



Perspectives: Using Positive Psychology and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals to Build a Better World

Lambert, L., Warren, M. A., Brulé, G., O'Brien, C., Murray, S., Mulay-Shah, A.,
Passmore, H.-A., Zelenski, J. M., Asfour, M., & Alsubaieci, S.

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Abstract: How the COVID-19 pandemic will affect society long-term remains to be seen, but the role taken by wellbeing researchers and practitioners can shape our communal future. Never has wellbeing and the field of psychology been better equipped, nor more relevant, in addressing issues of sustainable development known to significantly contribute to and underlie wellbeing. While efforts have been made across many areas, with each converging into the need for a more systemic view evidenced by theoretical developments in the field of positive psychology, wellbeing cannot remain the purview of individuals alone. Positive psychology interventions can be expanded to include attention to social and ecological issues as well. To support our claim, we explore issues that researchers and practitioners are tackling globally and consider how the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can guide that work. We also look at which of the SDGs are most critical in the Middle East region. Researchers and practitioners must align their activities towards the resolution of broad systemic issues bearing on wellbeing identified by the SDG agenda and in this manner, effectively contribute to the creation of a better world.

ملخص: كيف سيؤثر جائحة COVID-19 على المجتمع يبقى أن نرى ولكن الدور الذي يلعبه الباحثون وممارسو عافية الإنسان يمكن تشكل مستقبلنا المشترك. لم يسبق أن تم تجهيز مجال علم النفس بشكل أفضل ولم يكن أكثر صلة بمعالجة قضايا التنمية المستدامة المعروف أنها تساهم بشكل كبير في عافية الإنسان. في حين تم بذل جهود في العديد من المجالات مع تقارب كل منها في الحاجة إلى رؤية أكثر منهجية , وهي خطوة أثبتت أيضاً من خلال التطورات النظرية في مجال علم النفس الإيجابي, لا يمكن أن تظل العافية من اختصاص الأفراد وحدهم. في الواقع، نقترح توسيع تطوير تدخلات علم النفس الإيجابي لتشمل الاهتمام بالقضايا الاجتماعية والبيئية أيضاً. لدعم مطالبتنا، نستكشف القضايا التي يعالجها الباحثون والممارسون على الصعيد العالمي وننظر في كيفية توجيه أهداف التنمية المستدامة (SDGs) لعملهم وتأطيرها. ننظر أيضاً إلى أهداف التنمية المستدامة الأكثر أهمية في منطقة الشرق الأوسط. يجب على الباحثين والممارسين مطابقة أنشطتهم نحو حل القضايا المنهجية الواسعة التي تؤثر على العافية المحددة في جدول أعمال أهداف التنمية المستدامة , وبهذه الطريقة المساهمة بشكل فعال في خلق عالم أفضل.

Keywords: sustainable happiness; wellbeing; sustainable development goals; climate change; positive psychology; Middle East/North Africa



About the Authors: Dr. Louise Lambert is the Editor of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, positive psychology researcher and program developer (www.happinesismatters.org; mejpospsy@gmail.com). Dr. Meg Warren is Assistant Professor at Western Washington University (USA), with expertise in positive psychological approaches to diversity, inclusion and equity (www.MegWarren.com; Meg.Warren@wwu.edu). Dr. Gaël Brulé (University of Geneva, Switzerland) is a Postdoctoral researcher with interests in sustainability and micro-travel (<https://gaelbrule.com/>; gael.brule@gmail.com). Dr. Catherine O'Brien is Senior Scholar at Cape Breton University, Canada (<https://sustainablehappiness.world/>; obrien@sustainablehappiness.ca). Sean Murray, Canada, can be reached at s.murray@thinkingrock.org. Aziz Mulay-Shah is Managing Director of Global Communications Agency (Dubai, UAE) and specializes in social impact investing and sustainability (<http://www.gc.agency/>; aziz@gc.agency). From Canada, Dr. Holli-Anne Passmore is Assistant Professor of Psychology and Director of the Nature-Meaning in Life Lab at Concordia University of Edmonton (Holli-Anne.Passmore@concordia.ab.ca). Dr. John Zelenski is a Professor of Psychology at Carleton University, Ottawa (Canada) (<https://carleton.ca/happineslab/dr-zelenski/>; john.zelenski@carleton.ca). Nearer to home and based in Jordan, Mohammad Asfour is Head of the MENA & Africa Regional Networks, World Green Building Council (Middle East) (<https://www.worldgbc.org/about-us/team/mohammad-asfour>; masfour@worldgbc.org). Sabrina Alsubaiei is a Saudi undergraduate psychology student at the United Arab Emirates University (smts981@gmail.com).

Psychology has for a long time remained on the fringes of society, geared towards the unwell, with the field as a whole oriented towards distress and disease. This science of the mind has necessarily been oriented towards the problems that plagued humans, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, as well as collective problems like untangling the roots of terrorism (Hafez, 2016; Tsintsadze-Maass & Maass, 2014) or reducing HIV/AIDS related stigma (Badahdah, 2010; Wu & Li, 2013). In recent years, though, the field has evolved with the development of positive psychology broadening its remit. The examination of positive emotions and strengths, as well as the heights individuals and societies can reach, has become a topic of scientific inquiry (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) across the domains of health, governance, education, and organizational scholarship. How this focus can be useful in tackling the world's major issues is of significance.

