

# GDP per capita is a poor predictor of national well-being

**Adrien Fabre** (CNRS, CIRED)

*January 2024*

# Introduction

# What makes a country happy?

What country is the happiest?  $\Rightarrow$  Answer on: **sli.do/2601**

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## HAPPIEST COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD 😊

- |   |   |                          |    |   |                      |
|---|---|--------------------------|----|---|----------------------|
| 1 |  | Finland<br>7.769         | 6  |  | Switzerland<br>7.480 |
| 2 |  | Denmark<br>7.600         | 7  |  | Sweden<br>7.343      |
| 3 |  | Norway<br>7.554          | 8  |  | New Zealand<br>7.307 |
| 4 |  | Iceland<br>7.494         | 9  |  | Canada<br>7.278      |
| 5 |  | The Netherlands<br>7.488 | 10 |  | Austria<br>7.246     |

Source: World Happiness Report 2019

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What do we mean by “happy”? Subjective well-being.



# Literature

Inglehart & Klingemann (WVS, 2000)

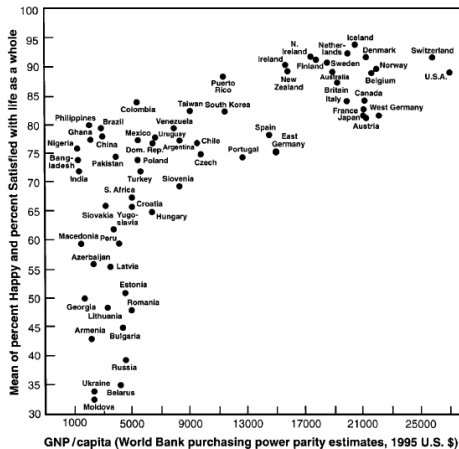


Figure 7.2

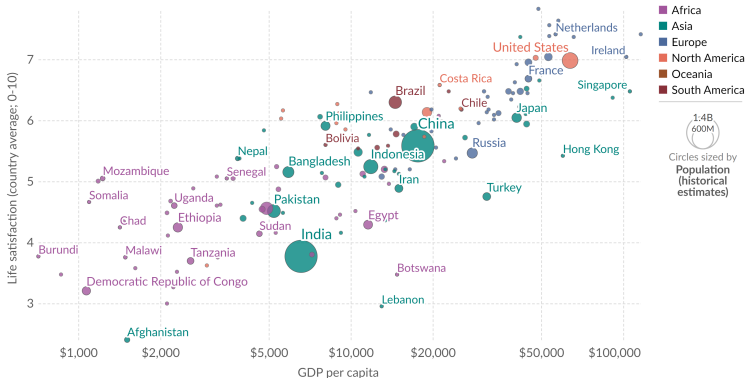
Subjective well-being by level of economic development ( $R = 0.70$ ,  $N = 65$ ,  $p < 0.0000$ ).  
Source: World Values Surveys; GNP/capita purchasing power estimates from World Bank, World Development Report, 1997.

# Literature

## World Happiness Report (Gallup, 2023)

### Self-reported life satisfaction vs. GDP per capita, 2022

Self-reported life satisfaction is measured on a scale ranging from 0-10, where 10 is the highest possible life satisfaction. GDP per capita is adjusted for inflation and differences in the cost of living between countries.



Data source: World Happiness Report (2023); World Bank (2023)

Note: GDP per capita is expressed in international-\$<sup>1</sup> at 2017 prices.

[OurWorldInData.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction](https://OurWorldInData.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction) | [CC BY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

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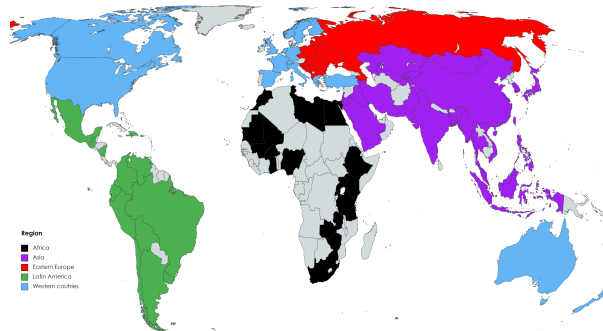
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Another simple variable, the country's (macro) region, is a better predictor of national well-being.

