

# Author's response

Manuscript Number: ARIQ-D-23-01168

Title: Colombia: Unlivable but Happy. Fool's Paradise?

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# 1 Response to Editor

Dear Professor Burger,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a revised draft. We list below in inline format our brief responses to reviewers' comments and attach at the end tracked changes that show precisely the additions and deletions.

Best,  
Authors

Changes in general (tracked changes appended at the end):

Overall, we strived to streamline. We have dropped superfluous text and auxiliary ideas. At the same time, we have rearranged and added some text to improve structure and flow.

Notably, we have streamlined introduction focusing on key ideas, and added structure signposts: notably a large one at the beginning: "The paper is structured as follows..." (which also reveals our reasoning)

Likewise, there was much rewriting, reorganization, and also additions in "4 Discussion and Conclusion" section, with 2 added subsections: "4.1 Alternative Explanations and Counterarguments" and "4.2 Take-away for Policy and Practice and Future Research"

We have restructured and shortened abstract and made it reflect better what the paper is about, that its significant parts include contrasts to the West and especially the US; likewise, we added subtitle to the title in this vein.

We believe structure and flow were much improved; still, do note: focus here is unlike most other articles on subjective well-being (SWB); the article is NOT "standard" structure of lit rev, data, and results; there are at least 2 reasons for our non-standard setup: 1) there is not much of results material: only 2 tables showing and contrasting happiness and livability; and 2) we decided to start with contrasting happiness and livability because this is how the project started, as arguably many others we were stunned by the apparent chasm between livability and happiness, so this is a starting point for this article

The key contribution is a novel approach to explain the livability-swb chasm using multiple concepts and theories in section 3; in general we cover a wide range of concepts and approaches with 150 references; we also use more livability metrics in table2 than elsewhere in the literature

Reviewer 1 sees many merits in this paper, but signals also several feeble elements, in particular, the lack of a clear contextualization of the Colombian case, the under-representation of a strong and convincing methodological framework, the lack of clear arguments on the Colombian happiness paradox, and a weak Abstract and concluding part. Reviewer 2 appreciates the paper, but raises several critical comments, in particular, the less clear conceptualization of SWB and related concepts, the lack of a clear focus, as well as the lack of a coherent architecture of the paper, and a weak prospective outlook.

see replies to reviewers

## 2 Response to Reviewer #1

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This is a fascinating study, and it is well-fitted for the special issue.

thank you!

“Colombia: Unlivable but Happy. Fool’s Paradise?” examines the paradoxical relationship between subjective well-being (happiness) and objective measures of quality of life in Colombia. The authors argue that despite Colombia’s poor performance on various livability indices, Colombians report high happiness levels, suggesting that factors beyond economic prosperity and safety contribute significantly to well-being.

n/a

The following revisions would enhance this interesting work further:

1. The manuscript benefits from a broader and more nuanced theoretical framework that comprehensively integrates existing literature on subjective well-being. This should include discussions on how the Colombian context might differ or align with other global contexts where similar paradoxes are observed. The manuscript should explicitly address how the Colombian case contributes to or challenges existing theories of happiness and well-being.

we have restructured and clarified: theory is more clearly embedded; we make references to latin america, the us, and the west

“how the Colombian case contributes to or challenges existing theories of happiness and well-being”—the main section of the paper, section 3 is mostly devoted to this task

2. While the paper is rich in qualitative descriptions and theoretical discussions, it lacks detailed methodological information about how subjective well-being is measured and compared across different countries. For the paper to have a more robust empirical footing, it would be beneficial to include more details on the survey instruments, sampling methods, and statistical analyses used to assess and compare happiness levels. Realizing this may be hard at this stage, some local empirical studies or information on governance and policymaker instruments could support findings instead.