Positive Psychology: Broadening the View

Positive psychology's (PP) early developments centered on tracing and demarcating the boundaries of the field, and laying the foundations for the development of theories and constructs upon which to solidify its science (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Lomas et al., 2020). Its initial rapid growth served to establish PP's pillars of inquiry, such as the study of positive emotions and positive psychology interventions (PPIs). It was largely limited to a psychological audience and early on, criticized for its primarily Western-centric assumptions (e.g., Lambert et al., 2015; Rao & Donaldson, 2015; Wong, 2013) and overly positive focus (e.g., Yakushko & Blodgett, 2018). The second wave of PP (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016) aimed to redress the imbalance by incorporating the positive and negative, strengthening its methods, and seeking non-Western voices (Wong, 2013).



Calls for a more contextual PP have also been made (e.g., Ciarocchi et al., 2016; Cohrs et al., 2013; Lambert et al., 2020; Yakushko & Blodgett, 2018), outlining how and where positive psychology could do more to create better societies globally (i.e., Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Corral Verdugo, 2012; Diener & Diener, 2017; O'Brien, 2013). In response, the most recent rendition, or third wave of PP (Lomas et al., 2020), has elevated the field again. In the face of recent events (such as COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, social unrest, employment and economic hardship, the rise of populism, and climate change threats), third wave PP posits that wellbeing is critically affected by outside forces. This third wave more keenly investigates sociocultural factors, as well as groups and systems that influence wellbeing. It espouses interdisciplinary, multicultural, and diverse methodologies, systems-informed positive psychology (SIPP; Kern et al., 2020) being one example. Moreover, it provides a role for, and addresses the absence of, positive psychologists from the tables of governance (Diener & Diener, 2017; Lambert et al., forthcoming).

Looking Beyond Individuals

Attempts to address structural failings have often been overlooked in psychological research, including positive psychology (Friedli & Stearn, 2015; Yakushko, 2018; Yakushko & Blodgett, 2018). Contextual approaches are useful in addressing issues of human and ecological survival, economic promise, social and political stability (Lelkes, 2013; Pykett & Cromby, 2017; Yakushko, 2018), and even responses to COVID-19 (van Bavel et al., 2020). For example, studies have shown that the lower individuals are on the socioeconomic scale, the more their wellbeing is impacted by contextual rather than psychological factors (Lomas, 2015). Further, costs of resolving systemic factors like crime, poverty, inequality, social isolation, and unemployment have larger effects than those gained from wellbeing efforts (Clark et al., 2017; Lelkes, 2013). Although individual interventions are effective (Carr et al., 2020; Chakhssi et al., 2018; Hendriks et al., 2020), addressing the wellbeing of societies as a whole may be more impactful.

A focus on wellbeing over illbeing may also be a more promising route for change. Tal and Kerrett (2020) posit that using a PP approach—such as making links between subjective wellbeing and issues such as having fewer children—may be more effective than approaches that shame, chastise, or punish women or families for having large numbers of children. Developing culturally relevant narratives around optimal family sizes and supporting the means by which families can reach their economic needs without having more children would go even further at promoting large-scale well-being. Given that PP addresses the desire of individuals to engage with their best selves, harnessing such aspirations through positively worded interventions that aim to resolve social ills may be noteworthy. In fact, such an approach may be useful in harnessing the collective will to address broader issues altogether, such as the sustainable development goals, thereby providing a roadmap to greater wellbeing globally.

The Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations proposed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Directly and indirectly tied to the wellbeing of individuals and societies, these goals provide a strategic framework through which global and



national challenges can be met. They apply to member nations who have pledged to use the framework to guide their policies and activities, as well as to research and practise endeavors.

The SDGs contain 169 targets to be tracked by 232 indicators including the reduction of poverty, gender equality, decent work within sustainable economic growth, and climate action (see Table 1). Better health and wellbeing (SDG3) is a goal in itself, but also a precursor to, and outcome of the other goals (Hill et al., 2014; WHO, 2012). The attainment of each SDG demands global and national forms of sustainable development alongside sustainable living.

Sustainable Development

Since it emerged as a concept in the 1980s, sustainable development has never only been an environmental matter. While several representations exist, sustainable development is commonly portrayed as the intersection of environmental, economic, and social issues. When first conceptualized, sustainable development was focused on the fulfillment of basic physical needs such as access to water, food, and shelter, but gradually this conception moved to include psychological and emotional goals, such as flourishing or wellbeing. However, increasing aspirations to fulfill human needs did not echo in increasing environmental protection; to the contrary, the great majority of environmental health indicators (e.g., global warming, resource depletion, air and water quality) show worrying trends which highlight that we are rapidly destroying the environment to sustain our wellbeing.

Table 1

The Sustainable Development Goals

SDG Number	Descriptor, Indicator Examples
1. No poverty	Eliminate extreme poverty globally. Indicator examples include access to social protection systems and economic loss from natural disasters.
2. Zero hunger	Eradicate hunger, improve food security and agriculture systems. Indicator examples include food insecurity, childhood stunting and malnutrition.
3. Health & Wellbeing	Promote global physical and mental health. Examples of indicators include suicide rates, alcoholism, and child mortality.
4. Quality education	Ensure quality education, especially for females, at all academic levels. Indicators include qualified teachers, educational disparities, inclusiveness.
5. Gender equality	Promote gender equality and empowerment of girls and women via equal access to education, health. Indicators include violence against women, girls married before the age of 15/18 years.
6. Clean water & sanitation	Achieve safe access to clean water and sanitation. Examples of indicators include protection/restoration of aquatic ecosystems, safe drinking water.