# Design

# Data

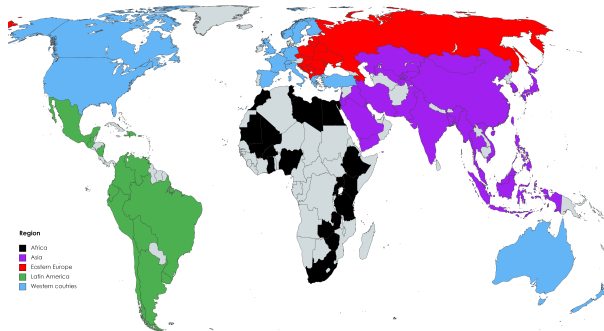
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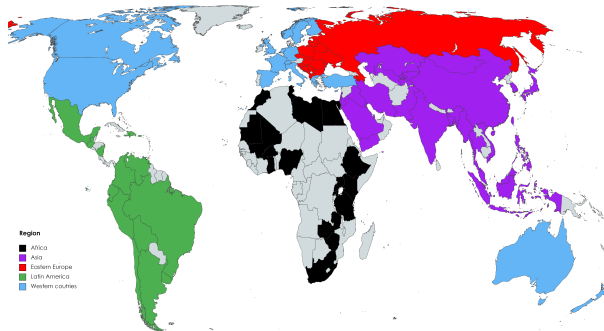


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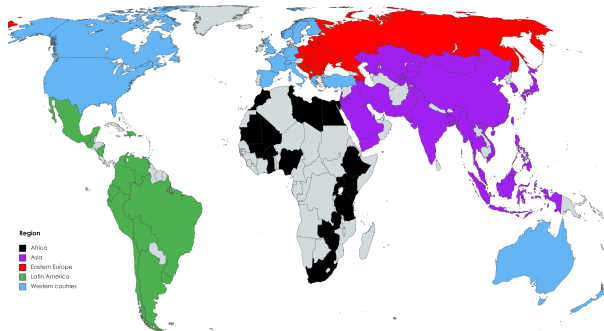
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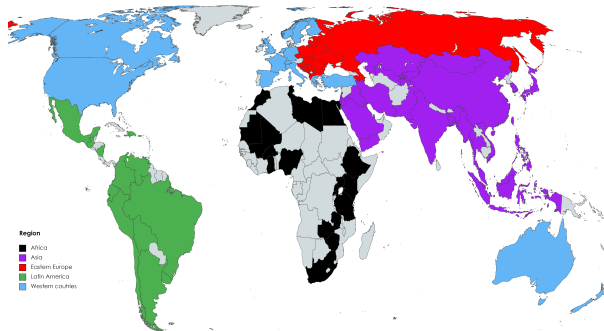
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**Satisfaction**: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?”

*1-Completely dissatisfied – 10-Completeley satisfied*; PNR



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With the two well-being questions, **we can define various** national **indicators** (all weighted using survey weights, all excluding PNR).

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Bond & Lang (19) show that no single indicator can reliably identify two group's relative well-being, justifying reliance on several indicators.

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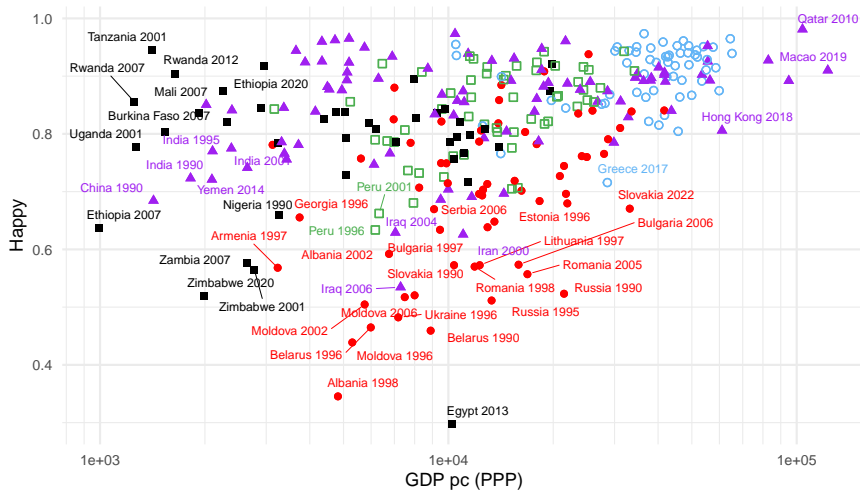
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For robustness, we also run our analyses without this imputation (excluding countries with missing GDP data).

