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Social capital, economic growth and well-being

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L'European Values Study (EVS) est une enquête réalisée au Luxembourg en 2008 auprès d'un échantillon représentatif de la population résidante composé de 1610 individus âgés de 18 ans ou plus.

Au niveau national, cette enquête fait partie du projet de recherche VALCOS (Valeurs et Cohésion sociale), cofinancé par le FNR dans le cadre du programme VIVRE. Au niveau international, elle est partie intégrante d'une enquête réalisée dans 45 pays européens qui a pour objectif d'identifier et d'expliquer en Europe les dynamiques de changements de valeurs, et d'explorer les valeurs morales et sociales qui sous-tendent les institutions sociales et politiques européennes (www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu).

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INTRODUCTION

Individual well-being is among the most hotly debated topic in contemporary economic literature as well as in the public sphere. After years of almost uninterrupted economic growth, one might wonder to which extend modern societies have truly benefit. Put differently, did economic growth keep its promises of improving the human lot[2]? The question may well sound as granted, but the answer is not! Safer and quicker communications, longer, healthier and more comfortable lives, eradication of a large number of illnesses and better access to education for all are some of the most important benefits brought about by economic growth.

All these benefits are usually well summarized by traditional income-based measures of well-being, such as *gross domestic product* (GDP) (Blanchflower, 2008), the most widely adopted index to account for the well-being of a nation. However, it only captures parts of a broader story. If we consider our daily life experience, we easily realize many other dimensions affect well-being, which are not necessarily directly related to economic growth (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Diener and Seligman, 2004).

I. LIMITS OF TRADITIONAL MEASURES OF WELL-BEING

Unfortunately, while enjoying more comfortable material lives, many people report feeling isolated and lonely; statistics suggest that the social environment in which people live is unsafe and they fear to leave their homes; cities are polluted; many people waste a lot of their daily time stuck in traffic jams; trust in others and honesty are declining; stress and nervous illnesses are widespread and it is increasingly difficult to find space to enjoy social relationships (unless mediated by commercial activities, i.e. big commercial centres, multi-cinema, etc.) (Putnam, 2000; Layard, 2005). All these aspects strongly affect people's well-being, but they are hardly accounted for by GDP.

Furthermore, there are two aspects concerning the lives we built that look quite puzzling. Thanks to technological progress, work productivity (considered as the amount of output produced by unit of time) increased dramatically suggesting that currently a worker might produce the same amount of output than a comparable worker 50 years ago, but in much less time. This implies that currently a worker has potentially a larger amount of free time to allocate on leisure activities. Indeed, between 1950s and 1980s the number of working hours in US remained substantially constant. After this date, something has been changing. Starting from 1980s people in the US experienced a rise in their working time (Blanchard, 2004).

The second aspect is related to the relationship between wealth and well-being: during the last 50 years people's well-being didn't increase despite robust economic growth (Easterlin, 1974). This observation is discussed in more detail below.

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[2] *Easterlin (1974)*

Joining these two pieces of evidence, some new questions arise: why do American people consume less leisure time than in earlier years? Why do people strive so hard to get what they need to satisfy what they consider the basic needs of their families at the cost of spending less time with them? In other words, why did higher wages and wealth turn into more goods but not into more leisure time? Finally, if money can't buy happiness, why are we working so much? (Blanchard, 2004; Faggio and Nickell, 2006).

In light of these questions, it seems that the promise of economic growth to improve the human condition has been disattended. At the same time, income-based measures of well-being are showing their limits: an increase in income or in GDP (at a country level) don't unambiguously imply an improvement in people's quality of life. Hence, we need to complement more traditional measures of well-being with additional measures allowing to properly account for the multiple dimensions of subjective well-being.

The idea that economic growth is all we need to enjoy a better life is showing its limits. More opulence doesn't necessarily turns into higher standards of living (Easterlin and Angelescu, 2009).

II. AN ALTERNATIVE MEASURE OF SWB

Recently, this picture has been changing: the development of social sciences, and particularly of economics and sociology, allow further dimensions to the term well-being, its determinants and, above all, propose new tools to help accounting for well being (Bruni and Porta, 2007). A growing number of economists are turning their attention to the study of subjective well-being (SWB), commonly defined as an individual's evaluation of its own well-being. This branch of economics is rapidly growing and is promising to significantly add to our knowledge of modern societies that we could correctly state that economic theory is experiencing a revolution re-discovering happiness (or SWB) as the main goal of human life.

In this context, ``happiness", ``life satisfaction" and ``subjective well-being" are considered synonyms that generally refer to an evaluation of one's own life regarded as a whole (van Praag et al., 2003). Furthermore, these data reveal to be precious and reliable sources of information on individual's well-being as they are consistently correlated with more objective measures of well-being (heart rate, blood pressure, duration of Duchenne smile, neurological tests of brain activity) (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008a; van Reekum et al., 2007), with other proxies of SWB and are consistent with evaluations about the respondent's happiness provided by friends, relatives or clinical experts (Schneider and Schimmack, 2009; Kahneman and Krueger, 2006; Layard, 2005).