Subjective Wellbeing (SWB)/happiness is defined in first paragraph of section “1 Happy Colombia.” Livability is defined in first paragraph of section “2 Unlivable Colombia.” And there are signposts to these definitions at the end of introduction

Per “the survey instruments, sampling methods, and statistical analyses used” we clarified: in table 1 caption: “Technical information for WDH is at <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/reports/finding-reports-on-happiness-in-nations/technical-details-to-rank-reports-of-happiness-in-nations-2010-2019> and WVS documentation is at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>.” ; in table 2 caption: “For details on each indicator click the link under “Source” column.”

3. The paper suggests that Colombia’s high happiness levels in the face of poor objective quality-of-life measures might challenge the emphasis on economic development and infrastructure in determining well-being. However, it does not sufficiently address potential counterarguments or alternative explanations for the observed phenomenon.

now we have a dedicated section “4.1 Alternative Explanations and Counterarguments”

also, we highlight better “potential counterarguments or alternative explanations” throughout the paper and especially in the “4 Discussion and Conclusion” and “4.2 Takeaway for Policy and Practice and Future Research”

4. The abstract and conclusion hint at valuable lessons that the world could learn from Colombia regarding happiness and quality of life. The revised manuscript should elaborate more on these lessons, providing specific policy recommendations for Colombia and other countries. This would enhance the manuscript’s relevance to policymakers and practitioners in the field of development and well-being.

yes we have re-framed the paper to what are the lessons form colombia, and specifically what other countries can learn, again see “4 Discussion and Conclusion” and “4.2 Takeaway for Policy and Practice and Future Research”

5. The literature review should be updated to include recent studies on subjective well-being, particularly those focusing on Latin America and other regions with similar socio-economic challenges. This will help situate the study within the current state of research and highlight its contribution to ongoing debates.

we have references to mariano rojas, arguably the leading expert on swb in latin america; and use a number of studies from his “Handbook of Happiness Research in Latin America,” (and have several others such as Graham)

also added 1st paragraph in “4 Discussion and Conclusion” on how it fits in the literature and what the contribution is

Minor Revisions: 1. Some sections of the manuscript would benefit from editing for clarity and coherence. Efforts should be made to ensure that the argument flows logically and that key points are articulated. The report could benefit from including tables that summarize essential findings and comparisons, which would help readers better understand the information presented. Additionally, the conclusion section must be improved to summarize the study’s key findings, theoretical contributions, and practical implications more effectively.

we edited sections for clarity and coherence  
made efforts that argument flows logically and that key points are articulated  
we have rewritten and reorganized conclusion section

per “tables that summarize essential findings and comparisons”—there are tables 1 and 2; we do not include “tables that summarize essential findings and comparisons,” which are often used in pure literature reviews and meta analyses—this article is not just a literature review; rather it tries to explain the high happiness and low livability apparent contradiction “fool’s paradise” with theory and literature

2. The concluding section should be strengthened to more directly summarize the study’s key findings, theoretical contributions, and practical implications. By addressing these revisions, the manuscript will contribute to the literature on happiness and quality of life, offering insights into the Colombian context and a broader understanding of the factors that contribute to human well-being.

see above

and again, we have a new subsection “4.2 Takeaway for Policy and Practice and Future Research”

### 3 Response to Reviewer #2

Changes in general (tracked changes appended at the end):

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The key contribution is a novel approach to explain the livability-swb chasm using multiple concepts and theories in section 3; in general we cover a wide range of concepts and approaches with 150 references; we also use more livability metrics in table2 than elsewhere in the literature

The paper explores the "Latin American phenomenon," where Latinos, particularly in countries like Colombia, exhibit high life satisfaction despite challenges such as underdevelopment, social conflict, and poor policy outcomes. The authors argue that traditional measures of livability based on money, consumption, and infrastructure overlook crucial factors. They emphasize that basic commodities are sufficient to satisfy human needs and well-being, while non-commodities like personal freedom and social connections play a significant role. The article suggests that excessive pursuit of commodities, as seen in highly developed nations, may hinder happiness due to overemphasis on unimportant aspects and inhuman environments. The authors propose that Colombia offers valuable lessons for the world and discuss alternative explanations for the apparent contradiction in the country's happiness amid adversity. The possibility of "ignorance is bliss" is also considered. The paper concludes by pointing towards future research directions in understanding this phenomenon.

