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Worldwide Indicators for Quality of Life: the Ten Leading Countries in the View of the Peoples and the Measurements of Experts around 2020

Wolfgang Glatzer

Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Email: glatzer@soz.uni-frankfurt.de

Abstract

Quality of life has been measured in recent times in most countries of the world. In earlier times the GDP was the professional measure to describe the economic success of a nation. This measurement of economic performance is now not accepted as a sufficient measure for wellbeing and quality of life. Meanwhile there are alternatives available like the Human Development Index (UN), the Better Life Index (OECD), and the Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP). Above the subjective measurement of wellbeing and quality of life were introduced in many countries worldwide. The various indicators for quality of life show huge inequalities between the countries in the world. Among the ten leading countries in the world the North and the Middle of Europe were most often at the top of the new recently established indicators. People were despite their relative satisfaction ratings also reporting significant amounts of hardship and misery in areas like personal health, standard of living and unemployment. Around 2020 the countries were confronted with new worldwide challenges; the Covid 19-pandemie came over the world, the Russian-Ukrainian war was taking place, the climate change grew to a threat of living conditions and sexual harassment received

perception as a serious topic. The countries were different successful in the fight against these challenges. Nevertheless the inequality between high and low satisfaction with quality of life in Europe and abroad remained rather stable.

People and experts use different measures about the state of quality of life and the countries meet different decisions about their development paths. North and middle European countries are worldwide leading in the creation of good societies according to the actual indicators of quality of life and a challenge to improve the levels of living in the less developed countries.

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1. Monitoring the Worlds Nations and Continents

As it seems a world society is emerging in which people are better informed about another than before. Social scientists are investigating systematically the question how successful are the nations of the world. In the last century the Gross Domestic Product was the main measure to show the economic growth of the various nations. But the societal goaldiscussion went on during the decades of the cold war and quality of life has become a new goal for international monitoring (Zapf 1972). The question how quality of life should be defined was raised

(Veenhoven 2000), how it should be measured and how the tendencies of change should be evaluated (Glatzer et al 2015). Also the improvement of quality of life became a political task (Ostasiewicz 2006). Prominent leading models were developed from the UN with the **Human Development Index**, the OECD with the **Better Life Index**, and various projects with measuring **Satisfaction and Happiness in the World**. Up to now many concepts and indicators are used in the international working field (Moller et al, 2008) for example the measurement of US-scientists who developed the **Weighed Index of Social Progress**.

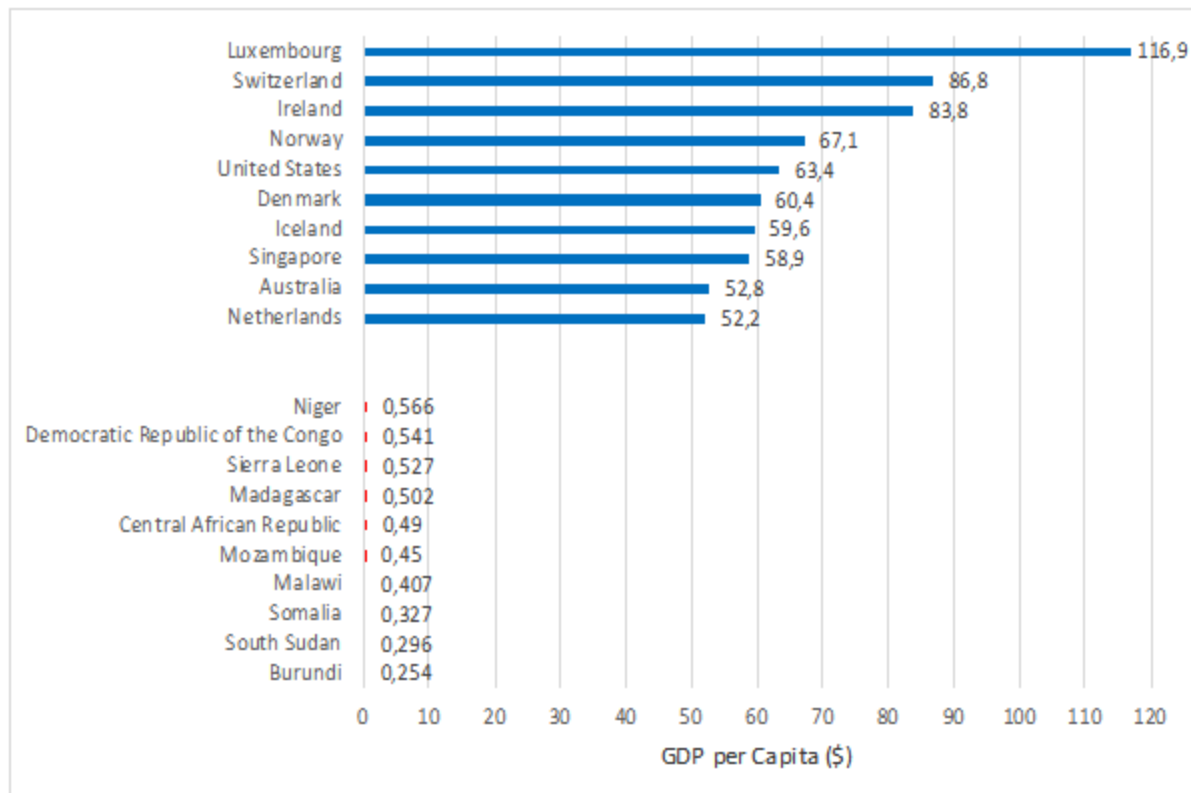
Societies can be regarded from different standpoints, on the one side the so-called „objective“ view of experts and on the other side the „subjective“ view of the people (Cummins 2000). In the last half century subjective components of the world are more and more documented (Diener, Suh 1999. In the recent World Happiness Report (2023) a broad number of different scales for subjective measurements of quality of life are presented.

