

Chapter 1

Introduction to the 2019 Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report

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Introduction

Why are happiness and well-being being given so much more attention by governments around the world? Why are nations around the world signing up to the UAE's Global Happiness and Well-being Coalition? After all, the pursuit of happiness is as old as politics itself. Yet three things are bringing happiness and well-being to the top of the global policy agenda.

First, more and more nations are learning that economic growth alone is not enough to produce happiness. Second, as psychological science has demonstrated, happiness and well-being can now be measured and studied with rigor. Third, there are new and effective public policies for raising societal well-being. This Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report is based on the idea that the "pursuit of happiness" should no longer be left to the individual or the marketplace alone. Happiness and well-being should be of paramount concern for all of society, engaging governments, companies, schools, healthcare systems, and other sectors of society.

Wealth is not enough

The main economic strategy since Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* has been to raise national wealth in order to raise national happiness. In one sense, the pursuit of economic growth has worked. The world today is now very wealthy, at least on average. According to the IMF, world output (and therefore world income) in 2018 totaled \$135 trillion when measured at purchasing-power adjusted prices. With 7.7 billion people, that comes out to around \$17,500 per person, an astoundingly high average for the world.

Yet despite this remarkable affluence, there remains considerable unhappiness. Of course, part of the unhappiness results from the enormous inequality in the distribution of global income. Around 1.2 billion people live in high-income countries, with an average income of around \$47,000, while around 700 million people in low-income countries live on just \$2,000 per person per year (World Bank data for 2017). Life expectancy in rich countries stands at around 80 years, compared with just 63 years in low-income countries. Basic economic development in low-income countries, and the end of extreme

poverty in those countries by 2030 as called for by the Sustainable Development Goals, remains a fundamental key to higher happiness.

Yet there is more at play. Many rich countries, including my own, the United States, have become a lot richer in recent decades, but not much happier or even less happy, according to survey data. Richer but less happy is a syndrome in many parts of the world. The standard approach of maximizing economic growth to maximize happiness is far from adequate.

If we listened more carefully to the great moral teachers – Confucius, Buddha, Aristotle, Jesus, Mohammed – the broken link from wealth to happiness would of course not surprise us at all. Happiness requires not just adequate material conditions but also good health, both mental and physical; good friendships and social support; honesty of business and government; the freedom of each person to pursue their life's dreams with meaning and purpose; and social trust and generosity. "Tis better to give than receive" is a proven path to personal happiness and social peace.

Indeed, the situation is even more perverse. The very manner that we are chasing wealth today is simultaneously wrecking the planet through global warming, massive deforestation, the reckless overuse of freshwater, and the air and water pollution claiming millions of lives every year around the globe. The current approach to economic growth threatens our very survival.

Our societies are not well organized to promote happiness. The global market economy is good at producing wealth, but not at sharing it fairly or protecting the environment from vicious greed. Globalization has accelerated economic growth but also environmental destruction and widening inequalities. The world's tax havens and secrecy havens, many of which are managed by powerful nations, facilitate corruption and shield hundreds of billions of dollars of corporate profits from taxation.

The unregulated pursuit of economic growth is also unleashing new forms of unhappiness, including epidemics of substance abuse to new drugs, as well as widespread addictions to fast foods, gambling, compulsive shopping, and many sorts of online activities. Adolescents and young adults in particular seem to be succumbing

to depression and anxiety as a result of their heavy use of online social media and games and their ensuing isolation. The world's advertising industry and giant tech companies are adept at fostering these addictive behaviors. More screen time means more revenues, whether or not the consequences of the resulting addictions are dire for the users' well-being.

Happiness can be measured and assessed

A second reason for growing interest in the pursuit of happiness is that well-being can now be measured with rigor, validity, and reliability. Psychologists and neuroscientists, in particular, have developed many important tools for assessing multi-dimensional individual well-being, in terms of emotional well-being as well as in terms of more global life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, and healthy relationships. And well-being measurement is now multi-method, including self-report surveys, behavioral instruments, magnetic resonance imaging and electro-encephalograms of the brain, and most recently, with advancements in AI and machine learning, big data.

