

By Byron Johnson, Tyler J. VanderWeele and Brendan Case



<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/30/opinion/happiness-economic-development.html>

According to the 2025 World Happiness Report, which was [released](#) last month, the happiest country in the world is Finland, trailed closely by Denmark, Iceland and Sweden. This news came as no surprise. The report, released annually since 2012 by a consortium of groups including Gallup, often features these four Nordic nations — all of them stable democracies with prosperous and healthy citizens — at or near the top of its list. At the bottom (out of 147 countries assessed) was Afghanistan, then Sierra Leone, Lebanon and Malawi.

These rankings reinforce a key supposition of our globalized political and economic order: Poor countries are unhappy because they are poor, and wealth is a critical precondition for individual and societal flourishing. The International Monetary Fund encourages trade and economic growth on the theory that happiness increases with material prosperity. Political thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama and Steven Pinker talk about wanting to help poor and turbulent nations “get to Denmark.”

But there are reasons for suspecting that the World Happiness Report rankings — and the model of international development which they are often taken to justify — do not capture the fullness of well-being. Respondents are asked a single question: to imagine an 11-rung ladder whose top and bottom are the best and worst possible lives, and to place their life on one of the rungs. This metric, known as life evaluation, can be a useful piece of information, but happiness is almost certainly a more complex phenomenon. You might be sick but still have a strong sense that life is meaningful or be financially insecure but still have close relationships with family members and friends.

There is also [evidence](#) that when people offer their life evaluation score, the framing of the question can prompt them to fixate on wealth and status over other aspects of well-being. That risks stacking the deck: If life evaluation is, in effect, another way of measuring economic prosperity, it is neither surprising nor illuminating that the rankings of the World Happiness Report loosely correlate with gross domestic product.

The three of us conceive of happiness — or flourishing — more broadly: as a state of affairs in which all aspects of your life are relatively good, including the social environments in which you live. If we were to examine not just life evaluation but also relationships with family members and friends, community and political participation, health, prevailing emotions, a sense of life’s purpose, feelings of financial security and so on, we could better understand what it means to live a good life and how governments and international institutions can help make people happier.

On Wednesday we are publishing a substantial body of research — dozens of academic papers, including a high-level [overview](#) of the results in the journal *Nature Mental Health* — based on the first year of data from our [Global Flourishing Study](#), a five-year project that poses more than 100 questions to more than 200,000 people across 22 countries on six continents. Combining answers to questions regarding several domains of well-being — health, happiness, meaning, character, social relationships and material prosperity — we calculated a [composite flourishing](#) score for each country.

Our findings present a different picture of global well-being. As expected, Sweden, for example, had high scores for life evaluation, behind only Israel, another typical standout in the World Happiness Report. When we widened the aperture, however, the picture changed: Sweden had only the 13th-highest composite flourishing score, essentially tied with the United States, and considerably lower than Indonesia, the Philippines and even Nigeria, whose 2023 gross domestic product per capita was just under 2 percent of America's.

Across the whole sample of 22 countries, the overall national composite flourishing actually decreased slightly as G.D.P. per capita rose. The only high-income countries that ranked in the top half of composite flourishing were Israel and Poland. Most of the developed countries in the study reported less meaning, fewer and less satisfying relationships and communities, and fewer positive emotions than did their poorer counterparts. Most of the countries that reported high overall composite flourishing may not have been rich in economic terms, but they tended to be rich in friendships, marriages and community involvement — especially involvement in religious communities.

Japan, where only 3 percent of the participants reported attending religious services at least weekly, had the lowest reported composite flourishing as well as the lowest scores in many individual facets of flourishing, such as a sense of life's meaning and social relationships. Indonesia, by contrast, where 75 percent of the participants reported attending religious services at least weekly, had the highest scores both for composite flourishing and for many individual facets of flourishing.

Indonesia is often [contrasted unfavorably](#) with Japan in discussions of international development, cited as an example of the so-called [middle-income trap](#), in which economic growth stalls before reaching high-income levels. This is true, so far as it goes, but our study suggests that the focus on economic growth tells only part of the story.

To be clear: Being poor is not desirable, and we should strive to improve material conditions. But our research, though in its early stages, should prompt people to wonder whether prioritizing economic growth and material prosperity above all else has imposed costs on developed nations — and whether doing so is likely to impose these costs on the developing economies that follow the path of Europe and its colonial offshoots.

We need to figure out how to foster economic development without compromising meaning, purpose and relationships. Israel, a rare wealthy country with a high composite flourishing score (second in our study), is highly religious by developed-world standards, with a third of its citizens saying they attend religious services at least weekly. Might something in the experience of Israel provide a model for how Indonesia could pursue improvements in economic growth and political stability without eroding the close-knit communities from which life there derives so much of its value?

Might it even be possible for Sweden to “get to Indonesia” — in terms of restoring relationships and communities, a sense of meaning in life and a connection to the sacred — without sacrificing its hard-won health, wealth and stability?

There are no simple answers to these questions. But if nothing else, our work offers an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which much of the developed world may have gone astray and to explore the paths that might lead us back to happier lives.