

ASSESSING HUMAN PROGRESS

A central tenet of modern Western culture is the belief in progress, the belief that life should be (and is) getting better—healthier, wealthier, happier, more satisfying, and more interesting. Is this the case? If our answer is “yes,” then we can assume society is on the right trajectory, requiring only periodic course correction by governments.

If the answer is “no,” then the most fundamental assumptions about our way of life need reassessing. The task we face goes far beyond the adjustment of policy levers by government: It means having a more open and spirited debate about how we are to live in the future and about what matters in our lives.

Some commentators believe that, if we continue on our present path of economic and technological development, humanity can overcome the obstacles and threats it faces and enter a new golden age of peace, prosperity, and happiness. Others foresee an accelerating deterioration in the human condition leading to a major perturbation or discontinuity in human history, even the extinction of our species (along with many others).

One reason we remain divided on the question is that the data are in-

Is Life Really Getting Better?

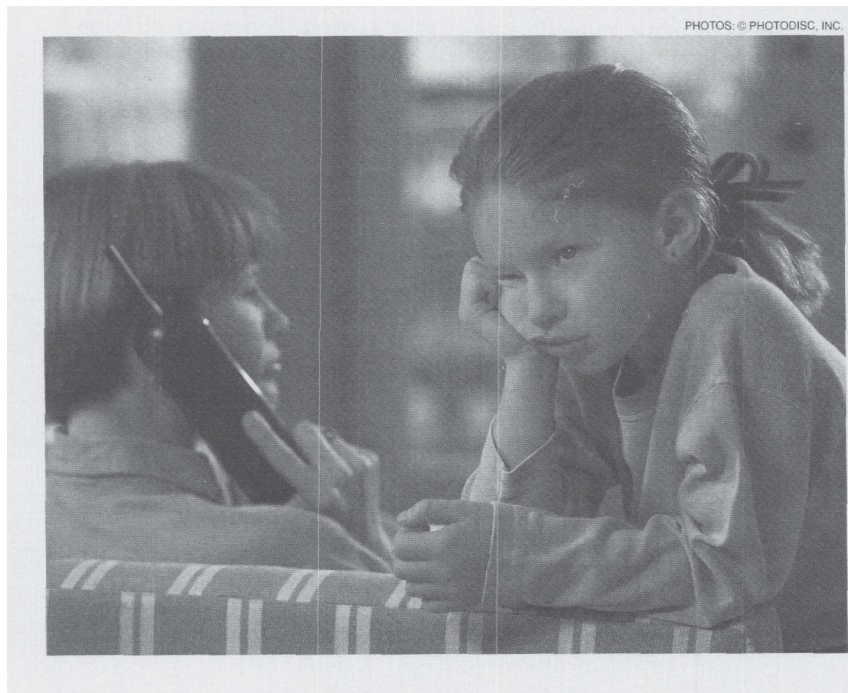
Most people assume that “progress” means more of everything—more money, more technologies, more things to buy, bigger houses, cars, etc. But shouldn’t we be asking whether “more” is better? **By Richard Eckersley**

complete or are open to differing interpretations. We do not agree on what constitutes “a better life,” and we do not have good measures of many aspects of life. Another problem is that most analysts view the question through the prism of their particular expertise, giving a distorted or incomplete picture. To the economist, we are consumers mak-

ing rational choices to maximize our utility or personal satisfaction; to the ecologist, we are one of millions of species, whose fate hangs on our interactions with other species and the physical environment.

However, the issue goes deeper than this. We are seeing a clash of paradigms, a confrontation between fiercely held beliefs. The paradigm of progress is being challenged by that of transformation: Are we still “on track” to a better future or are we now straying ever farther off it? Are economic, social, and environmental problems mere “glitches” that we can iron out, or are the problems systemic, requiring whole-system change?

In developed nations, we have defined progress in mainly material terms. We equate “standard of living” with “quality of life.” This view remains largely unquestioned in mainstream political debate, where our fundamental assumptions about economic growth—that it enhances



Child waits for mother to get off the phone. An economist may see a growing number of telephones as an indicator of national progress, but such statistics are an inadequate measure of quality of life, argues author Richard Eckersley.

The rich are getting richer much faster than are the poor, many of whom are getting poorer.

well-being and is environmentally sustainable—are rarely explored.