# National well-being and income

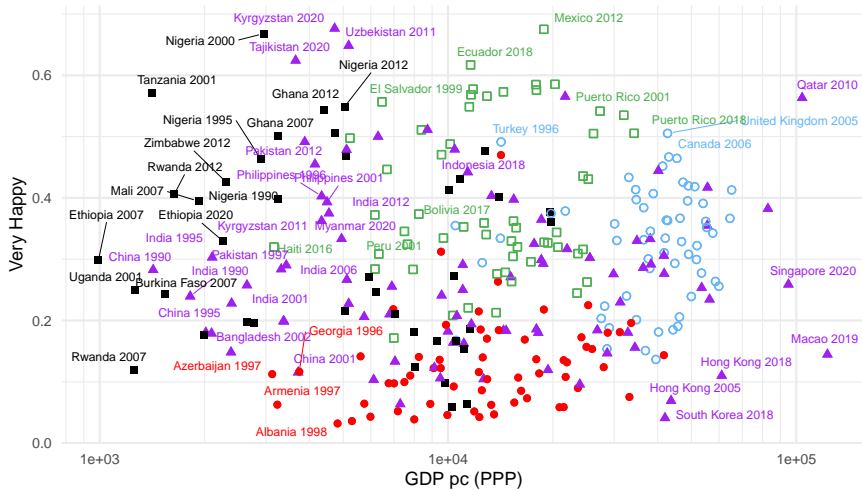
# Graphical evidence

## Happy vs. log GDP p.c. (PPP) — All waves of WVS.



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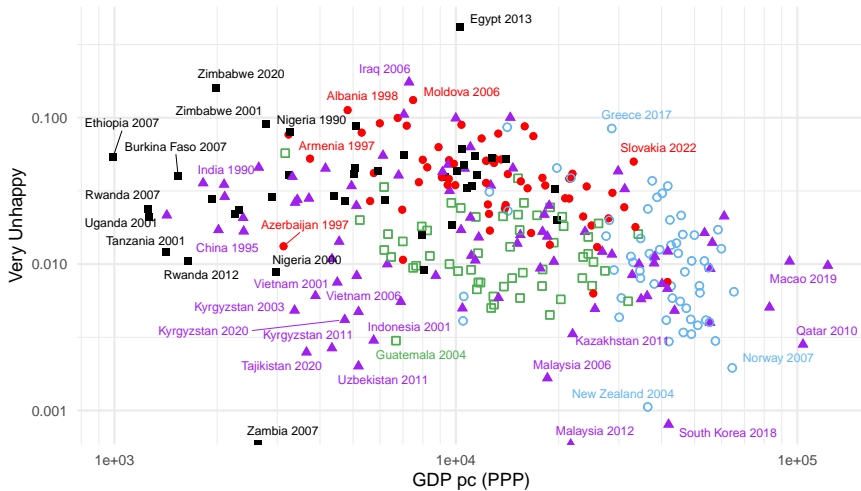
Very Happy vs. log GDP p.c. (PPP) — All waves of WVS.



Waves = 1 to 7 ( $R^2 = 0.01$ ) ■ Africa ▲ Asia ● Eastern Europe □ Latin America ○ Western

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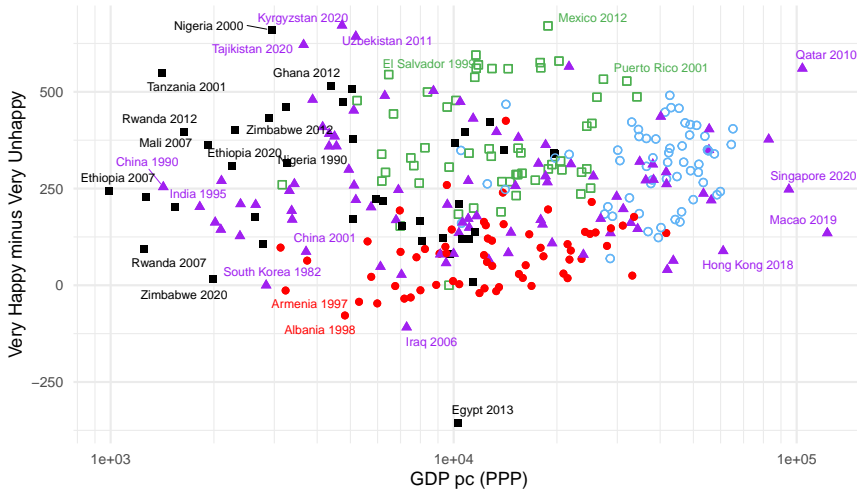
Very Unhappy vs. log GDP p.c. (PPP) — All waves of WVS.



