We then come to the third question: *What are those fundamental human needs, and who decides what they are?*

Traditional economic thinking states that human needs are infinite, that they change over time and that they differ in each culture or environment and each historical period. Max-Neef suggests that *while the means of satisfying a need may be highly variable, the need itself may be the same everywhere.* Having established a distinction between Needs and Satisfiers, it is possible to make two more assertions.

- *Fundamental human needs are finite, few and classifiable.*
- *Fundamental human needs are the same in all cultures and in all historical periods. What changes, both over time and through cultures, is the way or the means by which the needs are satisfied.*

Max-Neef has organised Human Needs into nine fundamental categories: *Subsistence, Protection, Affection, Understanding, Participation, Idleness, Creation, Identity and Freedom.* Each Need occurs at four different levels of activity: Being, Having, Doing and Interacting.

The Needs are all necessary, all equal. *Any human need that is not adequately satisfied reveals a human Poverty.* Examples include:

- *the Poverties of Subsistence* (due to insufficient income, food, shelter etc);
- *the Poverties of Protection* (due to inadequate health systems, violence, arms race etc);
- *the Poverties of Affection* (due to authoritarian government, oppression, exploitative relationships etc);
- *the Poverties of Understanding* (due to poor quality of education);
- *the Poverties of Participation* (due to marginalisation and discrimination against women, children and minorities);
- *the Poverties of Identity* (due to imposition of alien values on local/regional cultures etc).

It is important to remember that there are multiple poverties, not just one kind of poverty. Also, every poverty, if extended beyond a threshold, leads to a Pathology, a sickness.

This analysis leads to a classification of different kinds of satisfiers of fundamental needs. For example:

- *Destroyers* are satisfiers that address one need but end up destroying that need and others as well. As

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examples, the arms race, bureaucracy and authoritarianism promise Protection, but also stifle Subsistence, Affection, Participation and Freedom, while they increase insecurity.

- *Pseudo-Satisfiers* are appealing, but they only promise to fill needs; they don't actually do so. Examples include advertising, chauvinistic nationalism, prostitution, charity, aggregate economic indicators such as GDP.
- *Inhibitors* satisfy one need but inhibit another. For example, an overprotective family provides Protection but inhibits Affection, Understanding, Participation, Identity and Freedom. Obsessive economic competitiveness provides a form of Freedom, but stifles Subsistence, Protection, Affection, Participation and Idleness.
- *Singular Satisfiers* satisfy one need while steadfastly ignoring others. Insurance, guided tours, professional armies, curative medicine are examples.
- *Synergic Satisfiers* meet several different needs at once. Breast-feeding, popular education, barefoot doctors, democratic trade unions, educational games, preventive medicine, music, art, cooking and ornamentation are examples.

A very similar analysis arises from a General Systems approach, as developed by Bossel [1]. He addresses the requirement to satisfy the generic fundamental needs (which he refers to as Basic Orientors) for long term viability of a wide range of systems, human and non-human, living and constructed. These Basic Orientors come in seven basic categories: *Existence, Psychological needs, Effectiveness, Freedom, Security, Adaptability and Coexistence*. The nine Max-Neef and seven Bossel categories map easily on to one another, enabling social, economic and environmental factors to be taken into consideration together, through a common approach (see Peet and Bossel (op cit) for further information).

The Ethical Basis of an Approach to Basic Needs

The key element in finding out if people's needs are being satisfied is prior determination of an ethical principle against which the nature and extent of satisfaction of basic (or fundamental) needs can be evaluated. This evaluation can be done by identifying *Indicators* which must measure not only quantity of possessions or of income, but quality of life.

The things that really matter cannot usually be counted. The NZ writer Anne Else [1] has made some trenchant comments in this context:

Without families and communities, the economy means nothing. It has no life of its own. Its only purpose is to enable us to live, to care for one another and to raise our children to take our place. If we lose the power to do that, no matter how fast the GDP rises or how much the budget surplus grows, we will have no future worth working for.

According to Steve Hatfield Dodds [1], needs of humans cannot be separated from those of the total system of life on earth:

The truly good society is one which combines justice and the highest human freedoms to promote the well-being of all of its members, both present and future, while protecting the integrity and beauty of the earth and all its life. This implies that 'the good society' and 'sustainable development' are effectively interchangeable terms, but raises other questions about the nature and interpretation of freedom and justice.

The *tangata whenua* of this land, as with other indigenous peoples, have a unique holistic approach. This stems from the reality that it was their language and cultural understandings that first named this place - and hence all of the system is included. A Tiriti-based understanding is therefore vital for a full understanding of our "system" [1].

Indicators, then, must reflect the state of satisfaction of each basic need, according to the requirements of an ethical principle. As a working base, we put forward an ethical principle which has been found to be acceptable to several community groups with which we are involved. It has been developed out of extended discussions and summarises the consensus reached. The ethic reads:

All people have their basic needs satisfied, so they can live in dignity, in healthy communities, while ensuring the minimum adverse impact on natural systems, now and in the future.