Measuring Well-Being

The relationship among wealth, health, and well-being is less clear-cut than many assume. In the late 1980s, Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef and his colleagues undertook a study of 19 countries, both rich and poor, and found that people in rich countries felt they were part of a deteriorating system that was affecting them personally and as a society. This led the researchers to propose a *threshold hypothesis*, which states that societies experience a period in which economic growth brings about an improvement in quality of life, but only up to a point—the threshold point—beyond which more economic growth may lead to a deterioration in quality of life.

The threshold hypothesis has been supported in recent years by new measures, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, which adjust gross domestic product (GDP) for a wide range of social and environmental factors. The measures show that trends in GDP and social well-being, once moving together, have diverged since about the mid-1970s in all countries for which these indices have been constructed, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

American psychologists David Myers and Ed Diener have shown that wealth is a poor predictor of happiness. People have not become happier as their societies have become richer. In most countries, the correlation between income and happiness is negligible; only in the poor-

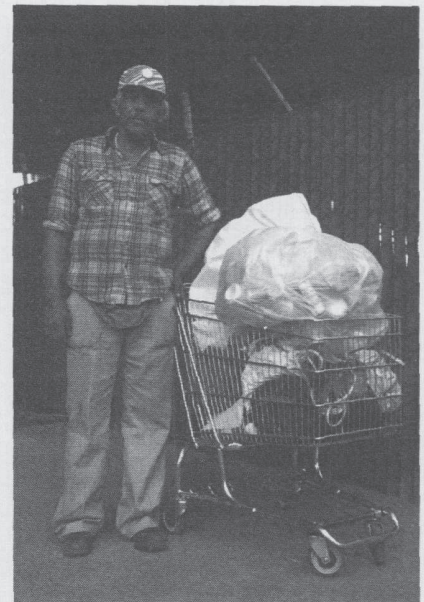
est countries is income a good measure of well-being. In general, people in rich countries appear to be happier than those in poorer countries, but the margin may be slim and based on factors other than wealth.

In rich nations, health seems to be influenced more by income distribution than by average income levels: The physical effects of material deprivation associated with absolute poverty are less important to health than the psychological and social consequences of relative deprivation, of living in an unequal society. British medical researcher Richard Wilkinson, a leading figure in this work, says that what seems to matter are the social meanings attached to inferior living conditions and how people feel about their circumstances and about themselves. The health data suggest, he says, that the quality of the social fabric, rather than increases in average wealth, may now be the prime determinant of the real subjective quality of human life.

Given this situation in developed nations, the current patterns of global economic growth seem perverse: The rich are getting richer much faster than are the poor, many of whom are getting poorer.

Growth and Sustainability

Advocates of economic growth argue that it is good for the environment. As countries grow richer, they reach a stage where consumer preferences and the structure of the economy change, technology becomes more efficient and cleaner, and the countries can afford to invest more in environmental improvements. However, researchers have pointed out that this has only been



Street person guards his belongings. In wealthy nations, the psychological stress of living in conditions that are inferior to those of other people may be more damaging than actual deprivation.

shown for a selected set of pollutants with local, short-term costs (for example, urban air and water pollution), not for the accumulation of waste or pollutants such as carbon dioxide, which involve long-term and more-dispersed costs.

The “pro-growth” argument is less likely to hold for resource stocks such as soils and forests, and it ignores issues such as the transfer of polluting industries to other countries. In places where emissions have declined with rising income, the reductions have been due to local institutional reforms such as environmental legislation.

Even if the argument is accepted,

economic growth will worsen environmental conditions at the global level because countries with most of the world's population will, for some time to come, have average incomes below that required to invest in improving the environment. Economic growth in these countries could be expected to increase pollution, more than canceling out any reduction of pollution in more-developed countries.

Our goal should be to dematerialize society without reducing quality of life. Several leading environmental research and advocacy organizations have urged a halving of global material flows. Developed nations would need to reduce their material consumption to 10% or less of present levels, according to these organizations. They argue that this reduction, while obviously massive, is achievable using present technologies.

As things are, a wide range of environmental indicators suggest that, globally, we are still moving *away* from sustainability, not toward it. The final statement of the 1997 United Nations Earth Summit noted that participants were "deeply concerned that overall trends for sustainable development were worse today than they were in 1992" (the year of the previous summit). Despite this, they failed to reach agreement on major environmental issues.

Changing Directions

Conventional notions of growth and progress are increasingly being questioned and challenged, yet powerful sections of society seem to be more deeply committed to them than ever. The whole of our society has been shaped by and structured around these notions. Growth is central to our economic system, and material progress lies at the heart of our culture—a culture powerfully reinforced by the mass media, marketing, and advertising.

The crux of the debate about progress is the direction of change.

