

Every year, the UN issues a report on a survey of how countries rank in terms of development and, of all things, happiness. I really do not understand how one can measure happiness, but I do know how one can measure unhappiness. For happiness, I would prefer contentment, which is more measurable.

Nonetheless, the UN does issue this report, defending it as a good measure of a nation's progress, and that using social well-being as a goal drives better public policy. In this year's report, 155 countries were surveyed (published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network) naming Norway as the most happy, unseating Denmark for the top spot from last year.

The other top-rated countries were: Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland, Finland, and tied for ninth are the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Sweden. What many of these have in common is that they are mostly in cold places, share a common Protestant ethic of hard work and honesty, and have small homogenous populations with values in common. (If having a long, dark winter drives people to drink, the happiness must come in summer.)

The US is 14th, a drop from its place as 13th last year, not a surprise considering how unhappy Americans are right now. The US is at least happier than Germany (16), the UK (19), and France (31). Those countries are going through the chaos of challenges to their democracies, potential disunity in the European Union, and social difficulties with incompatible immigrant hordes.

Sharing the bottom of the list are South Sudan, Liberia, Guinea, Togo, Rwanda, and Burundi, Syria, and Yemen, all African states. At the very bottom is the Central African Republic, a country with an endless civil war. All of these states share rampant violence, overpopulation, and corrupt and incompetent governance.

So how does the report measure happiness? Jeffrey Sachs, director of the polling agency, says the report looks at such things as political freedom, health, comfortable income, and good governance. "Happy countries are the ones that have a balance of prosperity, as conventionally measured, and social capital, meaning a high degree of trust in a society, low inequality and confidence in government." A government that manages universal health care means a population not in danger of an unexpected illness that can plunge a family into bankruptcy. A society in which common moral values are taught in the school system produces citizens who can govern their country without corruption. The division of powers (administrative, parliamentary, courts, and press) keeps the corruption from overwhelming the society.

These criteria show why the US is not in the top ten, although it has enough structural balance of powers to at least keep power and corruption in check. But social inequality is currently rampant, as is low trust in government (except for city governments, which do better). Despite our great capacity for developing wealth, such wealth is far from equal and with so much civil disharmony, wealth does not translate into happiness.

There are some interesting findings on this list: Turkey (in the process of losing its democracy and increasing its religiosity) has dropped to 69 out of 155. Saudi Arabia, despite its wealth, is 37th, down three from last year. Kuwait is 39, Bahrain 41, all wealthy and none happy. All of these countries share majority Muslim populations, oppression of women, rampant corruption, irresponsible governance, no fairness or accountability, and certainly no equality.

China is 79th, (a surprise to me), just one point higher than Pakistan, at 80. India, despite being "the world's largest democracy" comes in at 122! Corruption, overpopulation, and enormous inequality of everything determines its position. Afghanistan is 141, and I am surprised it is that high.

Although the polling was done by a leader in the field, Gallup World Poll, I really wonder how they collect the necessary data in the most dangerous countries. But intuitively, the list makes sense.

We in the US know what we need to do to repair our ranking. We must fix the growing inequality and mend the distrust of our institutions. We can do better.

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