The Systems Approach to Basic Needs

The state of progress for *Tauiwi* towards a new democracy of sustainable development - which includes assessment of whether the needs of people are being satisfied - can be broken down into four main tasks:

- To identify the overarching goal, which we have called Sustainable Development, whether seen in the individual or the collective sense. Sustainability implies the long-term viability of the system, whether that be a person, family, community, city or nation state.

- To adopt an ethical framework, which we believe must involve an inclusive approach. This will guide our relationship with other, living and nonliving, systems on which we depend or whose fate we influence in one way or another. In our opinion, it is appropriate in the context of this paper, to use the ethic stated above, of satisfying all people's basic needs.
- To identify and develop sufficient knowledge about the subsystems that we have to include within the "total system" boundary (often the nation state), including clarifying their role and function in contributing to the sustainability of the total system. This is where we find Max Neef/Bossel categories to be a complete picture. (We are open to testing other suggestions) (Geographic "systems" and community-of-interest systems can be related by using the principle of Subsidiarity [1])
- To Identify indicators and judge, quantitatively or qualitatively, how viable the subsystem itself is, and how its viability contributes to the viability of the total system.

The three subsystems, social, economic and environmental are used in much reporting - the "triple bottom line". More inclusively, we believe they are better described as Human & Social, Support and Natural subsystems, all of which are parts of one whole system.

Application of this Approach

The following matrix summarises the indicators used by Peet and Bossel (op cit) to assess the extent of satisfaction of the full set of basic needs of the Human & Social subsystem of Aotearoa New Zealand. The indicators are evaluated first in the context of the subsector itself, and then in relation to the contribution of that subsector to the total system of Aotearoa New Zealand, including the Natural subsystem (environment and resources) and the Support subsystem (economy and infrastructure).

We then move on to identify and judge indicators for the full set of basic needs in the other two subsystems. A relatively straightforward illustration of the results of an evaluation of these data is given in the diagram below left, which shows the state of each indicator (represented in "traffic light" colours of red, amber and green).

Human & Social System

Basic Orienter (needs)	subsector	total system
Existence	Children in poverty	Violent crime rate
Psychol. needs	Alcohol, tobacco, drug consumption	Youth suicide rate
Effectiveness	Voluntary social services involvement	Households living below poverty level
Freedom	Income & employment security	Average education level
Security	Ratio "Dependents"/"Producers"	Government financial and political security
Adaptability	Extent of Subsidiarity	Participation in voluntary activities
Coexistence	Community commitment to sustainability	Ratio top/bottom incomes

As indicated in the matrix by the "red lights", there are significant areas of the total Aotearoa NZ system where we believe the long term viability is in question, due to basic (fundamental) needs (of humans and nonhumans) not being adequately satisfied:

- *In the Human and Social Subsystem* - reflecting the social inequity and increased poverty that has resulted from economic restructuring.
- *In the Support Subsystem* - mainly reflecting the government's privatization programme, which has resulted in a transfer of much of the publicly-owned infrastructure of the country to private, predominantly overseas, ownership;
- *In the Natural Subsystem* - reflecting the rapid drawdown of the Maui natural gas resource and little evidence of a serious commitment to investments in improved resource use efficiency and renewable

resources.

Policy development is urgently needed in these areas.

Addressing Unsatisfied Needs

Once the unsatisfied needs are identified and assessed, according to the goal and using the ethical guiding principle described above, it is necessary to seek policies to "satisfy" them. From analysis of Max-Neef's list of satisfiers above, it becomes clear that the ideal is to identify and apply Synergic Satisfiers. How to identify them, and how to put policies in place to achieve them is obviously a matter for the political system. It is not an easy task! However, without it we believe society will remain hooked into perpetually searching for the political-economic "magic bullet" to ensure poverty alleviation, not realising that the key to poverty alleviation requires attention to the system in its entirety.

In our opinion, it is only when the political economy is guided by a clear goal and firm ethical principles that it can go beyond narrow economic theory or simple expediency. Only when it is guided by an understanding of the interdependence of all parts of the total system of people, society, economy, and environment will sustainable outcomes be achievable. We believe this requires a move to a new democracy - from the politics of self-interest to the politics of generosity, where there is understanding of "enough".

References

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- i. Max-Neef, Manfred A, *Human Scale Development: Conception, Application and Further Reflections*, The Apex Press, 1991.
 - i. J Peet and H Bossel, *An Ethics-Based System Approach to Indicators of Sustainable Development*, International Journal of Sustainable Development, v 3 no 3, 2000.
 - i. Anne Else, *False Economy*, Tandem Press, Auckland, 1996.
 - i. Steve Hatfield Dodds, *Paradigms for Sustainability: Consumerism, Well-being, and the Social Space*, in *Grounding the Paradigm: ANZSEE National Conference*, Griffith University, Brisbane, 5-7 July 1999 p 7.
 - i. Rev Maurice Manawaroa Gray, Upoko, Te Runaka ki Otautahi o Kai Tahu.
 - i. The concept of Subsidiarity comes from Roman Catholic theology.