Obviously quality of life in nations is normally a mixture of positive and negative aspects of life respectively of well-being and ill-being. The contribution here is comparing results from the global measurement of wellbeing and worries of the world peoples. The focus is on the top ten and the bottom ten of world societies.

2. National Accounts and the level of living

2.1 The significance of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

The economic accounts respectively the comprehensive indicator of gross domestic product have been used to measure their level since a long time. The measurement follows a worldwide established convention. „Gross domestic product (GDP) is the standard measure of the value added created through the production of goods and services in a country during a certain period.“ (World Bank 2020). As clearly said the GDP is an activity measure of the economy which measures the production of goods and it is not counting the present amount of consumption and destruction. Also important is that there is an important contribution of households and families regarding their household production and network support. In these cases we find nonmarket production in shape of housework, personal care and Do-it-yourself activities. Recent results for the GDP per capita are the following.



Overview 1: GDP per capita 2020 – The ten most wealthy and the ten poorest countries of the world

Source: Countries by GDP per capita, Statistics Times.com, N=194

The most wealthy country in economic terms of GDP per capita is in 2020

Liechtenstein among 194 countries, the second one is Switzerland. (and the third one Ireland (Overview 1). There is a huge gap to the ten weakest economies which are all on the African continent: Simbabwe, Kongo, Liberia, Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Sierra Leone, Zentral-Afrikanische Republik, Togo, Mozambique. Africa is a relative poor continent and earns most attention to reduce poverty.

The GDP can be used to construct performance zones. The economic performance is on the highest level in North America, in Northern Europe and in Australia. On the other side poverty zones of the earth are especially situated in the middle of the African continent. Africa and North Asia constitute wide areas with low income per head. South Europe and Japan are on a middle level. Inequality is characterizing the world. The GDP per capita is an expert rating and stands in full contrast to subjective evaluations of the societies. The peoples subjective opinion is documented in investigations of satisfaction and happiness (overview 5), Some wealthy countries are happy at the same time. A combination of wealth and happiness characterizes the socio-economic structure of the countries Luxembourg, Denmark, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, A few economic leading countries do not attain the high

satisfaction of these countries, This is the case with the US, Singapore and Australia. A high GDP per capita is often but not always a favorable feature for a happy country.