Trash laps at the edges of a city. The argument that economic growth is good for the environment does not hold for such long-term problems as the accumulation of waste, says author Eckersley.

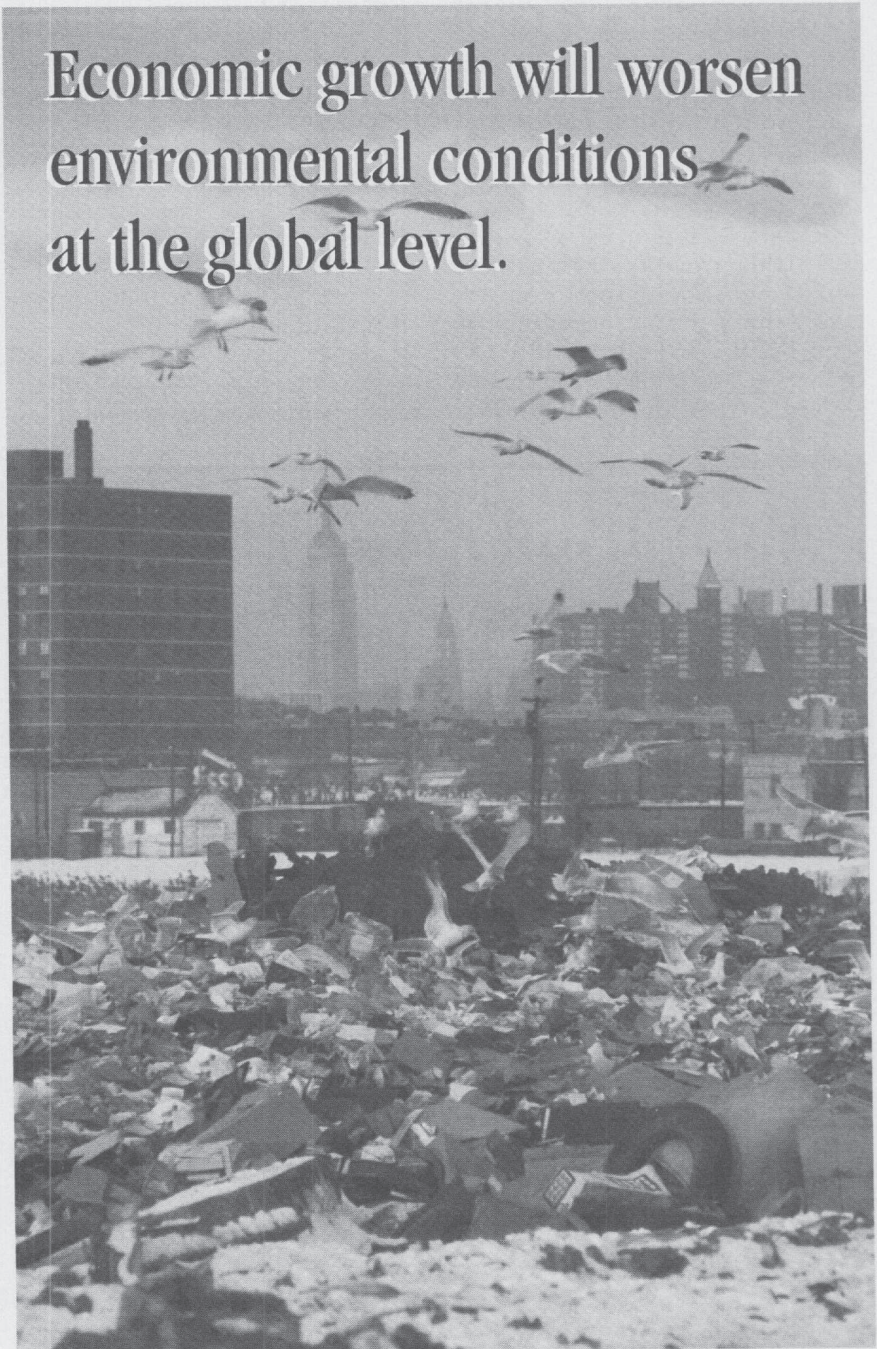
Will we improve the quality of life by continuing on our present path of progress—increasing average wealth to give the average consumer greater choice? Or do we need to find a new path that leads in a different direction, toward new personal and social goals?

The rationale for economic growth as we pursue it today seems flawed in several important respects: (1) it overestimates the extent to which

past improvements in well-being are attributable to growth; (2) it reflects too narrow a view of human well-being and fails to explain why, after 50 years of rapid growth, so many people today appear to believe life is getting worse; and (3) it underestimates the gulf between the magnitude of the environmental challenges we face and the scale of our responses to them.