7. Affordable & clean energy	Ensure sustainable, clean, economical energy. Examples of indicators are access to electricity, clean fuel for cooking, and renewable energy.
8. Decent work & economic growth	Advocate for viable work, employment, and sustainable economic growth. Indicator examples include child labour and youth employment.
9. Industry, innovation & infrastructure	Invest in sustainable infrastructure and innovative industries. Examples of indicators are monitoring CO ₂ emissions, roads for rural populations, and developing small-scale industries.
10. Reduced inequalities	Reduce inequalities within/among nation states. Examples of indicators are eradicating discriminatory practices, voting rights for developing countries, and regulation of financial markets.
11. Sustainable cities & communities	Make cities safe, sustainable, and productive. Indicator examples are urban populations living in slums, protection of cultural heritage, and economic losses from natural disasters.
12. Responsible consumption & production	Promote eco-friendly consumption and production, green energy and infrastructure via sustainable development. Indicators include global food loss, hazardous waste generation, recycling, etc.
13. Climate action	Tackle climate change and its economic and environmental effects. Indicator examples are integration of climate change into national policies, education on climate change, and natural disaster risk management.
14. Life below water	Preserve, protect, and sustainably use aquatic and marine ecosystems. Examples of indicators include reducing marine pollution, protecting and restoring ecosystems, and implementing international sea law.
15. Life on land	Protect/regulate the use of forests and land to limit loss of biodiversity, resources, and desertification. Examples of indicators include sustainable forest management, and wildlife poaching and trafficking.
16. Peace, justice & strong institutions	Promote sustainable, prosperous, and peaceful societies. Examples of indicators include violence against children, human trafficking, and public discrimination.
17. Partnerships for the goals	Ensure shared objectives and visions of civil society, governments, and private sectors via partnerships. Examples of indicators are cooperation in science and technology and assistance to least-developed countries.

The relationship between sustainable development and subjective wellbeing has also been depicted rather simplistically: happy people pollute less and less pollution makes people happy (Bachelet et al., 2019; Sheth et al., 2011; Veenhoven, 2004). The truth of course is more nuanced; situations may be good for sustainable development or good for subjective wellbeing, but are not necessarily conducive to both. If one considers that being happy means fulfilling one's needs and wants (Veenhoven, 2009), many discordant examples arise. For instance, if one lived in a house without air conditioning, this could save energy and facilitate feeling morally good, but not



necessarily engender comfort on hot days. Likewise, purchasing an SUV may impress the neighbors and boost self-esteem momentarily, but contribute to rising emissions. Too often individuals make personal choices which enhance their wellbeing in the immediate moment, but which undermine personal and environmental wellbeing over the long run.

Teaching Sustainable Happiness

Dr. Catherine O'Brien and Sean Murray

Sustainable happiness has been taught in Canada's Cape Breton University since 2009. The course begins with an introduction to positive psychology research and experiential activities guide students in a personal exploration of happiness and wellbeing. Readings and assignments illustrate that personal wellbeing is interconnected with the wellbeing of others, including the natural world. Students learn to make daily choices that foster their own wellbeing and align with sustainable lifestyles, such as eating healthy local foods, plant-based diets, and reducing their fast food consumption. Learning is reinforced through a student led four-week sustainable happiness project. The aim of the course is to combine information, reflection, and action to help students understand that they are choice makers as well as change makers. It is also to create the awareness that happiness and sustainability can be joyfully intertwined.

Sustainable happiness has also become a component of Montreal's Dawson College sustainability initiatives. Staff members complete a 24-hour Sustainable Happiness Certificate leading to a Sustainable Happiness Facilitator Training program that expands their capacity to teach sustainable happiness. Dawson College has embraced sustainable happiness as it aligns with the institution's 2016-2021 strategic plan commitment towards wellbeing for all (Adam & Cassidy, 2020). During the fall term of 2020, the College began piloting the use of the *Sustainable Happiness Semester Journal* (Murray & O'Brien, 2020). The 100-day student journal includes daily questions that focus on topics such as wellbeing, happiness, and sustainability. Each is accompanied by an overview of relevant research or a response to questions from invited contributors. While most are designed for individual reflection, many are shareable, i.e., open for class discussion and relevant to one or more SDGs. For more, see <https://www.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/sustainable/sustainable-happiness/>.

Thus, we face a problem: low levels of wellbeing in the future given continued environmental degradation, or low levels of wellbeing now in trying to limit material consumption (Marks et al., 2006). A third way that recognizes the need for stability afforded through a stable economy and the impacts of overconsumption on human and planetary wellbeing is needed. O'Brien's model (2013; 2016) of sustainable happiness makes salient this overlap between conservation and positive psychology, and illustrates how the nexus between the two offers opportunities for the development of wellbeing for individuals and the environment concurrently. The sustainable happiness model maps activities and situations on two axes—benefits to individual wellbeing and costs to the environment; thus, informing individuals of the most environmentally sustainable way to pursue happiness. Moreover, the viability of this model is supported by positive



correlations between pro-environmental behaviors, attitudes, and wellbeing (Kasser, 2017). In fact, the Happiness Research Institute (2015) suggests, "...it is no longer possible to imagine a future where the pursuit of happiness is not somehow connected to sustainability" (p. 16).

