

Contribution to Beyond GDP „Virtual Indicator Expo“

<http://www.beyond-gdp.eu>

Name of the indicator/method: **Happy Life Years (HLY)**

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Need for a measure of quality of life in nations

How to assess how well a nation is doing? One way is to look at the quality-of-life of the people who live there. This view is gaining prominence, both among policy makers and the general public. This begs the question what quality-of-life is precisely and how that can be measured comprehensively.

Assumed quality-of-life

Quality-of-life in nations is commonly measured by taking stock of conditions that are believed to make for a better life, such as economic affluence, full employment and education. Measures of such conditions are added in an index, like the Human Development Index (HDI) or the Index of Social Progress (ISP).

Items in such indexes are typically things that are on the political agenda and as such these indexes inform about progress on the way chosen. Yet these indexes do not tell us whether we are on the right track, that is, whether these policy achievements really improved the lives of citizens. Still another problem is that such measures typically assume that more is better and do not inform us about an optimum, e.g. how many years of education is optimal for a good life.

Apparent quality of life

Another approach is to assess how well people thrive in a society. The focus is then on the outcomes of life, rather than on the preconditions. How well an organism thrives is typically reflected in its lifetime. In higher animals, thriving reflects also in affective experience and humans are moreover able to estimate how well they have felt over longer periods of time. These estimates of how we feel most of the time are at the basis of the appraisal of how happy we are. Hence in the case of humans, thriving reflects both in how long and how happy they live.

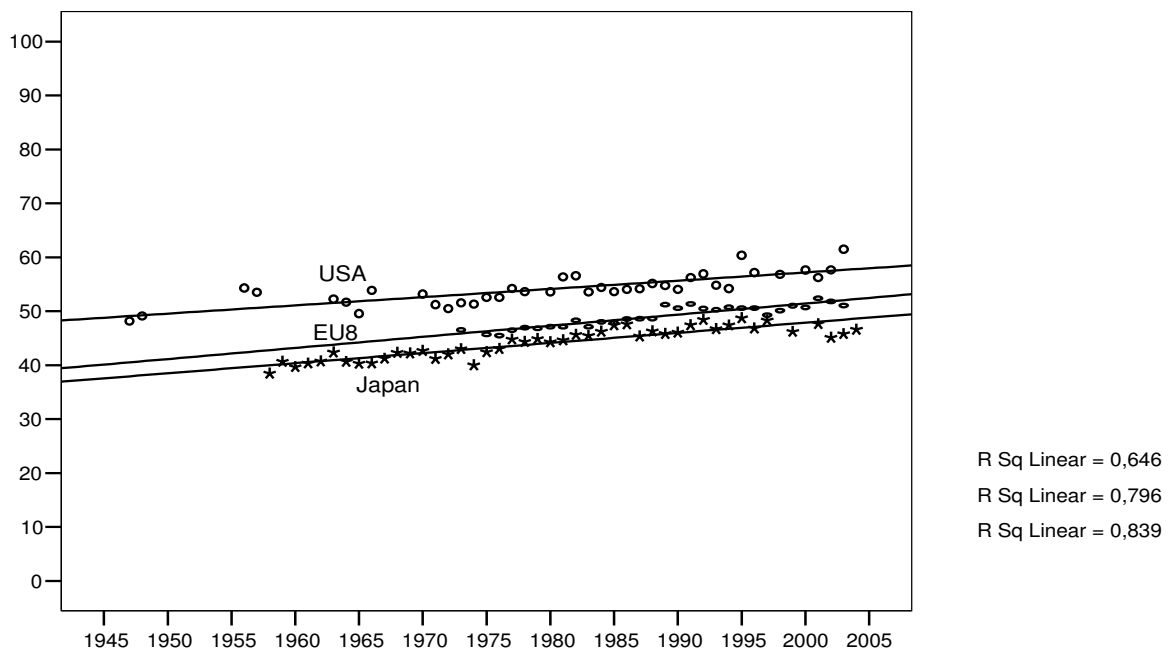
Measure of Happy Life Years

Full list of 95 nations available at:

http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/hap_nat/findingreports/RankReport2006-2b.htm

Gains in Happy Life Years over time in EU8, Japan and the USA

Happiness has risen slightly in most developed nations since the second half of the 20th century and life-expectancy has grown substantially. As a result, the number of Happy Life Years has grown remarkably.



Trend lines for 16 nation available at:

http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/hap_nat/findingreports/TrendReport2007-2.pdf

Happy Life Years sensitive for things that policy makers can improve

There is a system in the differences in Happy Life Years across nations. About two-third of the large differences in HLY across nations can be explained by societal variation in economic affluence, freedom, equality, brotherhood and justice. The table below presents correlations with indicators of these matters.

All variables in the table are things over which policy makers have some control. So the data leave no doubt that policy matters for final quality of life and also indicate what matters most. Economic affluence still stands out as a mayor factor, but 'tolerance' and 'rule of law' appear to be quite important as well.

Yet not everything deemed desirable appears to go with more happy life years. For instance, income-inequality rather appears to be positively related to HLY and social security spending negatively. This illustrates the above difference between assumed quality of life.

Societal Qualities and Happy-Life-Years in 67 nations in the 1990s

Condition in nation	Correlation with HLY		
	<i>Zero order</i>	<i>Wealth Controlled</i>	<i>N</i>
Wealth			
• Purchasing power per head	+0.73	-	67
Freedom			
• Economic	+0.71	+0.38	64
• Political	+0.53	+0.13	63
• Personal	+0.61	+0.31	45
Equality			
• Inequality in incomes	-0.10	+0.37	62
• Discrimination of women	-0.46	-0.12	51
• Inequality in happiness (SD)	-0.64	-0.37	54
Brotherhood			
• Tolerance	+0.72	+0.43	55
• Trust in compatriots	+0.20	+0.20	37
• Voluntary work	+0.40	+0.31	53
• Social security	+0.34	-0.27	34
Justice			
• Rule of law	+0.65	+0.20	64
• Respect of civil rights	+0.60	+0.20	60
• Corruption	-0.73	-0.32	40
Explained variance	66%		60

Source: Veenhoven, R. (2005) [Apparent quality of life: How long and happy people live](#)

Literature

Veenhoven, R. (1996)

[Happy life-expectancy: A comprehensive measure of quality-of-life in nations](#)

Social Indicators Research, Vol. 39, 1 – 58

Veenhoven, R. (2005d)

[Apparent quality of life: How long and happy people live](#)

Social Indicators Research, vol. 71, pp. 61-86

World Database of happiness, continuous register of scientific research on subjective enjoyment of life

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Available at: <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>