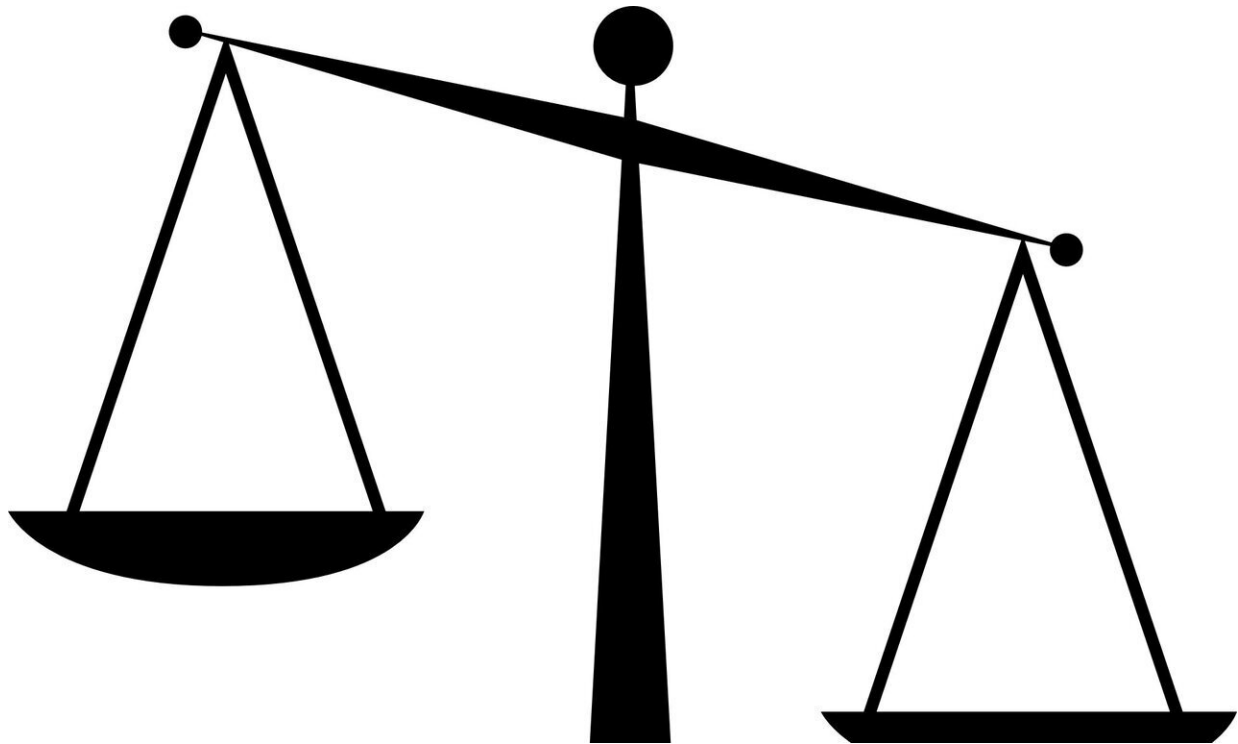


# Being happy with less: Money, children, time and balance

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They may seem like fixed options: having many children like in Africa, or overconsuming like in many western countries. These choices, however, are not personal preferences but societal norms that people adhere to subconsciously. Standards such as these can swing towards less consumption or fewer children while increasing the average happiness in

society.

This conclusion was published in the renowned *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* by an international team of researchers, including Wageningen University & Research.

Consumption and [population growth](#) are putting the world under pressure, and it seems impossible to change this. People in wealthy countries are unwilling to cut back on consumption. At the same time, no one wants to be forced into having fewer children. These preferences seem firmly rooted. "Everyone has the right to free choice. So it seems like little can be done about it." says professor Marten Scheffer, co-author of the publication. "However, there is a sustainable alternative, that -perhaps surprisingly- would at the same time increase wellbeing for the large majority. Many people intuitively feel that this could be the case, but elevating the discussion on issues such as consumption and population growth from unfounded small talk to substantiated insights that hint at solutions, is a challenge."

## **Subconscious societal pressure**

In the publication, a large group of economists, ecologists, [social psychologists](#) and other scientists brought together at the Beijer Institute's Askö meeting 2016, demonstrate that many apparent preferences spring from subconsciously perceived societal pressure. For instance, a study carried out among two separate religious groups in Bangladesh, shows that women lean towards wanting the number of children that is the norm in their group, and not that of the other group. Preferences are "contagious," which may lead a population to continue having many children, even if smaller families would make their lives significantly more comfortable.

## **Less consumption = more time for family and friends**

Patterns of consumption in wealthy countries show a similar dynamic. People tend to compare themselves to others in their material gains such as housing, clothing and vehicles. However, a lesser urge to buy expensive goods generates room for social endeavours such as day trips with friends and other things that promote a sense of wellbeing.

## **Less children = less poverty**

Other research indicates that reduced family size lead to a reduction of poverty in large parts of the world. But how could we initiate a large-scale change towards behaviour that can contribute to a more sustainable and better quality of life? Research shows that educating women has a significant effect on the desire to bear [children](#). Also, the influence of social media, traditional media and role models on behavioral norms is large.

## **Corona: time to reflect?**

Scheffer also identifies another possibility: "Our publication appears at a time that everything has become fluid due to the coronavirus. A global drama obviously. But one aspect is that many of us are suddenly put in a position where we have more time for ourselves and our families. We are taking a step back in travel, buying items and all kind of other things."

The authors conclude: "That human attitudes and practices are socially embedded suggests that it is possible for people to reduce their fertility rates and [consumption](#) demands without experiencing a loss in wellbeing."

The study is a result of the the Beijer Institute's Askö meeting 2016. The annual Askö meetings are informal workshops for internationally leading ecologists and economists at the island of Askö in the Baltic Sea, held since 1993.

**More information:** Scott Barrett et al. Social dimensions of fertility behavior and consumption patterns in the Anthropocene, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1909857117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1909857117)

Provided by Wageningen University

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