3. Alternative measures for the wellbeing of nations

3.1 The concept of human development for developed and developing nations (HDI)

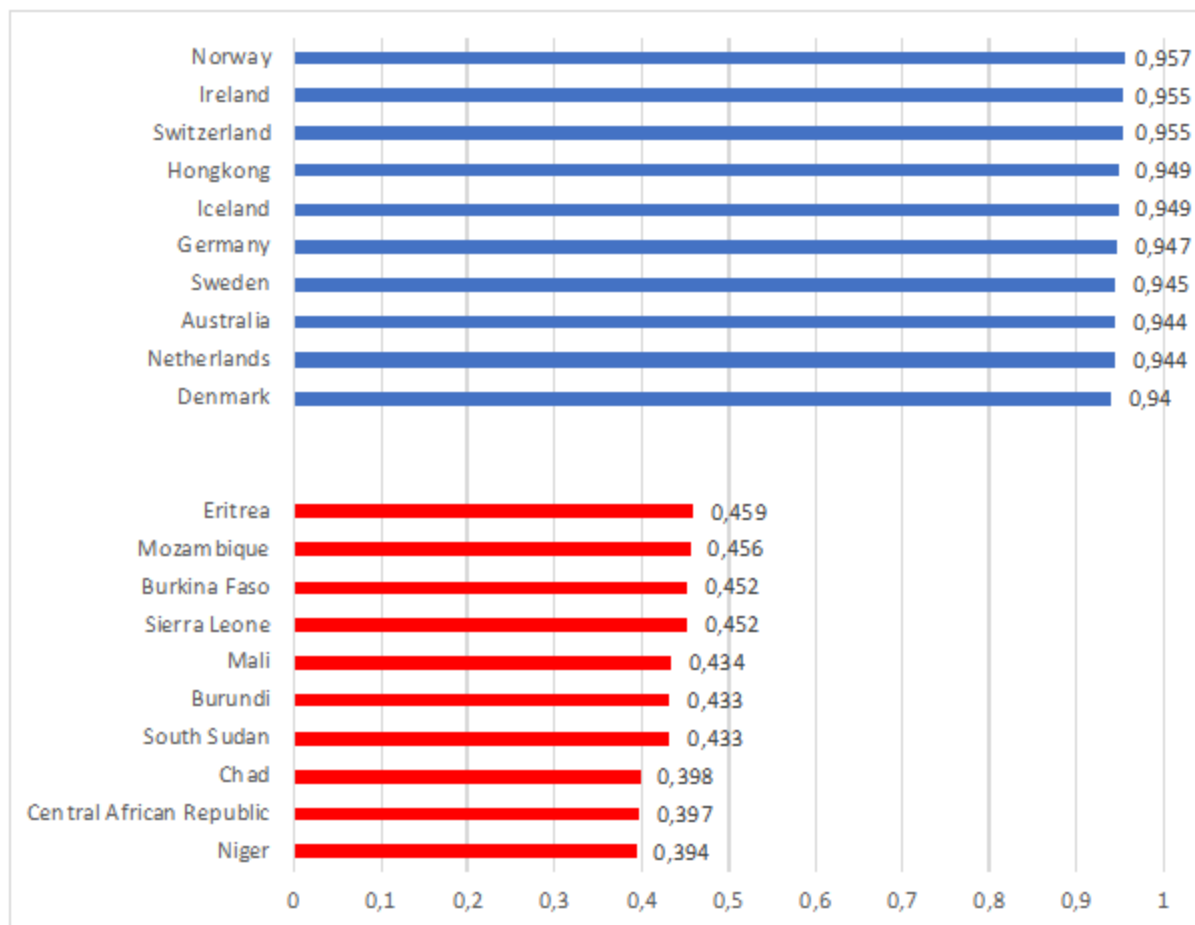
The Human Development Index (HDI) is an **objective** statistical measure including a long and healthy life, knowledge and education and access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. "If these essential choices are not available, many other opportunities remain inaccessible" (United Nations 1990). The reports of the series attracted worldwide attention in developed and developing countries beginning with the first *Human Development Report* in 1990. The wellknown Sen-Nussbaum capabilities approach was adopted to well-being by stating that the human development process is one of "enlarging people's choices" (Alkire 2021). This is the main goal measured with the HDI.

The concept of human development was developed from the United Nations. It is included into a broader goal discussion about millenium development goals, human development and human rights (Human Development Report 2010).

The two top countries are Norway and Australia. 6 from the 10 top nations are European countries. All countries on the highest level of the HDI belong to Europe, complemented by the three countries Australia, Hongkong, and Singapore.

The ten bottom countries are all from the African continent. From the evaluation of the UN-experts the world countries are distributed according to four zones. From 186 countries are 66 on a **very high human level**, on a **high human level** are 53 contries, 36 are on a **medium human level**, 32 countries are situated on a **very low human level**. More countries are on a high human level than on a lower human level (United Nations 2021).