Prioritizing Wellbeing through the SDGs

In the latest World Happiness Report, DeNeve and Sachs (2020) analyzed the relationship between the SDGs and subjective wellbeing. Currently, nations are measured on their progress towards meeting the goals on the SDG Index and Gallup World Poll (GWP). Nations with high index scores tend to do better on the six GWP determinants of wellbeing, i.e., social support, trust in government, income, generosity, freedom to live one's life, and health. Attainment of the SDGs facilitates wellbeing; accordingly, the case has been made that if nations desire to reach greater states of wellbeing, the pursuit of the SDGs is a route through which to do so. In fact, the correlation between the SDGs and overall life satisfaction is .79. Of greater interest is that negative affect is negatively associated with the attainment of the SDGs (-.57).

DeNeve and Sachs (2020) report that two of the SDGs are significantly related to subjective wellbeing on a global scale: SDG12 (Responsible Consumption & Production) and SDG13 (Climate Action). While consumption and production are necessary for economic growth, albeit the degree to which remains a point of debate, overconsumption can turn to materialism, which undermines wellbeing (Sirgy et al., 2013) and promotes unsustainable living. Materialism, valuing money, possessions and their conveyance, is also associated with lower life satisfaction and lower positive affect, negative self-image, greater anxiety, depression, treating others less empathically, compulsive buying, poor money management, and holding less sustainable environmental attitudes and actions (Brown et al., 2016; Brown & Vergragt, 2016; Dittmar et al., 2014; Hurst et al., 2013; Kasser, 2018; Kasser et al., 2014; Nepomuceno & Laroche, 2015).

Climate change affects mental health too. The impact of extreme weather patterns on post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicides are well documented (Bourque & Willox, 2014; Burke et al., 2018; Clayton, 2020; Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Hayes et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2020; Manning & Clayton, 2018). Negative psychological impacts rise in the months after disasters (e.g., flooding, hurricanes) and do not end at reconstruction (Azuma et al., 2014; Fontalba-Navas et al., 2017; Kessler et al., 2008). Farmers for example, are highly susceptible to suicide in periods of drought (Carleton, 2017; Coêlho et al., 2017). Climate change also influences land use, destabilizes food security, weakens infrastructure, and increases economic hardship, stress, crime, aggression, and human as well as animal migration patterns (Agnew, 2012; Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013; Gleick, 2014).

On a broader level, the prevalence of eco-anxiety is also rising. Eco-anxiety goes beyond reacting to the direct experience of natural disasters driven by climate change. Rather, eco-anxiety is chronic or persistent feelings of anxiety, worry, dread, or doom regarding degradation of our natural environment and the impacts and implications of climate change on our planet as a whole (Albrecht, 2011; Clayton, 2020; Clayton et al., 2014; Clayton et al., 2017; Swim et al., 2009). Closely related is solastalgia, the distress and isolation caused by the gradual removal of solace from the present state of one's environment (Albrecht, 2011). These states are becoming the new



normal, particularly in younger generations (APA, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). As a rational cognitive and emotional response to the very real environmental emergencies we face as a species, eco-anxiety, as it is most commonly manifested, is not a pathology (Albrecht, 2019; Clayton, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Consolo et al., 2020; Moffic, 2017; Pihkala, 2018, 2020). Yet, it does cause distress. Passmore and colleagues (in press) have identified how eco-anxiety is causing a cascade of existential anxieties regarding meaning, mortality, isolation, freedom, identity, and wellbeing. If researchers prioritize wellbeing, then issues like climate change and sustainable consumption, and the public will and action to mitigate these, must be priorities for interventions (Han & Barnett-Loro, 2018).

The Middle East/North Africa's Relationship with the SDGs

In 2019, the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region compiled its own SDG report (Luomi et al., 2019) to capture unique challenges and create new regional indicators. Covering 22 nations across subregions, i.e., Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations (Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia), the Levant (i.e. Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq), North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt), and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs; Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen), the region as a whole is lagging behind in progress towards the SDGs, with the average country score being just 58 out of 100. Only five countries (Algeria, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan) score between 65 and 66 on the total index score, and only Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon fully meet four goals (see Figure 1). This leaves 19 countries that have not attained a single SDG. A higher GDP is no guarantee of attaining the SDGs either: Algeria has a GDP of only 15,622US\$ (per capita 2018, PPP) but it leads regional SDG attainment, whereas Qatar with a GDP of 126,598US\$ (Luomi et al., 2019) ranks 10th.

Low rainfall in many areas, coupled with extreme heat for much of the year, makes climate action the strongest negatively correlated SDG with wellbeing (-.71), suggesting it is the single most critical issue to tackle in the region if wellbeing is of any concern. Environmental sustainability, climate change, and access to water have been identified as immediate concerns, with moderate increases in attaining SDG6 (Clean Water & Sanitation) and SDG13 (Climate Action) being recorded regionally. Nations hardest hit by climate change disasters are not always those contributing the most to it. People (per 100,000) most affected by disasters related to climate change include Lebanon (8,5959), Morocco (1,455), and Sudan (531), whereas the least affected nations include Kuwait (0), Jordan (1.0), Saudi Arabia (1.2), and the UAE (2.0). In contrast, nations importing the most CO₂ emissions are the UAE (2.1) and Lebanon (1.1), with Kuwait (-5.0) and Oman (-2.9) importing the least.

Related to governance, SDG16 (Peace, Justice, & Strong Institutions), has a correlation of .73 with wellbeing in the region. Political stability remains a stumbling block with more stable nations including Oman, UAE, and Qatar, and less stable nations including Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Weak governments and unstable political and economic systems are to blame, all of which are exacerbated when natural disasters occur.



