

Global Issues and Sustainable Solutions

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Join us on Wednesdays and Fridays for Skills for Everyday Living, a series that goes beyond the classroom to prepare students for the many challenges of the real world. Our current topic is **Global Issues and Sustainable Solutions**, developed by *Facing the Future*. Series ends June 13.

"The quality of life is determined by its activities."

— Aristotle, Greek philosopher, 384-322 BCE

Defining Needs

When we talk about sustainability, we're talking about meeting needs — both now and into the future. What are some of your needs?

Everyone has basic needs for food, water and some form of shelter. Once their basic needs are met, people strive to meet additional needs such as community, meaningful work and human rights. Meeting human needs depends on a healthy environment that can continue to provide resources for us and for our children.

How Do We Measure the Good Life?

"Quality of life" refers to the well-being of an individual or a group of people. It's likely that each of us has a different idea of what exactly the good life looks like — and it is also likely that many of us share similar ideas. What do you think a good life looks like?

Measuring quality of life for a community or a country can be a tricky thing. Often, health indicators such as how long an average person lives or how many children die are used to determine how well a population is doing. Or we might look at how many people can read, or how many people are living in poverty.

Economic indicators such as the gross domestic product (GDP, a nation's total income), the rate of unemployment, and the stock market are common ways to measure well-being in the United States. Some things that most of us agree are part of a good life — access to open spaces, clean water, clean air, healthy food and personal safety — are missing from traditional economic indicators such as the GDP.

Does Money Buy Happiness?

For many people, happiness is one indicator of a good quality of life. Sometimes it's easy to think that we'd be a lot happier if only we had more money. This is probably true for people who are very poor and still need to meet their basic needs. But beyond a certain level of income, more money does not seem to bring more happiness. While income levels doubled in the United States between 1957 and 2002, the percentage of people who reported being "very happy" did not change.¹

The ability to buy the things we want is tied to making money, which is also tied to the amount of time people spend working. No one in the world works more than in the United States, where the average person:

- Worked 199 hours more in 2000 than in 1973, an increase of almost five weeks annually.²
- Has 10 days of paid vacation each year, while European workers get at least 28 days.³

U.S. citizens work long hours to buy the things they want and need, and spend a great deal of time commuting and watching television. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the main way that people in the United States spend their leisure time is watching TV.

Key Ingredients

If increased income beyond a modest level does not guarantee a better quality of life, what does?

Researchers have identified a number of key ingredients to happiness and well-being. Building strong relationships with family, friends and community often contributes to happiness. Read on to see how one city invested in their community to improve quality of life.

Building the Happy Life in Bogota, Colombia

Beginning in the late 1990s, Bogota Mayor Enrique Peñalosa initiated a bold campaign to improve the quality of life in his city by focusing on people and communities. In doing so, he challenged the stereotype of Colombia as being overwhelmed by civil war, the cocaine trade and violence.

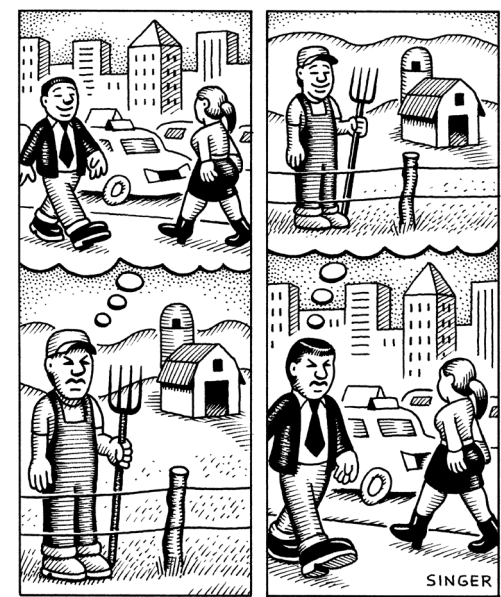
Immediately upon taking office, Peñalosa decided not to build a highway intended to carry increased automobile traffic. Instead, the mayor expanded the city's less-expensive bus system to carry more than 700,000 passengers daily. The city of Bogota also created or improved more than 1,000 parks, created hundreds of miles of bike- and pedestrian-only paths, and built new public buildings such as libraries and schools. Said Peñalosa, "A city is successful not when it's rich but when its people are happy."

Good News about the Good Life

The goal for improving quality of life on Earth is relatively simple: to improve well-being in a sustainable way. This goal includes maintaining a healthy economy, environment and society for present and future generations.

How do you want to spend your time and money? Thinking about your answer to this question might get you — and all of us — a little closer to your idea of the good life.

- 1 David G. Myers, "Happiness," in *Psychology*, 7th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2004).
- 2 Five weeks of additional work is based on a 40-hour week. Juliet Schor, "The (Even More) Overworked U.S. Citizen," in *Take Back Your Time*, ed. John de Graaf (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003), p 7.
- 3 Joe Robinson, "The Incredible Shrinking Vacation," in *Take Back Your Time*, p 21.



Happiness means different things to different people.

Activity

- ❖ What contributes most to your quality of life? Write down five things that you think are most important for a good quality of life. Ask at least one other student and one adult to do the same, and compare your "top five" lists. How do your lists differ? Do you think your vision of a good life will change as you get older? How can you improve your quality of life?

Take Action!

- ❖ "Human rights" are the basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, including the right to life and liberty and freedom of thought and expression. Protecting human rights is one way to ensure that everyone has the opportunity for a good life. Visit www.facingthefuture.org and click on *Fast Facts & Quick Actions* under *Latest News from Facing the Future*. Click on *Human Rights* and choose one quick action; get started working on the human rights solution of your choice today!