

ALTERNATIVE INDICATORS OF WELL-BEING FOR MELANESIA

Changing the way progress is measured in the South Pacific

A **Vanuatu** initiative with support from:





The Republic of Vanuatu has begun the process of testing alternative indicators of well-being which reflect Melanesian values. These specially tailored indicators modify the existing progressive measures accepted internationally by governments and aid agencies in order to better track the factors that contribute to ni-Vanuatu well-being. The indicators focus on factors not currently captured by the Human Development Index or accounted for within the Millennium Development Goals—factors including free access to land and natural resources, community vitality, family relationships, and culture.

The almost universal use of GDP-based indicators to measure progress has helped justify policies based on rapid *material* progress at the expense of more holistic criterion. Because it is a crude measure of only the cash value of activities or production, GDP is heavily biased towards increased production and consumption regardless of the necessity or desirability of such outputs. Policies developed with regard only to increasing per-capita GDP can have negative, and potentially disastrous, impacts on other factors contributing to life quality.

The development and use of alternative indicators of well-being is past due. Indicators drive society in certain directions and even determine the policy agendas of governments. Not only decision makers, but ordinary citizens tend to take social or economic programs at face-value and accept proposed policy implementation without examining the ultimate values underlying those programs. The *Alternative Indicators of Well-Being for Melanesia* project aims to bridge that gap and enable the countries of island Melanesia to develop in accordance with the expressed needs of their populations.

[PROJECT CONCEPT]

In 2006, the UK-based New Economics Foundation published “The Happy Planet Index: An index of human well-being and environmental impact” in which countries were ranked in relation to three indicators of well-being: life satisfaction, life expectancy, and ecological footprint. These three indicators were chosen by the Foundation to represent the ecological efficiency of delivering human well-being within

the constraints of equitable and responsible resource consumption. The report declared Vanuatu to be the “happiest country in the world.”

Vanuatu, a peaceful nation fully capable of sustaining the well-being of its people without destroying its environment, was and still is worthy of such a title. However, Vanuatu is currently classified by the United Nations as one of the world's 50 Least Developed Countries, conjuring images of a starving, deprived population. The Happy Planet Index brought forth awareness in the region of the need for new indicators to be developed that take into account the income-neutral factors contributing to Melanesian well-being, rather than continuing to rely solely on GDP to measure success or progress.

In general, policymakers tend to implement policies and programs based on current international development trends without taking into consideration the values behind the indicators established to monitor such development. One way to overcome this tendency is by recognizing that indicators stand between values and policy implementation. It is not always easy for the people of a society to discern that indicators are not value-neutral and that values and principles underlie and determine programs and policies. Developing indicators that reflect Melanesian values would help reconcile the policies and programs developed at the ministerial and departmental levels with Melanesian principles of development.

The sense of common purpose embodied in a coherent set of well-being indicators would enable ordinary men and women more readily to judge and hold accountable their leaders by checking whether these targets are being fulfilled. Without a common vision reinforced through indicators, each individual merely looks to his or her own ends, even though welfare is a shared pursuit. Not only would Melanesian well-being indicators assist in building vision, they will be instrumental in building a notion of greater interdependence in the region.

Alternative well-being indicators would also provide constructive feedback on the effectiveness of existing policies and programs, as well as useful input into program design and implementation. They would allow the values they embody to be infused into policies and programs in a broad based manner. Thus, alternative indicators as evaluative tools could be used not only to check whether programs are consistent with Melanesian well-being, but also to foster a coherent, organic relationship between professed values on the one hand and actual policies, programs, and projects on the other. If done successfully, true Melanesian values will penetrate the region's economic, political, social, environmental, cultural, and technological development and bring a natural coherence to the region's policies.

Vanuatu presented a paper entitled “Enhancing our Traditional Systems and Values for a Stronger and More Integrated Melanesia in Addressing Global Challenges” at the 2008 Melanesian Spearhead Group Leaders Summit Trade and Economic

Officials Meeting (TEOM). The leaders agreed that MSG governments should indeed be better able to account for and measure the substantial non-cash values that contribute to their peoples' quality of life. In considering the paper, TEOM endorsed Vanuatu's initiative to host a workshop to develop alternative indicators of well-being within a Melanesian context.

The first stakeholder meeting of the *Alternative Indicators of Well-Being for Melanesia* project, hosted by Vanuatu in June 2010, brought together specialists in statistical measurement and representatives from organizations with a vested interest in redefining poverty in the region. The two day conference provided rich insight into the meaning of Melanesian well-being and uncovered a number of unique concerns regarding the development, collection, and use of indicators in Melanesia. From the input collected through various informational panels, group discussion sessions and presentations, and periods of open dialogue, the process of developing individual and community-based indicators of well-being began.