Developing Sustainable Reconstruction & Urban Regeneration Guidelines

Mohammad Asfour, Head of the MENA & Africa Regional Networks, World Green Building Council (Middle East) Jordan

The SDGs are relevant for urban regeneration and sustainable reconstruction. When natural disaster or conflict strikes communities, they must be quickly stabilized and rebuilt, or face greater risks in the future. The role of the SDGs are implicated in rebuilding cities as a whole, including making those spaces safe (e.g., after earthquakes or from unexploded ordinances) and preserving access to water, as well as in protecting and promoting nature, archaeology, heritage, promoting the rights of women and children, strengthening education, and boosting social and economic resilience. Sustainability and climate change actions figure prominently across our assessment, planning, and development activities, much like infrastructure, wellbeing and health, peace building, and employment.

In collaboration with the UN Habitat, we are undertaking a project to put forth a set of rebuilding guidelines for the region. The first phase was completed in 2020 as part of the SDG Climate Nexus Facility Project. Consultants identified the main thematic areas (i.e., climate change, social and economic resilience, life cycle of materials, mobility/accessibility, health and comfort, disaster risk reduction, etc.) and designed the guidelines structure. They also compiled a comprehensive digital library. The second phase began in September after receiving a grant to develop the final version of the Sustainable Reconstruction & Urban Regeneration Guidelines. Many of the consultants working on both phases were supplied through the MENA Network's Green Building Councils.

This project provides the groundwork for a regional agenda for sustainable recovery, regeneration and reconstruction in which the built environment contributes to healthy, resource secure, and climate resilient societies. The regional agenda is aligned with sustainable development and 'Build Back Better' principles anchored in the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030, New Urban Agenda, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and others. The Guide will be a working document that provides actionable guidance that addresses the changing environmental landscape for regional reconstruction. For the first time, a positive psychologist was included to ensure that the presence of wellbeing was firmly embedded.

High levels of materialism and consumption also drive unsustainable living (Arthur et al., 2019; Chalhoub Group, 2014; Cherrier et al., 2009). In fact, the correlation between consumption and production (SDG12) and wellbeing in the MENA region is -.80. What drives consumption, in part, are subsidies (SDG12 indicator: Fossil fuel pre-tax subsidies; consumption and production); this discounted pricing favors consumers (petrol is widely available at below cost). Subsidies deplete natural resources by encouraging consumers to spend; but, forces governments to divert money away from education, innovation, or green technologies to afford them. These become the norm over time, with populations thereafter becoming resistant to paying costs more in line with actual prices; they are further disinclined to change their habits as subsidies become part of the social contract. Such subsidies range from 1185\$ to 1544\$ per capita (i.e. Qatar, Saudi Arabia,



UAE, Bahrain) to 4\$ to 11\$ (e.g. Yemen, Morocco, Iraq). Researchers must find ways to encourage consumers to reduce levels of materialism in a region where it is often synonymous with personal and/or family status.

Gender (in)equality (SDG5) persists, with all countries in the red zone. For instance, even in countries at the high end, such as Tunisia and Sudan, the number of seats held by women in national parliaments and local government figures are only 31% and 30% respectively. In the middle range are Iraq and UAE with 25% and 22%, while Yemen and Bahrain are at 0% and 7%. Violence against women by intimate partners is reported to be between 33% and 35% in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, while Iraq and Syria report 60% and 43%. The issue is not trivial; the correlation between gender equality and wellbeing is .75. As views on women and girls are often entrenched in cultural beliefs, these must be tackled sensitively, but tackled, they must. While laws are often in place to protect women, prevailing attitudes limit their enforcement. Dialogue around how sexism hurts both women and men and hinders social and economic progress is vital.

SDG8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth) is also highly correlated (.77) with wellbeing in the region. The Human Capital Index (HCI) (World Bank, 2018a) ranks nations on how well they develop human capital potential. The UAE ranked 49th in 2018, outperforming the 15 MENA nations covered in the index. Human capital reflects a nation's competitiveness and productivity; yet, the 2018 HCI shows that the region only captures 62% of its human potential, with numbers ranging from 66% in the UAE, 54% in Lebanon, and 37% for Yemen (World Bank, 2018a, b, c). Considered the lowest share of human capital globally (Lange et al., 2018), these figures are explained, in part, by high youth under- or unemployment, low female workforce participation, a large portion of the public purse going to public sector employment (double the world average at 10% of the GDP), and a heavy reliance on expatriate labour.

Further, while women outperform men educationally (Marquez et al., forthcoming), much performance-opportunity is wasted as women participate the least in the employment market. Greater female labour participation would boost the UAE's GDP by 12% and Egypt's by 34% (World Economic Forum, 2017). Overall, the unemployment rate for the total labour force in the MENA region ranges from 0.1 and 1.2 for Qatar and Bahrain, and up to 26.8 and 15.3 for Palestine and Tunisia. Specifically, youth unemployment (% of total labour force aged 15 to 24) ranges from very high (Palestine 47%, Libya 42%, Egypt 33%, Saudi Arabia 26%) to low (Qatar 0.6%, Bahrain 5%, UAE 8%). Only seven nations in the region have achieved this SDG with the majority either decreasing, stagnating, or moderately improving.

Overall, issues which plague the region are similar across countries: poor governance and lack of citizen voice, water shortages, malnutrition (due to affluence/poverty), transition towards renewables, women's inequality, a very large young population, low levels of innovation, few resources dedicated to science and technology, and misaligned or poor employment prospects (Luomi et al., 2019). Multiple crises have beset the region, and social and economic divisions seem intractable (Göll, Uhl, & Zwiers, 2019), not to mention that at least 10 of the 22 nations are beset by occupation, war, violence, political/social conflict, as well as a high number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). These issues make peace, regional cooperation, and social trust difficult. Even if resolved tomorrow, this mindset's legacy would remain (Göll et al., 2019).



