OPINION: Denmark has reclaimed its place as the happiest country in the world, according to the latest annual World Happiness Report, closely followed by Iceland, Norway, and Finland. But it is equality and not GDP that makes the Nordic countries top in the happiness polls.

Denmark reclaimed its place as the happiest country in the world, according to the latest annual World Happiness Report [6]. Switzerland, Iceland, Norway and Finland followed in quick succession at the top, while Benin, Afghanistan, Togo, Syria and Burundi languished at the bottom.

The nations that top the usual measure of a country’s health – its Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, which shows overall economic output – were much lower down. The US came 13th, the UK 23rd and China 83rd. This goes to show that GDP is by no means a conclusive measure of well-being and the report reflects moves to recognise this. In fact, the report found a strong correlation between inequality and unhappiness.

The cluster of high performing Nordic countries at the top of the World Happiness Report suggests that there are shared features of policy and perhaps geography and culture that matter. These are countries where high taxes are used to generate relatively equal societies where social mobility and income security are much greater as a result. These countries tend also to have rather homogenous societies and the evidence [7] is that in many situations people prefer being with others like themselves.

Meanwhile, at the bottom of the list are a variety of countries which are less homogenous but nonetheless either war-torn, close to being destitute and in the case of Burundi – which comes bottom – both.

Countries at both ends of the scale remind us why we need to measure happiness. Income isn’t the be all and end all of life quality and research into human flourishing continues to grow as a result. Partly this reflects the increasing availability of data measuring subjective markers of happiness. But it also shows a dissatisfaction with modern economic ways of thinking, where morality and ethics take a back seat and bureaucratic cost-benefit analysis is the norm.

Happiness is complicated

The World Happiness Report uses a mix of GDP, social support (as measured by someone to count on in times of trouble), healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity (as measured by donations) and perceptions of corruption to rank countries. It is good to see a mix of subjective and objective measures.

In my own team’s work [8], we have sought to develop a framework for the multiple indicators of life quality in order to assess progress. We use a theoretical approach devised initially by the Nobel-prize winning economist Amartya Sen [9], with subsequent additions by political philosopher Martha Nussbaum [10]. This helps us think about quality of life not just in terms of objective accomplishments but by looking
at more subjective qualities like personal enjoyment or opportunities.

As well as looking at the resources that people have access to, we examine their ability to convert those resources into things they value. By developing data sets focused on these concepts we can see what individuals are able to do at home, in work and socially, as well as their physical environments and the services they can access.

Comparing what different countries value can be revealing [11]. We found that Americans, for example, report being better able to get help from the police compared with people from the UK, whereas there is a substantial difference in the other direction when it comes to accessing medical treatment. But this has a different level of importance for different people in different countries so it’s necessary to find a way to compare them.

In both the US and UK, the ability to have your rubbish cleared away is an important determinant of happiness. It seems a curious chart topper until we recognise that it is comparatively simple to deliver and easy to identify the local political actors who are ultimately responsible when things go wrong. In Italy, where it is significantly harder [12] for many people to get their waste disposed of, this may well reflect the much shorter political terms office there make it much harder to call local politicians to account.

Integrating these subjective indicators into an overarching framework of happiness and progress is not easy, however. How do you compare and weigh the importance of the quality of your social relations with whether your waste has been collected? In terms of well-being, both matter.

The truth is that there are many things that make life go well or otherwise. In my recent book, Happiness Explained [13], I showed how the approach initiated by Sen provides a framework for understanding all of these issues. Quality of life for almost everyone depends on fairness, autonomy, community and engagement though of course the details vary at different ages, in different cultures. One thing that stands out is that this FACE principle seems to apply right across the life course.

The updated World Happiness Report reflects on many of the same issues and it is great to see so much convergence of academic thought as schools, governments and NGOs start to engage with this agenda in novel and meaningful ways.

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Does giving make you happy? (Photo: Jonathan Brady/PA Archive) [18]
Some countries are unhappy with basic services, such as garbage collection. (Photo: EPA/Cesare Abbate) [19]
image-20160318-4415-1by3049.jpg [20]
