

A Happiness Index for Greater Green Bay?

We can Learn from Bhutan and Nordic Countries

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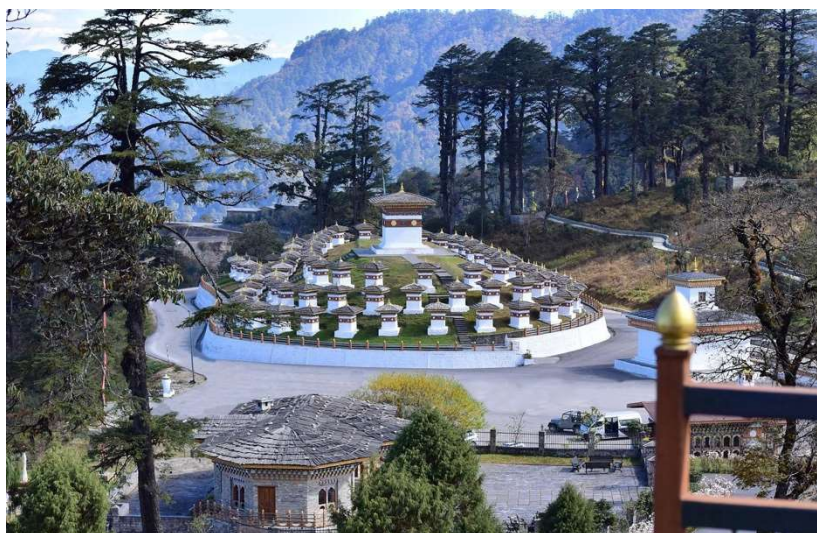
*Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life,
the whole aim, and end of human existence. — Aristotle*

*(from the Report on the High-Level Meeting on Well-Being and Happiness, April 2, 2012, UN
Headquarters, NYC)*

What can we do in Brown County to improve the quality of life for everyone and promote greater happiness in our community? What can we learn from them that we might adopt in our community? A brief look at the trajectory of the Southeast Asian country of Bhutan, that of Nordic countries, and the United Nations (UN) sponsored World Happiness Report might give us some clues. As we will see below, the south-central Asian country of Bhutan was instrumental in creating the World Happiness Report in 2012, while Nordic countries have consistently been considered the happiest.

On April 2, 2012, the Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan convened a High-level Meeting on Well-being and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm. Over 800 people attended the conference with representatives from government, international organizations, civil society, business, media, etc. The conference focused on four major themes: (1) well-being and happiness, (2) ecological sustainability, (3) efficient allocation of resources, and (4) fair distribution. Starting with the 2012 conference, the UN placed happiness at the center of its development paradigm and has been tracking the World Happiness Report annually. As we will see below, there was a reason why the first meeting was convened by Bhutan, as this country has a long history of promoting happiness among its population.

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index (GNH)



The Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan has developed a happiness index rooted in Buddhism, which focuses on compassion, contentment, and calmness. Bhutan has a long tradition with these values. How did Bhutan go from Buddhist values that imbue the culture of this South Asia nation to the Gross National Happiness Index (GNH) and then to the World Happiness Report that currently measures countries' happiness worldwide?

Already in 1629, the country of [Bhutan's legal code](#) stated that *"if [the] government cannot create happiness for its people, then there is no purpose for [the] government to exist."* Because Bhutan is a Buddhist nation, the code stressed that the legal system had to "promote happiness for all sentient beings." Early on, Bhutan's leaders understood that happiness cannot be measured solely in economic terms but had to do with the harmonious development of human beings and their relationship to nature. To this day, Bhutan surprises the world with just how far they have taken this concept.

In the 1970s, [Jigme Singye Wangchuck](#), the young king of Bhutan, promoted the concept of the Gross National Happiness index in contrast to the Gross National Product index, based on economic indicators only. Nearly four decades later, [Article 9.2 of Bhutan's 2008 Constitution](#) defined the government's responsibility to promote happiness: "The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of the Gross National Happiness."

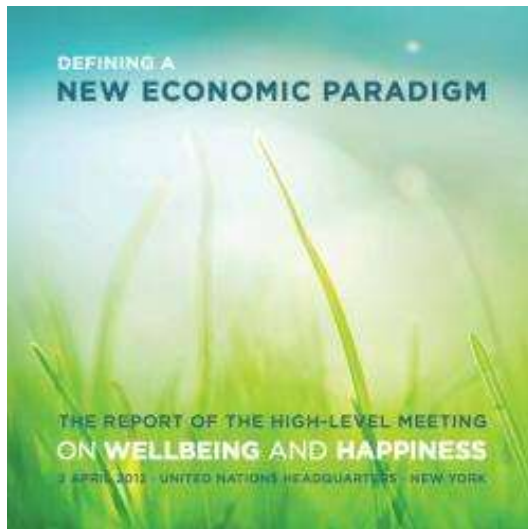
Today, Bhutan's [Gross National Happiness](#) is defined as: "[a] multi-dimensional development approach seeking to achieve a harmonious balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional, and cultural needs of society." Leaders have also developed four measurable tools to ensure that any policy passed in Bhutan promotes the happiness of its population. These include the nine dimensions of the happiness index: psychological well-being, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and strength, and living standards. The GNH also considered the four pillars of happiness, which include: (1) Good Governance, (2) Sustainable and Equitable Socio-Economic Development, (3) Environmental Conservation, and (4) Preservation and Promotion of Culture.



