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FIRST WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT LAUNCHED AT THE UNITED NATIONS

The happiest countries in the world are all in Northern Europe (Denmark, Norway, Finland, Netherlands). Their average life evaluation score is 7.6 on a 0-to-10 scale. The least happy countries are all poor countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Togo, Benin, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone) with average life evaluation scores of 3.4. But it is not just wealth that makes people happy: political freedom, strong social networks and an absence of corruption are together more important than income in explaining well-being differences between the top and bottom countries. At the individual level, good mental and physical health, someone to count on, job security and stable families are crucial.

These are among the findings of the first ever World Happiness Report, commissioned for the April 2nd United Nations Conference on Happiness (mandated by the UN General Assembly). The report, published by the Earth Institute and co-edited by the institute’s director, Jeffrey Sachs, reflects a new worldwide demand for more attention to happiness and absence of misery as criteria for government policy. It reviews the state of happiness in the world today and shows how the new science of happiness explains personal and national variations in happiness.

The report shows that, where happiness is measured by how happy people are with their lives:

- Happier countries tend to be richer countries. But more important for happiness than income are social factors like the strength of social support, the absence of corruption and the degree of personal freedom.
- Over time as living standards have risen, happiness has increased in some countries, but not in others (like for example, the United States). On average, the world has become a little happier in the last 30 years (by 0.14 times the standard deviation of happiness around the world).
- Unemployment causes as much unhappiness as bereavement or separation. At work, job security and good relationships do more for job satisfaction than high pay and convenient hours.
- Behaving well makes people happier.
- Mental health is the biggest single factor affecting happiness in any country. Yet only a quarter of mentally ill people get treatment for their condition in advanced countries and fewer in poorer countries.
- Stable family life and enduring marriages are important for the happiness of parents and children.
- In advanced countries, women are happier than men, while the position in poorer countries is mixed.
- Happiness is lowest in middle age.
As case studies, the report describes in detail how happiness is measured in Bhutan and the United Kingdom, and it lays out how the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development plans to promote standard methods of data collection in different countries. The report itself proposes two evaluative questions that should be asked by social surveys of representative populations in all countries:

- Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are? (where 0 means extremely unhappy, and 10 means extremely happy)
- All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays? (where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely satisfied.)

If possible, it would also be desirable to ask separate questions about how people experience their day-to-day existence.

NOTES FOR EDITORS:


The Conference at the UN on April 2nd is hosted by the Government of Bhutan.

On 13 July 2011, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution which:

1. Invites Member States to pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and well-being in development with a view to guiding their public policies;

2. Invites those Member States that have taken initiatives to develop new indicators and other initiatives to share information thereon with the Secretary-General as a contribution to the United Nations development agenda, including the Millennium Development Goals;

3. Welcomes the offer of Bhutan to convene a panel discussion on the theme of happiness and well-being during its sixty-sixth session;

4. Invites the Secretary-General to seek the views of Member States and relevant regional and international organizations on the pursuit of happiness and well-being and to communicate such views to the General Assembly at its sixty-seventh session for further consideration.

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