Another important feature is that these data are widely available and easy to collect even in Less Developed Countries. Many of the so-called ``happiness studies" show SWB data reveal interesting stories about our societies. This is why media, politicians as well as the scientific community have been paying increasing attention to the SWB of individuals. It is worth highlighting that the French economic commission directed by J. Stiglitz, A. Sen and J. P. Fitoussi (Stiglitz et al., 2009) published a report recommending the development of indices of well-being to supplement more commonly used income-based measures.

Currently, happiness data have been employed in many fields from macro to micro-economics (Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2008; Alesina et al., 2004), from policy evaluation (Diener et al., 2009) to the analysis of non economic aspects such as age, gender, marital and employment status (Clark and Oswald, 1994) and, finally, to study the relationship between political institutions and SWB (Frey and Stutzer, 2007).

III. THE EASTERLIN PARADOX

A growing area of interest in ``happiness research studies" concerns the explanation of one of the hottest paradoxes of modern societies: after the Second World War industrialized countries experienced an unprecedented economic growth, countries grew up richer and richer, every demographic and sanitary indices improved, many illnesses were defeated and schooling became widely available. However, an increasing number of people report to be less satisfied with their lives than ever before.

In his influential contribution Easterlin (Easterlin, 1974) suggested that during the last fifty years national well-being in western countries, measured by gross domestic product (GDP), grew up steadily while people's SWB stagnated. Although this finding - commonly referred as the ``Easterlin paradox" - has been challenged (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008; Sacks et al., 2010), other recent studies have provided further supporting evidence corroborating the existence of this paradox (Easterlin and Angelescu, 2009; Bruni and Stanca, 2008; Bechetti et al., 2006; Helliwell, 2002; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004).

Thus, one might wonder why people work so hard to get more money if a higher income doesn't bring about more happiness? The Easterlin paradox gets even more intriguing if we take into account the fact that different countries exhibit different trends of well-being (Sarracino, 2010). From this point of view, Easterlin and Angelescu (2009) show that in the long run changes in GDP cannot explain international differences in SWB trends.

IV. FIRST EXPLANATIONS OF THE PARADOX

Adaptation and social comparisons theories are the two main causal pathways hypothesized to explain the Easterlin Paradox. The first approach suggests that changes in people's living conditions (for example concerning their economic conditions) have a transitory effect on their well-being because people tend to adapt to their past experiences. In fact, neither rising prosperity nor severe misfortune seem to affect happiness permanently. In the long run people adapt to their baseline level of well-being and the same is supposed to hold for nations (Blanchflower, 2008).

On the other hand, social comparison theory posits that what matters for an average individual is her/his relative position with regard to a selected group of people with whom she/he compares (Layard et al., 2009; Di Tella et al., 2007; Ferrer-i Carbonnell, 2005; Diener et al. 1993). These people represent a benchmark for the individual and the comparison is such that, in a given country, the relative gains and losses of different individuals cancel each other out, resulting in no significant shifts, upward or downward, for the well-being of a society as a whole. These two theories have well-established roots and, so far, they are supported by compelling cross-sectional evidence (Clark et al., 2008).

V. LIMITS OF TRADITIONAL THEORIES

The strong version of these theories states that international differences in SWB reflect fixed cultural differences in the meaning of happiness. Hence, there is no space for policies to improve well-being: low-ranking countries have always been low and will remain so. These theories have depressing implications regarding the prospects for progress of humanity: no improvement in living conditions can permanently increase our well-being. At best we should be happy because no individual or social severe misfortune can permanently depress it.

Furthermore, studies on SWB have recently changed this framework. An increasing availability of data showed that SWB varies in the long run and it doesn't vary in the same way in every country (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008). There are countries in which well-being increased and others in which it decreased. For example, in developed nations, well-being raised in many European countries, while it decreased in the US (Sarracino, 2010; Van Oorschot et al., 2006).

This new evidence is hardly explained by adaptation and social comparison theories. These theories accept the effects are not complete and, for example, they do not entirely offset the effect of economic growth. However, they cannot explain cross-country differences in SWB trends: if the tendency to adapt oneself to changing circumstances or to compare oneself to others is a distinctive trait of human nature, then the trends of well-being in different countries should not exhibit opposite signs.

Hence, what does explain SWB trends and its differences across countries?

VI. AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION

The main idea is that individuals play a major role in determining well-being (Helliwell 2002, 2008; Uhlaner, 2009). But what do we mean by *sociability*? Social science studies usually refer to it as *relational goods*, commonly defined as intrinsic non-market relationships among individuals, or, more generally, to *social capital* (SC).