Every year, the government of Bhutan then classifies its population among those who are (a) unhappy, (b) narrowly happy, (c) extensively happy, and (d) deeply happy, and attempts to improve the conditions

of those who are unhappy and narrowly happy by analyzing the populations that are extensively and deeply happy. Indeed, every policy approved in Bhutan must pass the rigorous measure of [whether or not it will make the population happier](#). The so-called “GNH Policy Lens” requires that policymakers consider the consequences for all nine dimensions (listed above) and the four pillars of GNH when proposing new projects.

The World Happiness Report



By 2012 Bhutan’s success with the GNH index received attention from the global community. Bhutan’s prime minister, Jigme Y. Thinley, worked with UN Secretary Ban-Ki Moon and Jeffrey Sachs to convene the First UN Conference on Happiness in 2012, which mandated March 20 as the *International Day of Happiness*. At the time, [Prime Minister Thinley](#) stated that his hope was not that everyone would adopt Bhutan’s GNH index. Instead, he hoped the global community would understand and promote its well-being and happiness index, knowing that we share the planet with all sentient beings.

Using data analytics from the Gallup Poll, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network has produced ten World Happiness Reports since 2012. The Gallup Poll measures Life Evaluations by using the [Cantril Scale](#) to determine whether people are *Thriving* (7+), *Struggling* (moderate or negative feelings about the future), or *Suffering* (below 4). In addition, they measure *Positive Emotions* (laughter, enjoyment, and learning or doing something interesting) and *Negative Emotions* (worry, sadness, and anger) through Yes or No questions. Additional information about the [Gallup Poll methodology is available here](#).

According to Jeffrey Sachs in the [2012 World Happiness Report](#), most people believe happiness is up to an individual, not the state, and certainly not a matter of national policy. However, in recent years, an entire generation of psychologists, economists, political scientists, and sociologists have shown that, even though happiness can be a subjective experience, it can be measured and assessed and can say a lot about the individual and society. Furthermore, according to Sachs, even minor improvements in household income can make a significant difference for the very poor:

“As incomes rise from deficient levels, human well-being improves... Even small gains in a household’s income can result in a child’s survival, the end of hunger pangs, improved nutrition, better learning opportunities, safe childbirth, and prospects for ongoing improvements and opportunities in schooling, job training, and gainful employment.”

On the other hand, affluence alone does not guarantee happiness:

“Affluence has created its own set of afflictions and addictions. Obesity, adult-onset diabetes, tobacco-related illnesses, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, psychosocial disorders, and addictions to shopping, TV, and gambling are all disorders of development. So too is the loss of community, the decline of social trust[.]”

In the aftermath of the 2012 UN Happiness Conference, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, in conjunction with the Gallup Poll, began issuing the World Happiness Report annually. There have been ten reports, and some trends are beginning to surface. For example, according to the [2022 Tenth Anniversary World Happiness Report](#), more policy-makers believe today that happiness is essential to what they deliver to their constituencies. Most nation-states measure satisfaction among their populations annually. Unfortunately, in the last decade, there has also been a slight increase in stress, worry, and sadness in most countries and an equally slight decline in the enjoyment of life.



According to the 2022 World Happiness Report, the pandemic also demonstrated that trust in public institutions was crucial for human well-being. Indeed, in the 2020–2021 period, deaths from COVID-19 were substantially lower in countries with greater trust in public institutions and where inequality was less pronounced. In addition to trust in government, it was evident that [generosity to one another or benevolence](#) and social support were crucial for human well-being. Moving forward, we see many new ways in which happiness may be measured, including an increase in the biology of joy, the importance of calmness, harmony, balance, and overall satisfaction.

Nordic Countries, the Happiest Worldwide

While Bhutan has been measuring happiness longer than any other country and has made great strides in improving the conditions of its population, it has not ranked high in the World Happiness Report. In general, Global South Countries rank lower than Western nations, and [African nations rank lower than nations in any other region](#). For example, in the 2017 World Happiness Report, African countries appeared to have low trust in their democracies and have negative experiences with “lived poverty” in which basic needs were



lacking. This confirms the importance of wealth as a measure of happiness, but, as Bhutan has claimed for centuries, wealth is not enough. On the other hand, Finland has consistently been at the top of the list along with other Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the Netherlands). While the U.S. ranks high on the list, it has not made the top 10 in the last decade. What have Nordic countries done to rank this high, and *why* are they so high?

