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Are public happiness levels rising?

The investigation of public happiness is a growth industry. There is a growing chorus of opinion among experts calling for happiness and well-being measures to be used alongside more conventional economic indicators such as GDP per capita in assessing the success of countries. The issue was given world-wide publicity when the King of Bhutan called for the creation of a new global index – Gross National Happiness (GNH).¹

This interest has fuelled a number of global surveys of comparative happiness. Such research provides a wealth of material for those who would attempt to divine the root causes of human happiness.

One of the most comprehensive of such surveys is the World Values Survey (WVS) published by the United States National Science Foundation². Covering 97 of the world's roughly 200 countries, the WVS is directed by University of Michigan political scientist Ronald Inglehart.

According to the WVS, while it is true that affluence is associated with greater levels of happiness, post-material factors play a more decisive role once basic economic needs are met - particularly freedom of choice,

¹ The GNH measure was formerly adopted by the Kingdom of Bhutan in November 2008 and is now championed globally by, among others, the Center for Bhutan Studies.

² World Values Survey Association, Development, Freedom and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective 1981-2007, 2008.

gender equality and increased social tolerance. This finding is echoed by the bulk of studies in this field.

The WVS survey aims to measure happiness and life satisfaction through two simple questions: "How would you rate your happiness?" and "How satisfied are you with your life?" It found that, over the period 1981 to 2007, happiness had risen in 45 countries out of a total of 52 for which time-series data was available.³

The World Values Survey established Denmark to be home to the world's most satisfied citizens. One factor driving this was Denmark's top-notch public schools and affordable private ones. Denmark's small population of 5.5 million reinforces the nation's strong sense of identity⁴.

The link between economic growth and happiness is good news for low-income emerging countries, which should see their happiness measures rise in future in tandem with income per capita. For those countries which are already relatively affluent, the investigation of cross-country differences in happiness – which would have to be driven by cultural, institutional and political factors - should prove a fascinating exercise.

³ "Development, Freedom and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective (1981-2007)", World Values Survey

⁴ BusinessWeek, World's Happiest Countries, 11 October 2006