SC is a much debated concept about which many different definitions and descriptions have been proposed. For example, Pierre Bourdieu, arguably the first scientist introducing this term, defines SC as ``the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition ... which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital"[3]. A different perspective is offered by James Coleman: ``social capital is the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or a young person"[4]. More broadly speaking, we can refer to SC as a set of social connections and shared norms and values available in a society (Putnam 2000). Its role in the economic literature has longly been overlooked, being simply considered as a factor that could make economic relationships more efficient. On the contrary, much of the current literature is discovering a new role for SC in modern societies. Studies from the ``happiness economics" literature focused on the link between SC and SWB and found out a positive relationship among them. In particular, it seems that the *relational* quality of people experience, that is to say the quality of the relationships among people, has a predominant impact on well-being (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004; Helliwell, 2006; Bruni and Stanca, 2008; Bechetti et al., 2008).

[3] *quoted in Schuller et al. (2000, pag. 5)*
[4] *quoted in Schuller et al. (2000, pag. 6)*

VII. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Following this hypothesis, Bartolini et al., (2009) find that, consistent with previous studies, GDP growth is unrelated with long term changes in life satisfaction in rich and poor countries. In the pooled sample of countries, it emerges that variations in SWB are positively correlated with variations in SC over time.

The evidence of a positive relationship between the evolution of SWB and SC over time found further support in a study focusing on the US decline of SWB. Using micro data from the US General Social Survey covering the last 30 years, Bartolini et al. (2008) show that a large portion of the declining American happiness trend is explained by four forces acting in contrasting directions. The first one is the increase in per capita income, which positively affects SWB, while the remaining three negatively affect happiness. The declining American well-being seems pushed by three forces: 1) the increase in income of other fellow Americans, which erodes approximately 2/3 of the positive impact brought about by the increase in family income; 2) the erosion of relational goods which produces an impact of similar magnitude. Indeed, many indicators suggest that the American society experienced an increase in solitude, in comunicative difficulties, in apprehension, in loneliness, in distrust, in familiar instability in generational cleavages, in civic engagement, in participation in social networks and a reduction in solidarity and honesty (Putnam, 2000); 3) finally, a further reduction in American SWB is explained by the decrease in the confidence in institutions, a further component of SC (Bartolini et al., 2008).

The combined effect of these four forces on American SWB is negative suggesting that the variation in American SWB is almost entirely explained by the negative impact (on well-being) of *social comparisons*, *lower confidence in institutions* and the *erosion of sociability*. These three forces together more than off-set the positive impact of increasing income. From an econometric view-point, these results explain almost all the variation in American happiness and suggest a striking role of relational goods in determining happiness.

Simulations reveal that, if SC had stayed at 1975 levels, American SWB would have increased today. Hence, a large part of the explanation for the reduction in American well-being is linked to the fact that people became richer in material goods, but poorer in *sociability*. This evidence has been confirmed more recently for Germany. Using a different data-set and a wider set of variables, Bartolini et al. (2010) confirm previous results showing that the variation in the German SWB between 1994 and 2007 is explained by the same forces affecting the American well-being. The only difference, in this case, is that, during last fifteen years, German SC has been increasing with an overall positive effect on SWB. Still, this study suggests that if SC had not increased, the net result for SWB would have been the same than the American one.

CONCLUSION

From a broader perspective, all these aspects are composing a puzzle yielding a picture in which rich countries shouldn't expect substantial increase in well-being from economic growth and should rather re-orient their efforts to increase well-being towards some other aspects such as, for example, sociability. On the other hand, the implications for developing countries are slightly different.

Poorer countries can expect to achieve higher levels of well-being from economic growth, but only if this growth is obtained by paying much attention at the containment of its social costs.

Indeed, postulating that economic growth was the most efficient way to improve human condition, we built a whole economic, social and cultural order focused on material well-being. Though, it is now clear that changes in income don't affect the long term changes in well-being across countries (Easterlin and Angelescu, 2009). Hence, if changes in income don't explain international differences in well-being, where else should we focus our attention?

This point calls for an urgent re-definition of the economic policy agenda. Subjective evaluations of well-being prove to be a reliable and powerful tool to account for people's well-being and gives researchers a new opportunity to further explore its main determinants. *Sociability* emerged as a significant explanatory factor. Whenever its role for SWB is confirmed, economic policies should take into account their effects on SC if their final goal is to improve well-being. Specific policies could be enacted to preserve or enhance SC and the way many existing institutions are working could be reconsidered in the light of the new role that these studies are attributing to SC. New scenarios are available for policies aimed at increasing well-being: urban organization, educational system, labour market, health systems are only some of the fields in which re-considering the role of SC can significantly improve people's experience with their lives.

In the light of all the idiosyncrasies modern societies have to deal with, a reshaping of the social organization seems necessary. From this point of view an extensive policy agenda concerning economic and social policies have to be enacted by those governments caring for the well-being of the societies they are representing.

The deep economic crisis that has been plaguing the most developed part of the world during last two years appears to be simply the peak of a longer chain of crisis happening from the beginning of the '90s. Following this idea, a large part of the public opinion, of academics and of some political parties started questioning the development models that we have been following so far. As paradoxical as it can be, the historical period we are living in appears as one of those in which a shift seems more plausible.

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