Social change since 1990 was an increase of the HDI from 0,601 to 0,810 in the world average. At the top of the HDI-hierarchy is Norway with a growth from 0,849 to 0,957 and at the bottom of the ranking list is Niger with an HDI-index growing from 0,210 to 0,394 (United Nations 2021). Only one country from 189 was exposed to a regress backward (Syria). In the concept of the United Nations the value of 0,800 was declared as order between "high human development" and "medium human development".



Overview 2: Human Development Index 2020 - High and Low Developed Nations

Source: Human Development Index Trends 1910 -1919, N = 162

It should be kept in mind that the concept of human development is much broader than the HDI-concept. There are also indicators for negative wellbeing and social problems included.

3.2 OECD-Better Life Index

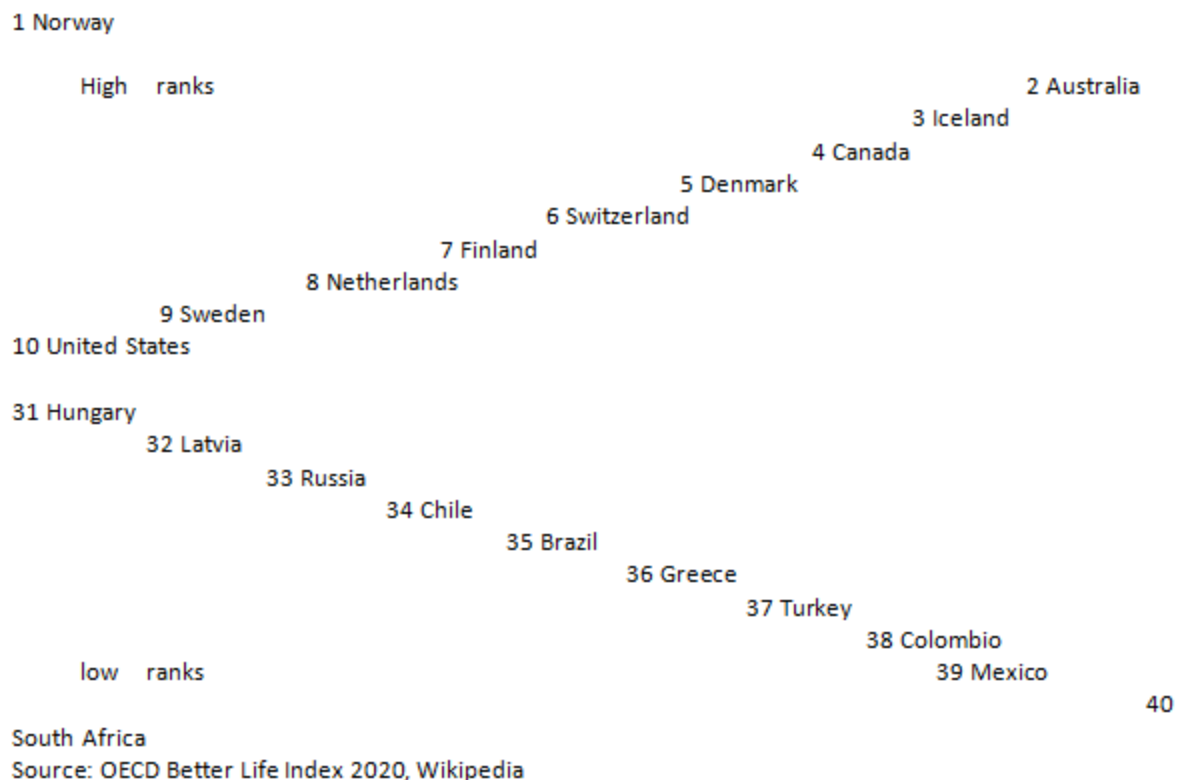
The OECD (2011, 2019) stands in a long traditions of working on quality of life and includes 40 OECD countries. Explicit are mentioned four measuring concerns namely well-being, environmental quality, quality of public services and security. The country monitoring begins with the description of domains for quality of life. The differentiation of quality of life at ends up with nine areas: Material living conditions & Health status & Education and skills & Work and life balance & Social connectons & Civic engagement and governance & Enviromental quality & Personal security & Subjective well-being. The resulting better life index is a mixture of objective and subjective indicators,

On this background the OECD publishes the report „How is life? Measuring well-being“. Fifth brochures are available since 2011 (OECD 2011, 2020). An interesting step was presented when the OECD-group

adapted the historical perspective „How was life? Global well-being since 1820“ (OECD 2014). This publication includes 34 countries and the publication gives a unique long-term view of the development in these countries.