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**V. Happy – V. Unhappy** vs. log GDP p.c. (PPP) — All waves of WVS.

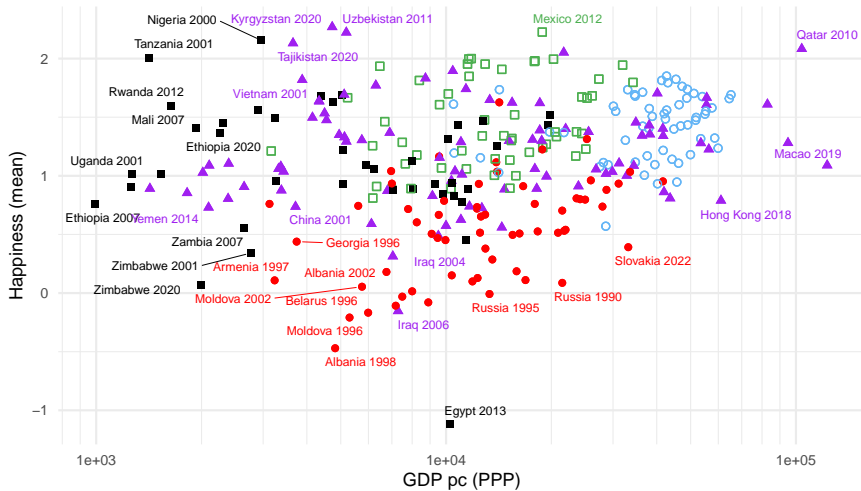


Waves = 1 to 7 ( $R^2 = 0.02$ )   ■ Africa   ▲ Asia   ● Eastern Europe   □ Latin America   ○ Western



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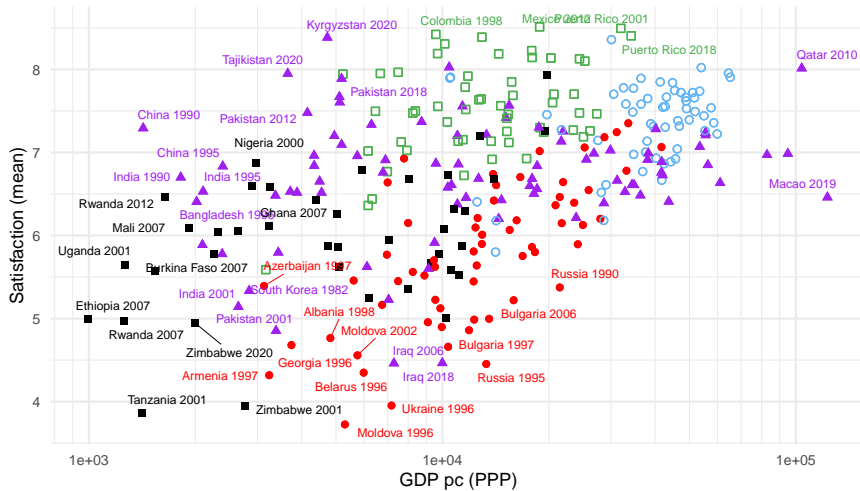
**Happiness (mean) vs. log GDP p.c. (PPP) — All waves of WVS.**



