

How to Measure True Prosperity

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Since ancient times, people have traditionally produced goods to satisfy their needs. Today, that has changed—now we sometimes confuse our need with our wants.

Following the Industrial Revolution, the progress of technology and the spread of consumerism have affected people's attitudes and mindsets. Their needs have been exploited in order to create a sense of want and desire for goods which they often do not need, to the point where people now expect that not only their needs but also their wants should be satisfied.

This shift in paradigm and change of consciousness from needs to wants has become a cultural habit, resulting in entire populations who have everything they want but not necessarily what they need. In other words, they are not content.

An old Spanish proverb says “Since we cannot get what we like, let us like what we get.”

Can money and wealth bring happiness? Can having everything we want satisfy us? The Baha'i writings tell us that:

“... wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes.” – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 24.

However, if happiness is perceived as a commodity or an object that one can possess or consume, such accumulation and overdependence on wealth can become a veil between the individual and his or her Creator.

Indeed, current research has found that money does not always bring happiness. As a result of this spiritual disconnect, discontentment is rampant. Although people are outwardly well off from a material standpoint, inwardly they are not happy, suffering from a high prevalence of depression. They sense an inner vacuum or hunger which nothing can satisfy. This existential emptiness—basically a spiritual phenomenon—has become almost universal in our materialistic cultures. Therefore, in our search for contentment, we all require a balance between material and spiritual fulfillment.

At the level of society, this situation manifests itself in the disparity between the rich and the poor, which the Baha'i teachings say has now reached crisis proportions:

“Today, all the peoples of the world are indulging in self-interest and exert the utmost effort and endeavour to promote their own material interest. They are worshipping themselves and not the divine reality nor the world of mankind.” – Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 68.

The New York Times recently reported that globally, we throw out about 1.3 billion tons of food each year—which constitutes a third of all food consumed by the world. – Somini Sengupta, Dec. 12, 2017. This enormous waste of food also contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Further, reports regarding discarded food show that, especially in the United States and Canada, approximately 40 percent of wasted food is thrown out by consumers.

The food thrown away by wealthy nations could mitigate the hunger, sickness and despair of millions of people in other countries of the world.

In stark contrast to this wasteful lifestyle, the plight of poor populations—as reflected in a report on global poverty and economic disparity between the poor and the rich—found that the poorest 40% of the world’s population accounts for only 5 percent of global income; while the richest 20 percent of the world accounts for 75% of it. Almost half of the world’s population lives on less than US \$2 per day. According to UNICEF, between 26,500–30,000 children die each day as a result of poverty. They die without fanfare in some of the poorest villages on earth. – UNICEF, *The States of the World’s Children*, 2008, p. 1.

Nearly half of the population in developing countries suffers from health problems caused by lack of safe water and adequate sanitation. Each year, 350-500 million individuals suffer from malaria. About 90% of these malaria-caused deaths occur in Africa, with children accounting for 80% of these mortalities worldwide. Among the 2.2 billion children of the world, one billion live in poverty.

We can prevent this suffering and death due to poverty—now. We have the means and the knowledge necessary to alleviate it. The following report from globalissues.org demonstrates the extent of economic disparity between wealthy and poor people in the world. The figures indicated are in billions of U.S. dollars per year:

Cosmetics in the United States: 8
Ice cream in Europe: 11
Perfume in Europe and the United States: 12
Pet food in Europe and the United States: 17
Total \$48 Billion

On the other hand, it is estimated that the cost of access to basic social services in developing countries during the same period would have been as follows:

Basic education for all 6
Water and sanitation for all 9
Reproductive health for all women 12
Basic health and nutrition 13
Total \$40 Billion

As I pointed out in my book *Materialism*, the combined actual expenditures for only three items in the first list above—ice cream, perfume and pet food in Europe and the United States—would have been sufficient to fund the four global priorities in the second list. – pp. 121-123. The World Food Programme says:

Every day too many men and women across the globe struggle to feed their children a nutritious meal. In a world where we produce enough food to feed everyone, 815 million people—one in nine—still go to bed on an empty stomach each night. Even more—one in three—suffer from some form of malnutrition. – www.wfp.org

In the light of the above statistics, and in conjunction with the Baha’i principle for humanity to eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty, it is important to realize that:

... if conditions are such that some are happy and comfortable and some in misery; some are accumulating exorbitant wealth and others are in dire want—under such a system it is impossible for man to be happy and impossible for him to win the good pleasure of God. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 312.

The true meaning of prosperity in relation to wealth needs to be redefined. True prosperity, from a Baha'i perspective, is based on social justice, reciprocity, and equity. It requires the well-being of all members of society.

In order to realize this vision of a new society, we all need to adopt a new attitude toward the acquisition and use of wealth—to practice moderation and to reflect on the real purpose of the journey of our life on this planet. The Baha'i teachings warn us that should we remain selfish and too attached to wealth and forgetful of God, we may become **“captives of nature and the sense world.”** – Ibid., p. 303. Instead, we need to understand that prosperity does not come about solely through the acquisition of wealth and material well-being—that, as the Universal House of Justice wrote in 2013, **“True prosperity is the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life.”**