Eoghan Gavigan

It's a jungle out there in today's financial world — just ask the Nukak

The task of managing one's finances has grown in recent years. This is due not only to the greater range and complexity of financial products available, but also to the boundless documentation requirements attaching to them. Ironically, it often seems that the more basic a product is, the heavier the regulation – and the paperwork. The humble personal retirement savings account is indeed no friend to the environment in terms of the number of trees which have been sacrificed in its name. A simpler existence is possible.

In his book *The Ascent of Money*, the historian Niall Ferguson, when seeking to explain the relationship between civilisation and the monetary system, cites the Nukak tribe in the Amazonian rainforest of Colombia, who had no contact with the wider world until 1981. The nomadic tribespeople had never seen money and did not understand the concept of a medium of exchange or a store of value, as their economy was based primarily on hunter-gatherer activity and the immediate use of food resources.

Perhaps arising out of these conditions and the immediacy of their needs, the Nukak concept of time and the future was very different from ours. Needless to say, financial planning was not a key element of Nukak society, as money and time's progress are the two vital ingredients that, when combined, make financial planning both necessary and rewarding, looking to balance present consumption with fulfilling future needs.

The Nukak also lacked many of the worries of a typical Irish person today, who at a minimum must accumulate, or sometimes borrow, funds to meet the cost of education, the acquisition of a home, living expenses after they stop working, and perhaps even their own burial. Most of the important life choices we make, such as accepting a job, purchasing a house or having children, are based at least in part on our ability to generate enough capital for these needs and wants. Financial planning is concerned with devising strategies to fulfil these objectives, allocating resources to each goal, and managing the investment. Another key aim is to minimise inefficiencies in the process. Resource management among the Nukak was far more seasonal and focused on harvesting what was available in the environment.

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Many reading this, who struggle against rush-hour traffic, competing demands between work and home, and high income taxes in their quest to increase their capital, might say that the Nukak had it good and should stay in the jungle, but read on.

Although we are told the human body is built for a hunter-gatherer existence and travelling up to 18km a day on foot, rather than in a car on the M50, that life is not easy. In 1988, an initial group of about 40 Nukak emerged unexpectedly from the jungle. The modern world had encroached on them, with coca growers, ranchers and guerrillas pushing into their territory. Over time, they were joined by others from the tribe. These pioneers now live in settlements around San José del Guaviare. As a displaced people, the state is required to assist them and help them to return home if they want. Some of the Nukak claimed the life of a hunter-gatherer was just too hard, and even among the tribe there is disagreement on whether they should return to the jungle.

According to The New York Times, after leaving the rainforest the Nukak started to learn Spanish and grow crops for sale, and they wanted the Colombian government to provide land to plant so they could "take the crops to town" and exchange them "for money and exchange the money for other things". Engaging in agriculture would result in them becoming active participants in the economy and financial system, and all that goes with that.

It would be a big adjustment for them, and it seems they haven't yet managed to make the change. If they ever do, something tells me that the regulatory burden of modern-day living may produce in them at least an occasional longing to be back in the jungle.

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