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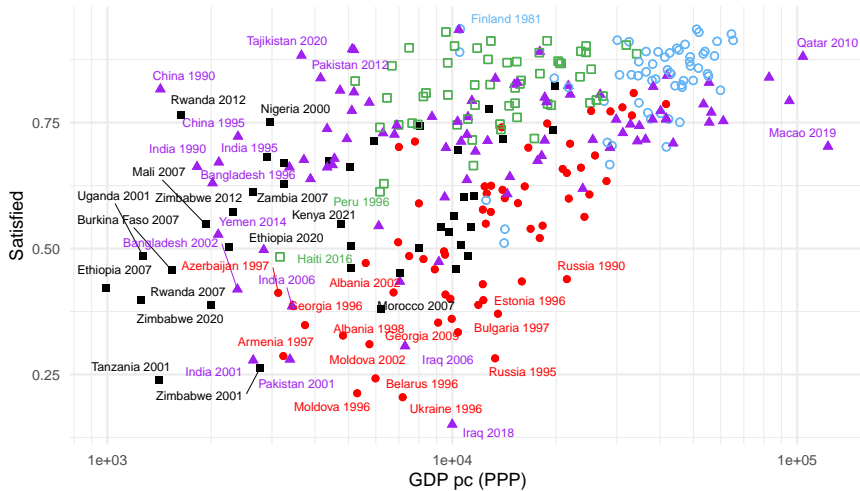
Satisfaction (mean) vs. log GDP p.c. (PPP) — All waves of WVS.



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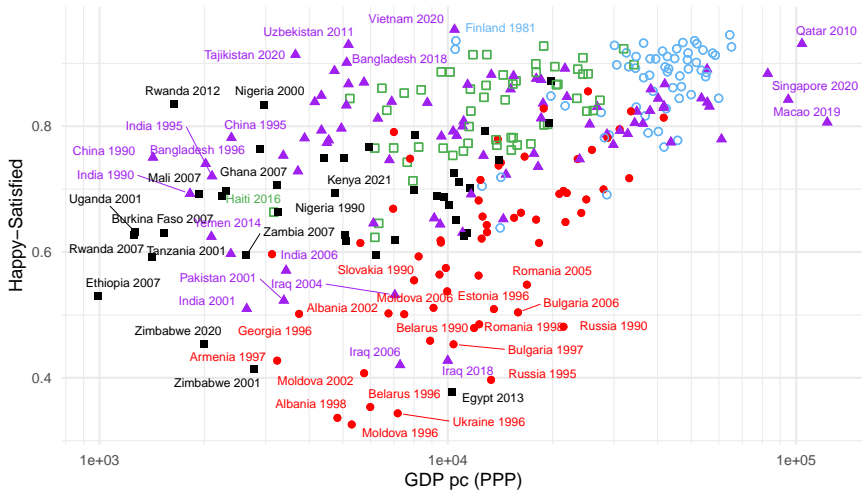
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Happy + Satisfied vs. log GDP p.c. (PPP) — All waves of WVS.

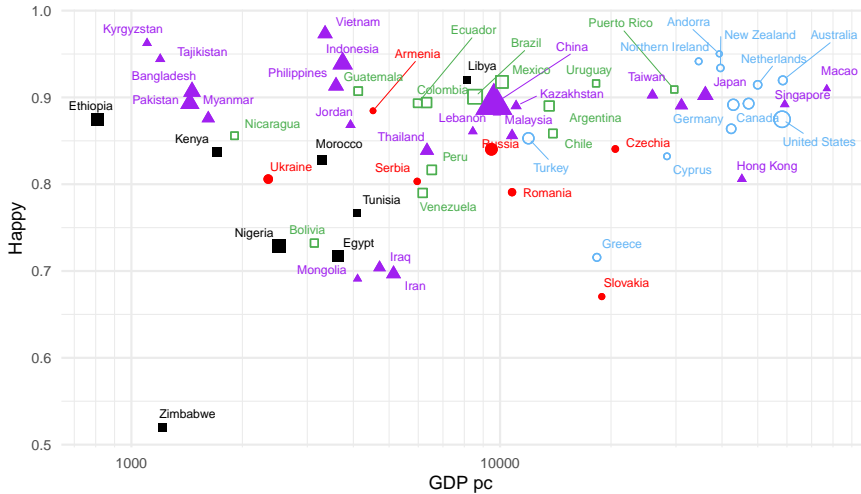


Waves = 1 to 7 ( $R^2 = 0.23$ )

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## Graphical evidence

**Happy** vs. log DP p.c. (nominal) — Wave 7 (2017-22) of WVS, weighted by population.



Wave = 7 ( $R^2 = 0.01$ )   ■ Africa   ▲ Asia   ● Eastern Europe   □ Latin America   ○ Western