Nordic countries [rank high on welfare and development indicators](#). Norway and Denmark are among the top five on the UN Human Development Index. According to Transparency International, Sweden and Finland rank among the six least corrupt countries in the world. Nordic countries also have greater press freedom and gender equality and, as indicated, are at the top of the World Happiness Report. Many have attempted to explain Nordic countries’ high happiness rankings. However, the two most important ones appear to be greater trust in government institutions and a strong sense of community derived from greater community equality.

Nordic countries believe that their governments (often social democracies) provide a robust social safety net. They have well-funded public services, a combination of free trade with collective risk-sharing, and high unionization levels, including a strong partnership between corporations, unions, and government. While several European countries have high taxes, so do other European countries that do not rank as high in the World Happiness Report.

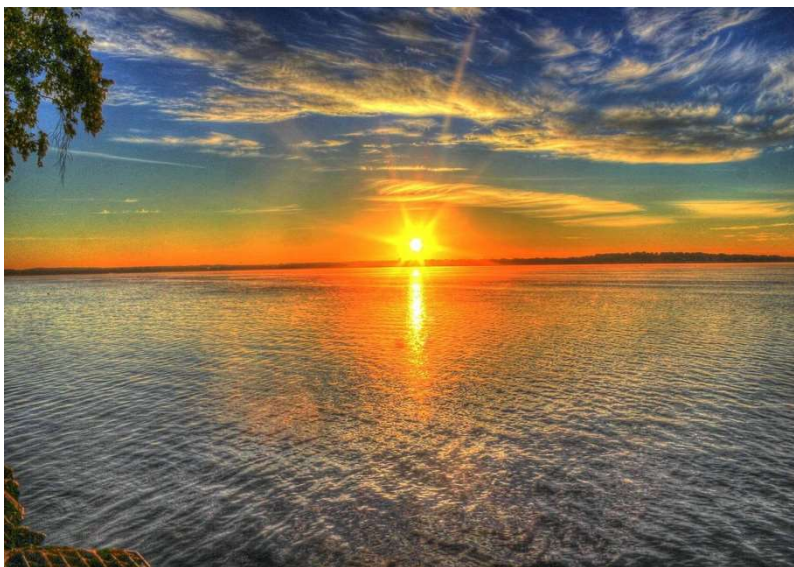
[Gender equality](#) has played an essential role in Nordic countries. Nordic countries have also had more women prime ministers; their legislatures are mostly over 40% female. Iceland ranks #1 for “Wage Equality for Similar Work.” In Norway, men and women may take 14 weeks of parental leave after the birth of a child, and gender quotas indicate that women must have 40% representation in parliament and on corporate boards. Sweden has the most generous parental leave, with 16 weeks following the birth of a child. Sweden has also achieved parity when it comes to gender representation in ministries.

All Nordic countries gave women the vote before the United States did, and Finland was the second country to give women the right to vote and full political rights in 1906.

Like Bhutan in South Asia, Nordic countries believe that being in nature strengthens the mind and body. Like Bhutan, they also have [progressive environmental and climate policies](#). Some also argue that Scandinavian countries are passionate about “open-air living,” or [friluftsliv](#). Studies repeatedly demonstrate that spending time outdoors has multiple health benefits, including better sleep, increased physical activities, and improved mood. Nordic countries have implemented policies and resources to increase biking among their population. This is good for the environment and has multiple health benefits. In Denmark, however, cycling is taken to a new level as people ride their bikes to work, school, shopping, and the city. People bike in the sun, rain, or snow, and there are more bikes than cars in Copenhagen.

There is still so much to learn about happiness, but it is a concept humans have embraced since ancient times. The inroads that Bhutan and Nordic countries have made have not resolved all their problems: Bhutan is still an impoverished Global South nation, and Nordic countries still face several challenges, including the Nordic Paradox (gender equality along with high rates of domestic violence), high rates of alcohol consumption, and more. However, the persistent focus on improving the perception of happiness, well-being, and contentment has made a dramatic difference for their population.

A Happiness Day in Greater Green Bay?



The World Happiness Report is relevant to our community in multiple ways. First, we can argue that we have already been tracking various forms of well-being for many years: The St. Norbert College Quality of Life Survey, originated by Dr. David Wegge, Emeritus Professor of Political Science at St. Norbert College, has been in place since 1995. It is currently conducted under the direction of Dr. Jamie Lynch, Associate Professor of Sociology at

St. Norbert College. Over the years, it has tracked overall satisfaction with the quality of life in Brown County. In the most recent rate of *LIFE Studies* in 2011, 2016, and 2021, the average rating on a 10-point scale, with one being very dissatisfied and ten being very satisfied, is typically a score of about 8. Wello's *Health and Well-Being Survey* has been in business since 2019 and tracks the quality of life on a 5-point scale.

