

# The Bellagio Initiative

Briefing Summary

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## Values and Human Wellbeing

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Values concern the aims people find important and worthwhile in life. Certain values, termed *extrinsic* and *self-enhancement* in the psychological literature, are focused on wealth, possessions, status, and image. Numerous scientific studies document that to the extent people prioritise these values, they report lower personal wellbeing and higher distress; these findings are robust across measurement strategies, age, culture, and socioeconomic status. Other studies have shown that a relatively high value placed on extrinsic/self-enhancement aims is associated with more discriminatory attitudes, less pro-social behaviour, and less sustainable ecological attitudes and behaviour, all of which have implications for lowering people's wellbeing, particularly that of poor people.

Given that personal, social, and ecological wellbeing are negatively associated with extrinsic/self-enhancement values, philanthropic and international development organisations may desire to design interventions, campaigns, and policy measures to reduce the prioritisation of such aims among people and societies. A two-armed values-based strategy is presented to help organise such efforts.

The first arm of the strategy involves addressing the personal and societal dynamics known to increase the likelihood that people focus on extrinsic, self-enhancement values; this would entail increasing feelings of security and decreasing social models that encourage people to pursue wealth, possessions, image, and status as primary aims in life. The second arm of the strategy involves promoting an alternative set of values, known as the *intrinsic/self-transcendent* strivings for personal growth, good relationships, and

contribution to the community; research shows that these values not only stand in opposition to extrinsic/self-enhancement values, but also promote higher levels of personal, social, and ecological wellbeing.

The essay then turns to more concrete and practical ways that philanthropic and international development organisations might apply this values-based strategy for change.

First, I describe three types of direct interventions that organisations might develop to remove the causes of extrinsic/self-enhancement values and to encourage intrinsic/self-transcendent values. These include:

- developing preventive and educational classes for parents to help reduce the deleterious effects of consumer society on their children;
- facilitating groups to support Voluntary Simplicity, which is known to be associated with greater life satisfaction and more ecologically sustainable lifestyles; and
- promoting greater mindfulness and reflection on the part of individuals, as both have been shown to help people orient towards intrinsic/self-transcendent values.

Second, I discuss how to apply these ideas to the campaigns that philanthropic and international development organisations conduct. In particular, I describe:

- the potential dangers of basing campaigns around appeals to extrinsic/self-enhancement values; and
- evidence showing that appeals to intrinsic/self-transcendent values can be quite effective in motivating behaviour.

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Third, I review five general directions for policies to effect shifts in values, each of which in turn yields multiple, more specific policy proposals that could be pursued. Specifically, I discuss policies to:

- develop alternative indicators of progress that de-privilege extrinsic/self-enhancement values and that include assessments of intrinsic/self-transcendent values in their calculations;
- improve people's time affluence so as to give them more opportunities to pursue behaviours relevant to intrinsic/self-transcendent values;
- promote localisation, and thereby promote greater security and choice for individuals and communities;
- restrict commercial advertising to decrease the presence of one of the primary sources of extrinsic/self-enhancing messages; and
- re-conceptualise the aims of business, corporations, and other financial institutions so that they are less likely to promote extrinsic/self-enhancing values and more likely to support intrinsic/self-transcendent values.

It is my hope that this values-based approach shows that many different types of efforts that have been used in the past and that could be tried in the future can be integrated under a coherent, empirically supported theory. Keeping this theoretical approach in mind and using it to derive interventions, campaigns, and policy efforts could help to create synergisms and virtuous cycles that would facilitate broad shifts in values and thereby enhance people's wellbeing.



The Future of  
Philanthropy and  
Development in the  
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The Bellagio Initiative is a series of global consultations to produce a new framework for philanthropic and international development collaboration in pursuit of human wellbeing in the 21st century. The project is led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the Resource Alliance and the Rockefeller Foundation.