## Variance explained by GDP p.c. [► More results](#)

For different *well-being* and *income* indicators, we compute the  $R^2$  of the regression:

$$well-being_i = \alpha + \beta income_i + u_i$$

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Happiness variable	log GDP p.c.		sextile PPP	Income cluster				Mean	Max
	PPP	nominal		k = 5 PPP	k = 6 PPP	k = 7 PPP	k = 7 nominal		
Very Happy	0	0	0.04	0.01	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.06
Happy	0.1	0.12	0.14	0.13	0.15	0.14	0.16	0.13	0.16
Very Unhappy	0.04	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.11	0.07	0.11
Satisfied	0.2	0.24	0.2	0.21	0.2	0.2	0.24	0.21	0.24
Satisfaction (mean)	0.14	0.17	0.13	0.15	0.14	0.14	0.17	0.15	0.17
Happiness (mean)	0.03	0.04	0.07	0.06	0.09	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.09
Happy + Satisfied	0.18	0.22	0.19	0.2	0.2	0.19	0.23	0.2	0.23
V. Happy – V. Unhappy	0	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.06
Mean	0.09	0.11	0.11	0.1	0.12	0.11	0.13	0.11	0.13
Max	0.2	0.24	0.2	0.21	0.2	0.2	0.24	0.21	0.24
Number of obs.	304	304	304	304	304	304	304		

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**Happiness (mean)** is poorly explained by income (8% at best).

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The happiest countries are Western (24), in Latin America (19), Asia (16) or Africa (6).



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Looking at all waves combined, **Kyrgyzstan**–2020 is the happiest country–year according to 3 indicators

Finland, Malaysia, Mexico, Qatar, Vietnam according to other indicators.

Counting the occurrences of countries for each wave–indicator (including all waves combined), **Switzerland** is the happiest (10 occurrences) followed by **Mexico** (9) and **Kyrgyzstan** (6).

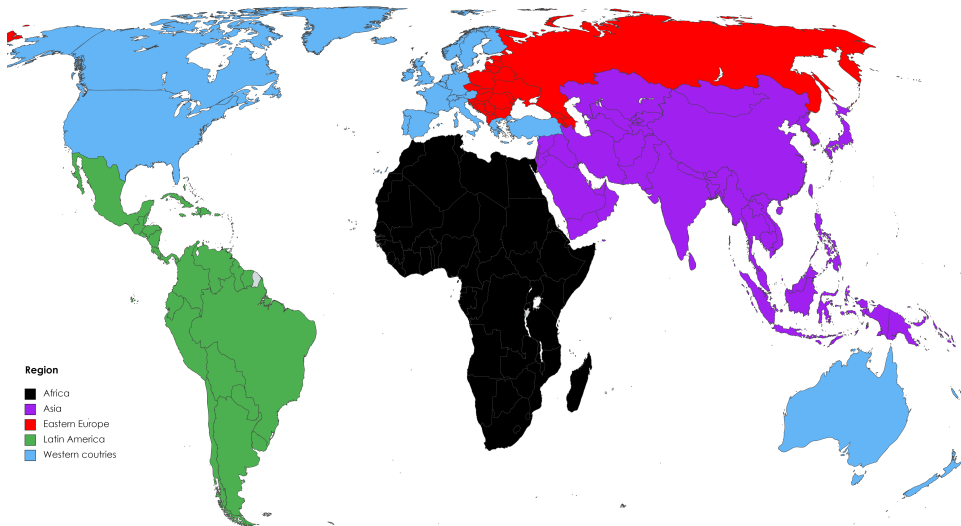
The happiest countries are Western (24), in Latin America (19), Asia (16) or Africa (6).

Blanchflower & Bryson (2023) show that on respective positive/negative affects, the happiest state is: Bhutan (well-rested), Denmark (satisfaction), Finland (anger), Hawaiï (enjoy), Paraguay (smile), Taiwan (sadness), Uzbekistan (worry), Vietnam (pain).

# Region vs. GDP per capita as predictor of well-being

## Region grouping

WVS countries grouped into the five UN regional groups.