[PROJECT STATUS]

Vanuatu has developed a comprehensive set of indicators for Melanesian well-being that complement existing data collected through the Vanuatu National Statistics Office (VNSO). The indicators developed thus far are designed to be useful at a number of different levels: for research purposes, for policy makers, and as a source of information for the general public. Clearly, these three groups have different needs. The research community puts a high premium on internally consistent and data comparable methodologies. Policy makers will no doubt want any indicator of sustainable development to be clear, unambiguous, and helpful to strategic and applied policy making. Ordinary people need to be informed if their environment and quality of life is deteriorating, about whether this trend is expected to continue, and how such a situation can be mitigated.

It was stressed in the development process that an indicator with respect to any variable must have either a positive or a negative influence on Melanesian well-being to qualify as valid, i.e., the direction of causality on well-being must be clear. Moreover, both objective and subjective dimensions of life have been considered in the development of Melanesian well-being indicators—equal weight is given to both the functional aspects of human society and the perceptive side of the human experience. For example, an individual's perceptions of his or her own safety and security are as important in determining well-being as objective crime statistics. Self-reporting of experiences along with objective statistics therefore provide a more accurate picture of well-being than the objective statistics alone.

The VNSO is currently running a trial survey of individual well-being to be completed in January 2011. Although this survey will not serve as an official baseline for ni-Vanuatu well-being, it will be instrumental in helping cement the need for collection of such data at the national and provincial levels. As Melanesian society is centered around the family unit and community a longitudinal study of community well-being is slotted to begin a trial phase at the beginning of 2011. This component of the project will better track changes in well-being at a broader social level and compliment the individual indicators of well-being.

[PROJECT OUTLOOK]

Following the two trials and analyses of preliminary findings for the individual and community well-being surveys, the project is then expected to roll out in other Melanesian countries that share the same values and progressive development interests. The development of policy and project screening tools that utilize the newly established indicators will be the next task the project will attempt. The screening tools will be used for selection of policies and programs aligned with improving the overall well-being of Melanesian peoples at the regional, national, and provincial levels.

Looking forward, a single number index for Melanesian well-being will need to be constructed that is capable of being broken down into individual component indicators useful for different sectors for planning and technical purposes. The index will reflect Melanesian values, set benchmarks, and track policies and performances of the region. As a monitoring device, the index will be capable of indicating areas of weakness and strength. The component indicators will also serve as yardsticks of evaluation of the policies and programs over time.

There are many who may be skeptical of an index that reduces well-being to a single number. For practical application, however, human well-being has to be translated into a metric system—without some kind of measurement system, well-being cannot guide practical policies and programs. If it is simply left at the level of inspirational discourse, conventional indicators will continue to play unwitting roles in Melanesian society.

Once people are familiar with the new measures, the alternative indicators will have a practical effect on consumer and citizen behavior. Appropriate indicators direct attention towards both the causes of problems and the manner in which behavior and decisions can prevent and solve those problems. The potential behavior-modifying function of these indicators is valuable. For example, certain indicators for Melanesia will track perceived levels of trust, reciprocity, and safety. Published and disseminated information on their prevalence rates will begin to influence behavior as

individuals weigh their own traits and values against the national and provincial trends.

[CONCLUDING REMARKS]

The *Alternative Indicators of Well-Being for Melanesia* project promises to more accurately present the welfare status of the people in the South Pacific. It will re-examine poverty in a region where the majority of the population has access to customary land. It will shed light on the real value of support received from family and community networks governed by traditional leadership. In addition, the project will capture the symbiotic nature of rural/urban interactions in Melanesia in which urban dwellers utilize rural kinship networks to settle disputes and access food and other resources.

Governments in the region lacking strong GDP figures will be able to enlighten outsiders as to why the majority of the people of their islands are free from the dangers of hunger and homelessness, as well as the need for nursing homes and mental asylums—serious conditions plaguing even some of the richest nations in the world today. Melanesians as a whole enjoy a general level of peace and social harmony that results from traditional values of respect, equity, the promotion of relationships, and a restorative community-based system of dispute resolution. It is time those values be fully integrated into the policies and programs that develop the nations of this region.

In order for this project to become sustainable, the governments of MSG countries must pool their resources in support of this progressive initiative to map and track changes in the well-being of those they govern. As the project advances, an autonomous body must be established and given the task of monitoring these changes in Melanesian well-being through continued social research, as well as screening policies and programs scheduled for passage or debate. Taken seriously, this project will do more than simply define and measure Melanesian well-being; it will improve the purpose and objectives of Melanesian progress by transferring control of that very initiative back to the Melanesian people.