Figure 1

SDG achievement, GDP per capita, Human Development Index across the 22 MENA nations (Luomi et al., 2019)

Country	2019 Arab SDG Index score	Arab SDG Index rank	GDP per capita (PPP) 2018, US\$	GDP per capita rank	Human Development Index score 2017	Human Development Index rank
Algeria	66.69	1	15,622	9	0.754	8
United Arab Emirates	66.17	2	74,943	2	0.863	1
Morocco	65.77	3	8,587	14	0.667	15
Tunisia	65.33	4	12,484	11	0.735	10
Jordan	65.28	5	9,348	13	0.735	9
Lebanon	63.09	6	13,058	10	0.757	7
Oman	62.84	7	41,435	6	0.821	5
Egypt	61.59	8	12,390	12	0.696	12
Kuwait	61.08	9	73,705	3	0.803	6
Qatar	60.57	10	126,598	1	0.856	2
Bahrain	59.82	11	47,220	5	0.846	4
Saudi Arabia	59.72	12	55,120	4	0.853	3
Iraq	55.49	13	17,510	8	0.685	14
Libya	53.90	14	20,706	7	0.706	11
Mauritania	52.75	15	4,190	17	0.52	17
Sudan	52.11	16	4,759	16	0.502	19
Syrian Arab Republic	51.86	17	n/a	n/a	0.536	16
Djibouti	51.04	18	2,744*	19	0.476	20
Comoros	48.26	19	2,828	18	0.503	18
Yemen	46.89	20	2,571	20	0.452	21
Somalia	43.41	21	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Palestine	n/a	n/a	5,148	15	0.686	13

Sources: GDP per capita data from World Bank World Development Indicators and HDI data from UNDP, retrieved in October 2019.

* GDP per capita data for Djibouti is for 2011 (latest available year).

Leading an SDG agenda

There is a role for positive psychology researchers to understand, investigate, as well as devise solutions and measure outcomes across a number of the SDGs. In fact, much research is already looking at systemic factors that contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and societies alike. Exploring how psychologists and positive psychologists can reorient their research to resolving some of the region's biggest issues—and not merely help individuals cope with them—would offer lessons for other regions too.



SDG 5: Gender Inequality

Women face challenges across several domains, from maternal health (Khan et al., 2006; Plouffe et al., 2020) to food insecurity (Jung et al., 2017), child marriage (Glover & Liebling, 2018), education (Aragonés-González et al., 2020), unpaid care work (Marphatia & Moussié, 2013), workplace discrimination (Triana et al., 2019), intimate partner violence and mental ill-health (Chmielowska et al., 2017; Dokkedahl et al., 2019).

While positive psychological research on issues relevant to women has been minimal (Rao & Donaldson, 2015), initial forays have begun to consider how approaches can build internal strengths (e.g., psychological growth after childbirth, Nishi & Usuda, 2017; strengths-coaching intervention for women in the workplace, Elston & Boniwell, 2011), foster positive affect (e.g., maternal positive affect during pregnancy; Voellmin et al., 2013), and improve resilience in the face of trauma (e.g., among breast cancer patients; Cerezo et al., 2014). Some studies have addressed issues such as coping strategies in the context of violence against women (Oosthuizen & Wissing, 2005) and childhood sexual abuse (Walker-Williams et al., 2012), yet, this research focuses on individual-level behaviors and interventions and implicitly offers guidance to women on what they can do to strengthen themselves. In a societal context that treats women unequally, it is neither fair nor sustainable to place the sole responsibility for women's wellbeing on women themselves; a focus on systems is imperative.

Recent studies have begun pursuing such avenues. A review of positive psychological approaches to addressing gender inequality in organizations identified four goals that can guide organizations' support for women's empowerment; that is, empower women to achieve, sustain and be rewarded for strong job performance, strengthen harmonious work relationships between women and men, improve women's quality of work life through initiatives that foster work-life balance, and invest in gender equality initiatives not only because it can boost profit, but because it is right to do (Warren et al., 2019). One intervention study found that to combat widespread systemic gender-based violence within the home and society, it was necessary to draw from vital cultural assets—religion and relationships (Wamue-Ngare et al., under review). Gender-based violence reduced drastically when religious leaders were invested, and when men and women worked together to combat violence and support women's wellbeing.

More broadly, positive psychologists have begun considering how health, psychological, social, and institutional issues stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic are worsening existing inequities (Warren & Bordoloi, 2020). Fortier (2020) notes that women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic as their jobs tend to be given lower priority, and they assume greater unpaid care work at home generally, more so when family members face physical and mental ill-health. These challenges are intensified for economically insecure women. As such, Fortier (2020) recommends that states adopt workfare policies, child care assistance, and paid family leave in strengthening wellbeing. Positive psychologists can play a role in developing such policies.

SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 & 15 (Life Below Water, Life on Land)

While wealth facilitates some forms of wellbeing, the environmental costs of over-consumption on climate change threaten not only future economies, but happiness too. A growing



body of research suggests that exposure to nature benefits individual wellbeing physically (Hartig et al., 2014), cognitively (Schertz et al., 2019), and emotionally (Capaldi et al., 2015; Mackerron & Mourato, 2013). For example, an Irish study of daily activities performed during the pandemic found that time in nature was reported to be the most pleasant (Lades et al., 2020). Similarly, a study of Tokyo residents found that the use of greenspace and views of it during lockdown were associated with better mental health (Soga et al., 2020). Like objective nature contact, individuals with strong subjective connections with nature report more wellbeing, and meta-analyses show these associations to be robust, spanning many indicators from pleasant emotions, satisfaction, meaning, personal growth, and autonomy (Capaldi et al., 2014; Pritchard et al., 2019).

Yet, the proliferation of urban development is not only adding to materialism, it is also driving climate change, environmental damage, and biodiversity loss; these underlie a cultural departure away from nature (Kesebir & Kesebir, 2017; Pyle, 2003; Soga & Gaston, 2016). A disconnect with the natural world feeds societal attitudes, policies, and governmental, corporate, and individual actions which further accelerate damage to the planet's ecosystems. However, affiliating and reconnecting with nature can break this cycle. Nature connectedness predicts pro-environmental behavior and interventions designed to boost nature connections generate more sustainable attitudes and behaviors (Richardson, Passmore et al., 2020; Whitburn et al., 2019).

While a personal sense of connection with nature is an individual-level variable, it links to collective processes in many ways. First, systemic and policy changes occur when sufficient numbers of individuals care enough to demand them. Further, individual actions can signal changing norms and inspire others to change their behavior and advocate for action (cf. Sparkman & Walton, 2017). Nature connectedness, noticing nature, and being exposed to it are each associated with greater pro-social orientations, connections, and behaviour, as well as less materialism (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001; Joye et al., 2020; Passmore & Holder, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2004; Zelenski et al., 2015). Programs and interventions which target the enhancement of nature connectedness and opportunities to easily affiliate with nature can have broad implications (see Richardson, Dobson et al., 2020) as sustainability involves pro-sociality with respect to humans and the beyond-human natural world.

Adjacent streams in positive psychology can explore psychological processes that can be harnessed to help mitigate climate change. For example, positive psychologists (along with philosophers, theologians, and other thinkers) understand that humans are driven by motives that extend beyond pleasure and pain. Broadly described as eudaimonia, meaning, authenticity, accomplishment, etc., are powerful forces that propel action through difficulty and beyond self-interest (Huta & Waterman, 2014). These tendencies are engendered by pleasant states such as self-transcendent emotions (e.g. gratitude, compassion, awe) which play roles in pro-social and likely pro-environmental actions (Stellar et al., 2017; Zelenski & Desrochers, 2020).

Positive psychology could also further the role of positive messages that have been overlooked by mainstream psychology. In a recent example, participants were more emotionally responsive to biodiversity gains (versus losses) over time (White et al., 2020). This finding contrasts with the widespread notion from prospect theory that losses loom larger than gains. It also suggests that optimistic and positive messaging can have an essential role in persuasive communication



about climate change, and underscores the broader idea that humans have much wellbeing to gain when the natural environment improves.

SDG 3: Health & Wellbeing and SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

The link between individual and social wellbeing is not always visible; however, when social and/or political instability rise, it becomes salient. In such cases, research is deployed to understand the consequences of warfare, political upheaval, migration and displacement (e.g. Hoppen & Morina, 2019; Kadir et al., 2019; Morina et al., 2018). Studies examining the negative impacts of conflict offer a lens through which to understand how mental distress can compound. At the same time, recent literature stemming from positive psychology has been instrumental in understanding how individuals and communities can move beyond those events. Studies in post-traumatic growth (PTG) are prolific, many of which emerged from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (e.g. Al-Krenawi et al., 2011; Punamaki, 2010; Thabet et al., 2015; Veronese et al., 2019), as well as studies on other positive constructs from Lebanon (Nuwayhid et al., 2011) and Afghanistan (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010) as examples.

Research focusing on PTG illustrates that what helps individuals move past trauma is social resilience (Cacioppo et al., 2011). Findings show that in post armed conflict situations, what contributes most to positive mental health is not wholly the personal efforts of individuals, but social integration and community resilience (Ajdukovic et al., 2013; Bakic & Ajdukovic, 2019). Findings from Nuwayhid et al.'s (2011) study after the 2006 war in Lebanon were much the same: collective strengths helped individuals survive, organize and mobilize. Equally, a review of school, community, and individual children's programs designed to reduce the effects of war (Betancourt et al., 2013) suggested that without the engagement of the community, impacts were limited. Attending to economic deprivation, discrimination, and violation of human rights, however, improved outcomes tremendously. Hence, understanding what factors drive social resilience and in turn, enhance individual wellbeing may yield greater returns than individual intervention alone.

In the hopes of offering functional solutions beyond mere descriptions of affected people's experiences, collaborating with social psychologists, economists, political scientists, climate change experts, and the like may help address the systemic issues that drive poor wellbeing. Deriving strategies to help communities constructively engage with their political or collective processes, peacefully contribute to social progress, and mobilize the willingness to work with diverse stakeholders, may remove from individuals the sole responsibility of having to develop resilience and coping skills to deal with unjust, oppressive systems (Cohrs et al., 2013). Such lessons may then be extended to broader social groupings and even nations as a whole.

