

## Want to be happy? Head for Vanuatu

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GIVEN the prospect of endless violence worldwide, it is interesting to understand the true meaning of "happiness" to the world.

Until lately, there was no way of telling. Now it is possible by using the Happy Planet Index (HPI). This is an innovative attempt to measure a country's level of happiness compared to the rest of the world.

Drawn up by the National Economics Foundation (NEF), a British think-tank, it claimed to be the first ever index to combine environmental impact with well-being.

Andrew Simms, the foundation's policy director, was quoted as saying the index "addresses the relative success or failure of countries in giving their citizens a good life while respecting the environmental resource limits on which all our lives depend".

The HPI is meant to show the relative efficiency with which nations convert the planet's natural resources into long and happy lives for their citizens.

While the nations that top the index may not be the happiest places in the world, the nations that score well show that achieving, long, happy lives (without over-stretching the planet's resources) is possible. The index reveals that there are different routes to achieving comparable levels of well being.

It makes clear that the model followed by the West can provide widespread longevity and variable life satisfaction but it does so only at a vast and ultimately counter-productive cost in terms of resource consumption.



A woman praying for happiness at a temple. To each person, his own way of finding happiness. If the people are happy, the country will prosper.

In other words, the HPI tends to move the economy back to its absolute basics— what is put in (resources) and what comes out (human lives of different lengths and happiness).

The resulting index, involving 178 nations for which data is available, unfortunately reveals that the world as a whole has a long way to go.

On a scale of 0 to 100 for the HPI, a reasonable target of 83.5 has been set, based on attainable levels of life expectancy and well-being and a reasonably-sized ecological footprint.

But the highest HPI score is only 68.2 achieved by Vanuatu, a South Pacific archipelago of about 209,000 people. This is despite Vanuatu being ranked 207th out of 233 economies when measured against gross domestic product.

Malaysia, with a HPI of 52.7, is placed at 44, just one spot above Palestine. After this survey by the Economics Foundation, the University of Leicester in Britain published its own first world "Map of Happiness" drawn up by Adrian White, an analytic social psychologist at the university's School of Psychology.

Generally, the university's version shows that it is better to live in northern Europe than in Asia with countries such as China being placed at 82; Japan 90; India 125 and Russia 167.

It is interesting to note that larger populations are not associated with happy countries, though one expects countries with a strong sense of collective identity, which other researchers have associated with well-being, would do better.

In northern Europe, in contrast, one has more chances to be happy if one is rich and in good health.

Malaysia fared relatively better in the university's ranking at number 47, with Burundi last (178) and Zimbabwe just before it (177).

Relative to Malaysia, other Group of Eight countries, except for Canada at No 10, fared relatively poorly—United States 23, Germany 35, Britain 41, Italy 50, France 62, Japan 90 and Russia 167 in that survey.

In the National Economics Foundation's survey, all the G8 countries were ranked even worse—Russia 172, France 129, Canada 111, Britain 108, the United States 105, Japan 95, Germany 81 and Italy 66.

Admittedly, although these methods of measuring happiness are not perfect, they are about the best available so far.

The authors demonstrated that it is possible to use certain parameters to track changes in happiness and what events may cause that, such as war, famine or national success.

"There is increasing political interest in using measures of happiness as a national indicator in conjunction with measures of wealth," claimed White.

It seems a nation's level of happiness is most closely associated with health levels, while prosperity and education are the next strongest determinants.

Simon Bullock, economics coordinator for Friends of the Earth, which helped compile the foundation's data, remarked on the Internet (BBC, July 12): "The current crude focus on gross domestic product is outdated, destructive and doesn't deliver a better quality of life."

It seems fitting to support the call by the foundation to adopt a "global manifesto for a happier planet" that will list ways nations can live within their environmental limits and increase people's quality of life.

Among its recommendations are eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, recognising the contributions of individuals and unpaid work, and ensuring economic policies stay within environmental limits.

As noted by Bullock, although Britain's economy (which is ranked 108) sucks up vast quantities of the world's scarce resources, the British people are no happier than those in Colombia (who came out No 2), who use far less.

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