

## EDITORIAL

# Happiest people in the world

Japan may have a relatively high standard of living and the longest life expectancy in the world, but it does not have the happiest people. According to a new Gallup poll of 148 countries, Japan ranks somewhere in the middle of world happiness levels. The recent poll showed just how little economic levels connect with life satisfaction.

Latin American countries with relatively low levels of economic development dominated the top 10 happiest countries. In Asia, only Thailand and the Philippines, with economic levels significantly lower than Japan's, broke into the top 10. Panama ranked No. 1 followed by, in order, Paraguay, El Salvador, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, Thailand, Guatemala, the Philippines, Ecuador and Costa Rica.

The worldwide poll found that happiness was only indirectly connected to material-centered lifestyles. Canada has the highest college graduation levels, Qatar the highest income, Germany and France relatively high income and long vacation time, but none of these countries made the top 10.

In contrast, Italy and Greece, with their debt-ridden economies, were in the top 20. Guatemala's civil war and gang violence did not keep it from reaching seventh place.

These paradoxes of happiness certainly come in part from cultural factors such as the tendency of some cultures, Japan's for example, to refrain from open expression of positive emotions. However, they also point toward a new view of economics.

In a study by Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, slightly different criteria placed wealthier countries like Denmark, Finland and Norway in higher positions.

Because of these discrepancies, happiness may appear to be a subjective, intangible quality that is hard to define and harder to measure. However, happiness remains one of the most meaningful and deeply felt life experiences and has become an important new way of finding economic priorities.

The growing field of such studies has established happiness as a new measurement with important implications for individuals and policymakers alike. Japan's newly elected leaders should take note that the past emphasis on economic growth and material gains is out of date. New measures of happiness, such as Bhutan's well-known Gross National Happiness concept,

are growing in importance and need to be included into government initiatives.

Like Singapore, last on the Gallup Poll, Japan's relatively high economic level has been achieved through high pressure, tight schedules and a work-life balance tipped very far toward work.

What most Latin American interviewees cited as the source of their daily happiness — taking pleasure in friends, family, nature and religion — have been neglected in many economically developed countries by striving for material comforts.

As a new government ponders Japan's future, it should be clear that higher income, without other types of nonmaterial gains, means very little.

In another study by Nobel Prize-winning economists Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, Americans felt happier with greater income only up to about \$75,000 annually. After that, more money had little connection to happiness. Other studies found that rates of happiness in America did not rise at all over the last half-century despite huge economic and technological growth.

In Japan, as in America, it is relative status, not just income that determines much of the feeling of satisfaction in life. Japanese feel unhappy even with the relative gains they have achieved in the past several decades partially because wealth has become so unevenly distributed. In addition, social factors such as insecurity, isolation and distrust of institutions contribute to lower levels of happiness.

The Liberal Democratic Party should include issues of well-being into all planning and policies. National happiness can and should be used as a measure of a successful government. The LDP helped to build a powerful consumer society, but that too failed to achieve life satisfaction for most Japanese.

Decisions about economic policy and social change should incorporate the findings of the aforementioned studies and focus on nonmaterial improvements to Japanese life.

Instead of continuing to focus on numerical economic growth by exploiting ever more resources, both human and natural, other issues should be given greater consideration.

Top of the list to improve Japan's level of happiness is higher rates of employment and better quality of work. The focus, though, should be on quality of work, rather than just income.

Likewise, finding ways to improve physical and mental health should be given as high a priority as finding economic stimuli.

The government can also focus on the enrichment of community, family life, education and leisure pursuits. Those issues should no longer be considered exclusively as individual choices or consumer options, but an essential and

basic part of what government supports for its citizens.

Of course, that will involve investment of financial resources, but the government should make investment decisions by focusing less on objective financial results and more on the subjective human benefits. Before unleashing economic incentives and financial inducements to stimulate the moribund economy, the new government should recognize that quality of growth, not quantity, is the most salient concern.

Pumping money into the economy might make economic numbers look good, but without greater consideration of noneconomic factors, Japan will never achieve the levels of happiness and life satisfaction it deserves.

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