"More" does not mean "better" if,

Economic growth will worsen environmental conditions at the global level.



in our efforts to get more, we sacrifice what really matters to our happiness and well-being: the quality of our personal, social, and spiritual relationships that give us a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging.

Nor can we keep getting "more" if, in doing that, we deplete the natural resources and damage the ecosystem processes on which all life on earth depends, ourselves included.

The main political justification for promoting growth is jobs. Economic expansion may be better than contraction in increasing employment, but it is also now creating more overwork and underwork, more job insecurity, and a widening income gap. All these things, like unemployment, put pressure on individuals, families, and the whole fabric of society.

We need to look much more closely at *what* is growing, what *other effects* this growth is having, and what *alternatives* might exist. We need to focus not just on wealth creation, but also on its distribution and conservation. In other words, we should pay as much attention to

measures of these things as we currently do to growth in GDP.

The task is not simply to *abandon* growth; it is to move *beyond* growth. To suggest this is not necessarily to be "anti" the economy, business, or technological innovation, but to argue that these activities need to be driven by different values toward different ends.

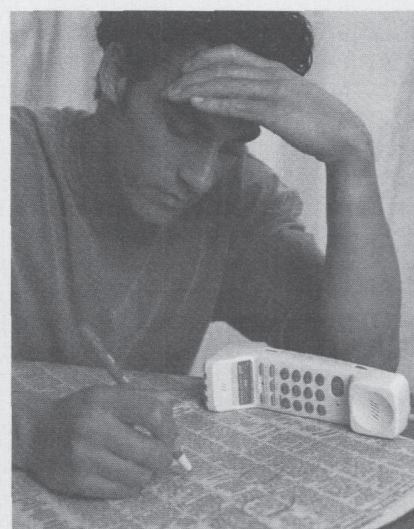
So . . . is life getting better? If we answer "yes," then we can continue on our present path of progress and enjoy the journey. If we answer "no," then we need to pose several other questions:

- What do we want from life? (What is its purpose? What makes a better life?)

- How do we best get what we want? (Is it through continuing economic growth and material progress of the sort we now have?)

- What values will promote what we want, and what will discourage what we don't?

Ultimately, how effectively we address many of the critical issues currently facing Western societies, and



Job hunter shows signs of strain. Pro-growth advocates argue that job creation is a primary goal and benefit of economic expansion, but side effects include overwork, insecurity, and a widening income gap.

indeed the world, hangs on our answers to these fundamental questions.

The decades ahead promise tectonic shifts in global civilizations—possibly cataclysmic, maybe drawn out, so that their true significance will only become apparent from a future, historical perspective. To borrow from chaos theory: How we respond in seemingly little ways today could have big outcomes tomorrow. How we choose to live affects the world—there is no escaping that—so we should choose to live to change the world. □

Measuring *Real* Progress

The Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) is an alternative to gross domestic product (GDP) for policy makers seeking a more realistic measure of national well-being. GPI examines not just the exchange of monetized goods and services, but adds in non-monetized activities (such as volunteer service and domestic work) that contribute to social progress and discounts those that detract from it (such as pollution and crime).

By applying these nontraditional variables, the Genuine Progress Indicator reveals that much of what contributes to a growth in GDP comes from fixing problems caused by economic growth, according to critics. For example, cleaning up the Exxon Valdez oil spill produced a flurry of economic activity, such

as extra business for local services and new jobs. The result: The infamous environmental disaster actually led to an increase in GDP.

Similarly, GDP increased by 50% between 1973 and 1993, but, as the GPI reveals, wages declined by almost 14%. Most of the growth in income went to the top 5% of households. Clearly, critics claim, a rising tide does not lift all boats.

For more information, see: *The Genuine Progress Indicator*, available from Redefining Progress, One Kearny Street, Fourth Floor, San Francisco, California 94108. Telephone 1-415-781-1191. 1995. \$10. A brief version is available on the Web site of *Ideas: A Magazine of Social Comment*, www.upstarts.net.au/site/ideas/gpi/gpi.html.



About the Author

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He was formerly with the Resource Futures Program of CSIRO. He has edited and contributed to two books: *Measuring Progress: Is Life Getting Better?* (July 1998, CSIRO Publishing, Web site www.publish.csiro.au) and *Challenge to Change: Australia in 2020*. His previous article for THE FUTURIST, "The West's Deepening Cultural Crisis," was published in November-December 1993.