n/a

Overall assessment and major issues: This paper is of potential added value as their focus is unlike many other articles on subjective well-being (SWB).

yes, thank you, that was one of the goals

While appreciating the effort invested in this paper, in its present condition, I do not consider the manuscript as suitable for publication. Extensive revisions are necessary. Therefore, I recommend rejecting the paper at this time. I encourage the authors to address the outlined concerns and resubmit the revised version for further consideration. I will briefly explain the reasons that lead me to this assessment regarding the quality of the paper.

see below

- The paper briefly introduces various forms of assessing well-being (affective, evaluative, and eudaimonic), referred to as "measurements" by the author. Subsequently, the author mentions sub-concepts such as life satisfaction as an indicator for the evaluative assessment of well-being. The section concludes with, "In this article, we use the concept of subjective WellBeing (SWB) to encapsulate the different accepted metrics in the field. When necessary, we make the distinction between them." (p. 2) As a reader, the relationship between the individual concepts remains unclear. Is SWB synonymous with well-being, and does it encompass all three forms of elicitation (evaluative, affective, and eudaimonic)? The distinction between theoretical concepts and measurement instruments is not apparent, leaving questions about how the theoretical concepts relate to each other. The author notes that "the measurement of SWB has become a relevant component of policymaking" in the introduction. What is the measurement of SWB?

agreed, that part was confusing—we dropped it from the paper, auxiliary points and further discussions are postponed to the appendix; we now have a clear statement on measurement of swb used in first paragraph of "1 Unhappy Colombia," also signaled at the end of introduction

- The terms life satisfaction, subjective well-being, quality of life, and livability of the environment are used interchangeably and inconsistently, causing confusion regarding whether they hold the same theoretical-conceptual meaning and share the same operationalizations. Clear definitions of concepts and their respective measurement tools are needed. This section requires a thorough explanation to understand the later arguments regarding lower levels of SWB.

Subjective Wellbeing (SWB)/happiness is defined in first paragraph of section "1 Happy Colombia." Livability is defined in first paragraph of section "2 Unlivable Colombia." And there are signposts to these definitions at the end of introduction

- The paper lacks a clear objective and does not critically reflect on the paradox of high life satisfaction despite a country's poor livability.

we have rewritten the abstract to better orient the reader; and, again, at the end of intro we have a statement "The paper is structured as follows..." that also signals the objective: to understand an apparent paradox of high happiness despite low livability

- The promised direction for future research, mentioned in the abstract, is underdeveloped and actually absent in the paper.

Added "4.2 takeaway for policy and practice and future research" section (earlier there was future research section buried in appendix; and future research ideas sprinkled throughout the paper—now integrated in one section)

- The paper's structure is questionable, consisting of 12 pages with an equal number of sections, lacking a coherent thread. It seems more like a compilation of anecdotal evidence, albeit entertaining. The headings are not helpful in conveying the paper's structure. The authors should opt for concise and more informative headings. For instance, it is not clear what the authors mean by "SWB and Development." What type of development is being referred to? Numbering of individual sections is missing.

we have organized better; cut number of sections; have them more descriptive

a sidenote: few pages (12) relative to the number of sections was a bit of an optical illusion: margins were 1cm, font 10pt, and spacing 1.4; now we made it more standard 2cm margins, 11pt font, and 2 lines spacing; and we added some text

While the paper could benefit the scientific community, it requires substantial theoretical embedding, a clear argumentative structure, and explicit recommendations for the research agenda. Currently, the paper is not in a publishable state.

see above; and yes, in this revision we have strived to rewrite in a way to benefit ARIQ reader; we have clarified theoretical embedding; and again improved structure and added future research section



## 4 Tracked Text Changes

(see next page)