In 2019, 92% indicated that the quality of life was either good or very good. In 2021, that decreased slightly to 78% saying good or very good. This was likely due to the Green Bay population experiencing COVID 19 health issues between the administration of these two surveys. [The U.S. News and World Report](#) placed Green Bay as #3 among 150 cities in the United States listed as the “Best Places to Live in 2022-2023.” Green Bay also ranks #2 among the most affordable places to live.

In some areas, Brown County still has work to do. For example, the [2022 Wisconsin Professional Police Association](#) (WPPA) reveals that, while 91% of Brown County’s white population feels safer and 93% of the white population respects police officers “some” or “a great deal,” minority populations rank 5-10 points lower. Also, when it comes to [police violence against the public in Wisconsin](#), 36% of the white population consider it moderately or extremely serious, whereas non-whites almost double that number at 63%. There is work to do to increase the trust that the minority population has in police officers in our community. Recently, Green Bay Chief of Police Chris Davis provided an example of what had been done by his staff to build that trust. In his previous position in Oregon, police officers would show up in large numbers to greet newly arriving refugees and help them load their luggage. This type of informal interaction in non-emergency settings with the public may be the key to building greater trust and consequently greater happiness.

[Data from the National Institute of Justice](#) (2008) statistics indicate that males and minority populations are more likely to be incarcerated. According to the [Vera Institute](#), Blacks were incarcerated at 6.9 times the rate of whites, and Native American people were incarcerated at 6.9 times the rate of whites in Wisconsin in 2015. [Justice Support Solutions](#) reports that incarceration rates in Brown County in 2019 demonstrated that Native Americans were over-represented by 19.3%, African Americans were over-represented by 21%, Hispanic/Latinos were over-represented by 5.7%, Asians were underrepresented by 1.6%, and Caucasians were underrepresented by 43.5%. Indeed, [Wisconsin has a higher rate of incarcerating Blacks](#) than any other state. It’s important to analyze the impact these trends have on families of minority populations in order to have accurate reporting on how different communities experience life in Brown County.

Access to education is also limited for minority populations. For example, only 10% of the student population of Northeast Wisconsin Technical College is Hispanic while the Hispanic population is nearly 18% and growing. (The University of Wisconsin Green Bay is only 7% Hispanic and St. Norbert College is only 5% Hispanic.) Education is an important indicator of happiness so, if minority populations are not getting educated, it will have a negative impact on the overall happiness and well-being of this community.

The *2011 Brown County Life Study* reported that, while members of diverse communities listed many positive features of their experience in Brown County, they reported intolerant attitudes in some of the Brown county leadership, the concentration of lower-income housing in the City of Green Bay proper, combined with the fact that the growing diversity in this region was seen less favorably by the overall population. The recommendation was that “the area must address how to enhance the inclusiveness of the community.”

While there is still much work to be done, today, there are many [positive signs](#): In 2016, for example, only 33% of the Brown County population had a positive view of diversity according to the *2016 Brown County Life Study*. The number increased to 56% in the *2021 Brown County Life Study*. Furthermore, 45% of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) respondents ranked themselves as thriving in 2019. The number had increased to 51% by 2021.

What else could we do to make sure we continue to develop in the right direction? Encourage our population to spend more time outdoors. Brown County has a lot of festivals during the summer, which contributes to this goal, but more can be done. Like several Latin American countries, we could set specific days in the year in which the use of cars is forbidden downtown, and the streets are open for those who want to walk (El Dia del Peaton-Pedestrian Day). We could also take Denmark's example and encourage our city officials to invest in bike paths to encourage greater outdoor living. Indeed, we should encourage people of all ages to provide ideas about how we could create a greater sense of community with neighbors of diverse backgrounds, and how we could spend more time in nature and have more respect for it.

Green Bay continues to have a small-town feeling with a big football team that gets significant national attention. What we learn from the World Happiness Report is that, for happiness and well-being to continue to favor this region, it is not only essential to have access to resources, but people need to have a lot of trust in government and a strong sense of community. More importantly, for a community that is likely to become a majority-minority community by 2060 if not sooner, it's essential for people of all races and ethnicities to feel equally trusting of its institutions and of each other.

Starting next year, we can make sure we celebrate the UN-mandated Happiness Day on March 20 and remember that both Western traditions going back to Aristotle, and Eastern traditions going back to Sidarta Gautama, spoke about the importance of Happiness to live a good life.