Multi-method mental health assessments also enable public health services to track the prevalence and incidence of mental disorders such as depression, addictions, and anxiety. This report and the complementary annual *World Happiness Report* detail many of the key data that are collected and assessed worldwide. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an increasing number of national governments, academia, and the private sector continue to develop new and important multi-dimensional indicators of well-being for individual happiness and for public policy.

Happiness can be promoted via public policy

A third and perhaps most important reason for the new and burgeoning interest in happiness is that it's possible to do something about it! The UAE launched the Global Council for Happiness and Wellbeing and the Global Coalition for Happiness and Wellbeing precisely to identify best happiness practices of government, businesses, schools, city planning, health systems, and other institutions in society. More and more governments are studying the impact of their public policies on the happiness

of their residents, using the cutting-edge instruments of modern psychological science. This year's Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report aims not only to present such best practices but also to outline how governments can proceed to put them into operation, a kind of policy handbook for happiness.

Some of the methods are strikingly important and obvious, such as the availability of mental health services for the population. Large proportions of individuals suffering from depression and other mental disorders are not able to access vitally important services, even in the richest countries. Other policies are less obvious, such as proven school curricula to foster healthy well-being skills and virtues among young students. These programs have been shown not only to raise students' well-being but also to improve their long-term academic performance.

Overall, the Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) point us in the right direction, by emphasizing the crucial importance of a holistic approach to development that includes economic development and the end of extreme poverty, the promotion of social inclusion and social justice, and the protection of the environment. Agenda 2030 commits specifically to "a world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels, to health care and social protection, *where physical, mental, and social well-being are assured.*" (Emphasis added)

The SDGs are, indeed, a framework and a roadmap for global happiness and well-being. The countries that rank highest on happiness are not the countries with the highest income per capita; income and happiness have quick and stark diminishing marginal returns. Rather, the countries that enjoy the highest levels of well-being are those that are closest to reaching the 17 SDGs – those that have the highest social capital, the most inclusive and equitable economies, and policies that effectively protect and promote the natural environment. Interestingly, policy research is revealing that the SDGs contribute to happiness, and vice versa – happiness also contributes to the SDGs. Individuals and societies with higher levels of well-being are more prosocial, civic, innovative, and productive. The SDGs promise to increase the levels of global happiness and well-being.

A worldwide movement

The global happiness and well-being movement is therefore based on an upsurge of societal needs, happiness metrics, and proven policies to promote happiness and well-being. The UN member states recognized these opportunities as early as 2011 by adopting a Bhutan-sponsored UN General Assembly Resolution (65/309) calling on 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.”

The UAE has become a major global leader in this effort, convening interested governments to meet annually in Dubai at the World Government Summit and to join together in the Global Coalition for Happiness and Wellbeing, with the Global Council for Happiness and Wellbeing to advise on best practices. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, on behalf of its member nations and its many non-member partners in the developing world, has also shown enormous energy and creativity in promoting new well-being metrics and public policies. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) actively supports both the UAE and OECD in their efforts, by hosting the Global Council for Happiness and Wellbeing and by engaging universities around the world to join the happiness and well-being effort through research, teaching, and engagement with policy makers and other stakeholders in society.

Happily, and for the benefit of all nations, the UAE, OECD, and SDSN will intensify their common efforts in 2019 in many forums around the world, commencing with the World Government Summit in Dubai in February, the International Day of Happiness at the United Nations in New York in March, and at the OECD headquarters in Paris in October. It is their shared desire that more and more governments will use the findings of the Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report and join the growing Global Coalition for Happiness and Wellbeing.

As gratitude is another rigorously proven path to individual and social happiness, I would like to thank the individuals and institutions that made this Report possible. I start by thanking

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I wish all the readers of this Report happiness and the inspiration to act for the common good!