Hence, as much as positive psychology interventions are successfully taught in schools, they may benefit from being extended to focus on the improvement of collective wellbeing as a whole. A revised set of interventions may be warranted to mobilize the collective ability to extend needed expressions of tolerance, communal care and justice (Cohrs et al., 2013). As peace and stability depend on perceptions, emotions, and interpersonal experiences, researchers and practitioners alike must understand what conditions make them possible and how they can be promoted and sustained long before they are needed (Leidner et al., 2013). A new iteration of collective PPIs



developed to suit positive psychology's third wave would not be remiss. Examples of where to focus may include reviving the notion of frugality and its links with subjective wellbeing (e.g. Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2014), exploring social dilemmas (e.g. "why must I limit my ecological footprint if no one else does" to "if I do, might others too?"), boosting levels of optimism and self-efficacy with respect to social and ecological change to reduce extremism and destructive nihilism (Marks et al., 2006), and calling forth character strengths like bravery, in taking unpopular actions.

Solutions

Beyond our main proposition of encouraging researchers and practitioners to consider how their activities can align with and make possible the SDGs via necessary individual and social actions, we offer additional solutions towards bridging the gap between aspiration and reality.

Cross disciplinary research and action

As the SDG's are cross-cutting in nature, greater interdisciplinary research is necessary (Guégan et al., 2018). It is not only that disciplines need to work together, but regions do too; even if solutions and needs differ dramatically, commonalities and inspirations can be shared. Initiatives need to be global in nature yet regional in scope, with solutions being developed by many stakeholders, including psychology, and non-traditional players too, like architects, heritage experts, urban planners, climate activists, policy experts, and religious figures (Roudini et al., 2017).

Reconsider impact against the SDGs

The pressure for academics to shift away from a purely scientific or academic impact towards resolving social, health, political, or environmental issues is growing (Bornmann, 2012; Taylor, 2009). Professional scientific associations such as the Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology have been urging psychologists to undertake research that advances the SDGs (Gloss et al., 2014; Mallory et al., 2015), and higher education associations are publicly committing to, and holding governments accountable for such aims as well (ImpAct Advisory Committee, 2020 is an example). Yet, a stumbling block is that researchers are not incentivized to pursue such agendas as universities base faculty success on publication metrics geared toward elevating the status of institutions instead (Lambert & Warren, 2019; Lambert et al., forthcoming; Ravenscroft et al., 2017; Torjesen et al., forthcoming). As public institutions are funded by the same money that addresses the SDGs, it should be obligatory that some of their research activity supports the SDGs.

Collect widespread and better data

The collection of data upon which decision making is made must be improved (Guégan et al., 2018). For instance, in preparing the Arab SDG Report (Luomi et al., 2019), no publicly available regional datasets were available, with the biggest gaps being identified around the distribution of wealth. When data are collected, they are not always useful, nor focused on the impact of SDG activity; else, they are collected, but incongruent with community or ecological needs. Agreement on what data are to be collected, by whom, and how they will be shared, is key.



Financing and Partnerships with the Private Sector

Aziz Mulay-Shah, Director of Global Communications Agency, Dubai

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is being felt acutely by small and medium businesses. Effects are both in terms of economic growth and the wellbeing of workforces globally. This has led some in the private sector, enabled by organizations such as the UN Global Compact, to champion and strategically redesign strategies that incorporate the SDGs as markers into business operations, value chains, and investment strategies, while also embedding wellbeing principles. A need has been identified to accelerate how companies can enable employees to thrive in the workplace and invest in impact initiatives or businesses that will alleviate some of the longer term impacts of the pandemic.

One area of focus that is garnering increased attention is impact investing. How can investments make money for investors while also helping to achieve the SDGs? Across the investment world, green financing, social investment instruments, and circular economy initiatives, particularly through public private partnerships, have used metrics associated with Economic, Social, and Governance standards (ESG). Yet, with a call to action from the UN and other international organizations, the private sector is being asked to build on ESG standards and develop social impact investment models that directly align to the SDGs.

Critics in the financial world argue that the SDGs are too numerous, cumbersome, lack performance indicator specificity, and do not reflect the realities of the investment world where returns on investment (RoI) prevail. Whatever diminishes sufficient RoI is deemed sub-optimal for investment committees; they argue that they are not in the business of philanthropy. To allay criticism, the UN Secretary General recently convened a task force to develop specific metrics for the SDGs that can be used by the investment world. Building on the extensive work undertaken via the UN Global Indicator Framework (<https://undocs.org/A/RES/71/313>), the task force on Digital Finance and the SDGs is refining specific indicators and linking them to digital finance and Fintech innovation to create a transparent model of Monitoring, Evaluation and Review.

This work will create pathways for investors to align investment models to the work of the UN and SDG targets. Academic research can assist by creating practical policy frameworks, particularly for SDGs of a social and wellbeing nature where business transactions are not the norm and enhanced operational indicators would be of great value.

Conclusion

Learning about the SDGs and the world's collective failure in reaching them can be demoralizing; yet, such issues cannot be ignored. Focusing on where change can be made is necessary. Further, while climate change triggers much distress, fear, and anxiety, it can also elicit more sustainable behavior, planning, and preparedness when well communicated (Marlon et al., 2019). Finding ways to build the social will to address such issues, strengthen collective efficacy and social resilience, and develop constructive solutions is imperative. Researchers in the social



sciences have a vital role to play in furthering the understanding of what moves people to action and what fosters a sense of communal responsibility. We hope to have offered a compelling narrative towards the adoption of the SDGs as research and practise objectives. Meaningful progress that will sustainably and reliably boost the wellbeing of all can only be achieved worldwide if greater synergy is achieved between what researchers do in terms of their research activity, advocacy, and partnerships with the private and public sectors, and what the world really needs.

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