# Share of explained variance that is explained by income [► More results](#)

Happiness variable	log GDP p.c.		sextile PPP	Income cluster				Mean	Max
	PPP	nominal		k = 5 PPP	k = 6 PPP	k = 7 PPP	k = 7 nominal		
Very Happy	0	0.01	0.11	0.03	0.14	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.14
Happy	0.24	0.3	0.32	0.31	0.34	0.32	0.37	0.32	0.37
Very Unhappy	0.24	0.32	0.35	0.36	0.37	0.36	0.48	0.35	0.48
Satisfied	0.35	0.42	0.35	0.36	0.36	0.36	0.42	0.37	0.42
Satisfaction (mean)	0.26	0.31	0.24	0.26	0.25	0.26	0.32	0.27	0.32
Happiness (mean)	0.08	0.12	0.18	0.14	0.21	0.16	0.19	0.15	0.21
Happy + Satisfied	0.32	0.39	0.34	0.35	0.35	0.35	0.41	0.36	0.41
V. Happy – V. Unhappy	0.01	0.03	0.12	0.05	0.15	0.09	0.1	0.08	0.15
Mean	0.19	0.23	0.25	0.23	0.27	0.24	0.3	0.25	0.3
Max	0.35	0.42	0.35	0.36	0.37	0.36	0.48	0.37	0.48
Number of obs.	304	304	304	304	304	304	304		

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This indicator explains 19% of the explained variance for **Happiness** and 32% for **Satisfaction**.

**Region is a better predictor than region in 94% of alternative specifications**: looking at each wave separately, weighting countries by population, dropping pandemic years...

(including 86% of 88 specifications involving the best-predicting income variable) [► More results](#)



# Conclusion

## **Take away and future research**

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Non-material dimensions seem key to well-being ⇒ Need to study mechanisms.

Despite evidence against translation issues (Diener & Suh, 2000),

We should check whether emotions are better predicted by region than income.

# Robustness checks

## Variance explained by PPP income cluster (k = 7) [Go back](#)

Happiness variable	All waves	Only selected waves							
	Pop. weight	1 & 2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	Max
Very Happy	0.05	0.25	0.06	0.17	0.06	0.12	0.21	0.13	0.25
Happy	0.21	0.19	0.24	0.23	0.22	0.17	0.06	0.19	0.24
Very Unhappy	0.04	0.2	0.15	0.19	0.16	0.1	0.08	0.13	0.2
Satisfied	0.23	0.2	0.22	0.35	0.26	0.23	0.1	0.23	0.35
Satisfaction (mean)	0.16	0.23	0.17	0.32	0.2	0.21	0.05	0.19	0.32
Happiness (mean)	0.09	0.18	0.13	0.22	0.15	0.14	0.07	0.14	0.22
Happy + Satisfied	0.27	0.2	0.25	0.33	0.27	0.21	0.09	0.23	0.33
V. Happy – V. Unhappy	0.05	0.16	0.07	0.19	0.08	0.12	0.16	0.12	0.19
Mean	0.14	0.2	0.16	0.25	0.18	0.16	0.1	0.17	0.25
Max	0.27	0.25	0.25	0.35	0.27	0.23	0.21	0.23	0.35
Number of obs.	304	26	56	40	58	60	64		

# Share of explained variance that is explained by PPP income cluster (k = 7) [Go back](#)

Happiness variable	All waves		Only selected waves						
	Pop. weight	1 & 2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	Max
Very Happy	0.19	0.3	0.08	0.36	0.13	0.37	0.47	0.27	0.47
Happy	0.54	0.33	0.36	0.58	0.39	0.48	0.26	0.42	0.58
Very Unhappy	0.25	0.26	0.28	0.57	0.44	0.43	0.34	0.37	0.57
Satisfied	0.57	0.35	0.28	0.56	0.38	0.42	0.25	0.4	0.57
Satisfaction (mean)	0.36	0.37	0.22	0.47	0.3	0.38	0.12	0.32	0.47
Happiness (mean)	0.31	0.25	0.18	0.46	0.25	0.43	0.23	0.3	0.46
Happy + Satisfied	0.57	0.32	0.32	0.57	0.39	0.42	0.24	0.41	0.57
V. Happy – V. Unhappy	0.22	0.22	0.1	0.38	0.16	0.41	0.38	0.27	0.41
Mean	0.38	0.3	0.23	0.5	0.3	0.42	0.29	0.34	0.5
Max	0.57	0.37	0.36	0.58	0.44	0.48	0.47	0.42	0.58
Number of obs.	304	26	56	40	58	60	64		