Another version is presented in „society at a glance“ since 2009 (OECD 2019). The ninth edition of the biennial OECD overview of social indicators, „addresses the growing demand for quantitative evidence on social well-being and its trends. This year’s edition presents 25 indicators, several of which are new, and include data for 40 OECD member countries“. The best ten countries, selected from these 36 countries are part of overview 8 below.

Overview 4: OECD Better Life Index 2020: Ranking From the Best to the Weakest country



The OECD counts for its member countries the rank according to its **Better Life Index** (OECD 2020). For the OECD-approach Norway fulfills quality of life to highest degree. Norway attains the highest rank and is the best country in the world (see overview 4). Australia is the second best country and Iceland the third one on the OECD scale.

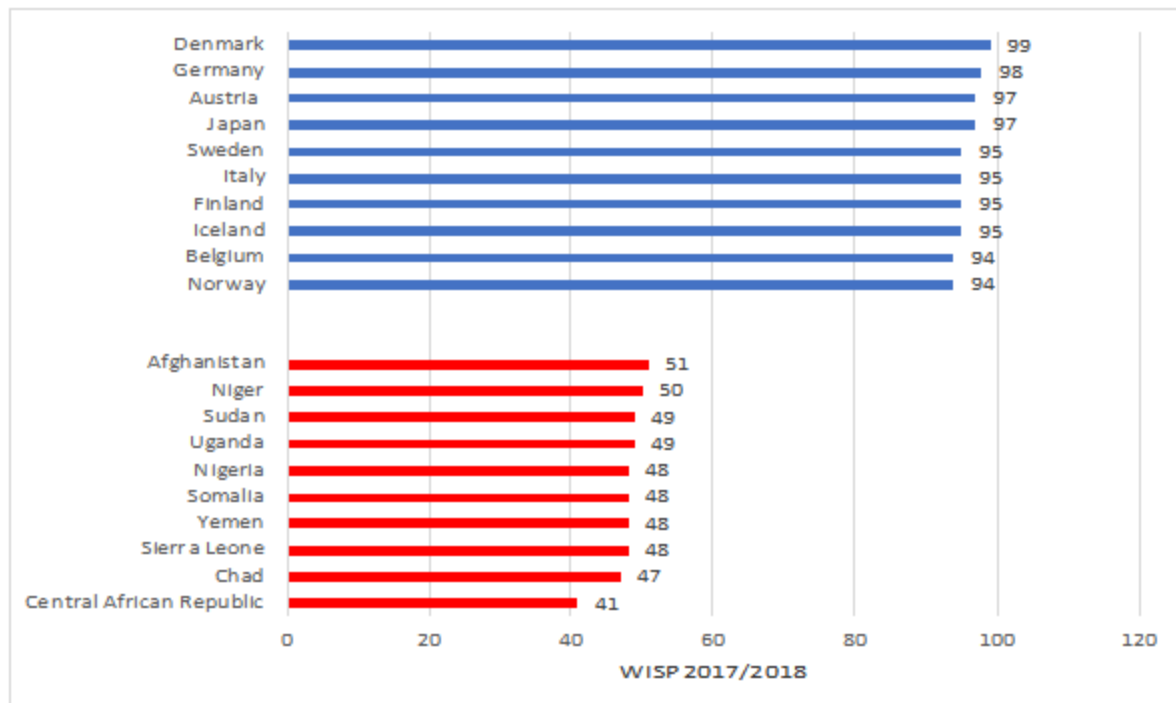
The following countries are Canada, Denmark, Switzerland, Netherland, Sweden and Finland. The United States are on position 10. Seven of the ten best countries are from Europe. Asian and African countries..

The countries at the end of the Better Life Index are Hungary, Latvia, Russia, Brazil, Columbia, Mexico and South Africa. Among the 40 OECD-countries the best countries are from Northern Europe and the worst countries from Eastern Europe, South America and South Africa.

There are many differences in nature, culture and politics which are among the reasons for worldwide discrepancies of subjective well-being. But it is said with care, „Data cannot be compared between different editions of the Better Life Index.“ This is pity.

3.3 The Weighted Index of Social Progress

Social progress is a differentiated traditional goal which has historical roots and has also found recognition in modern approaches (Estes 1984). The basic idea of this approach is to define objective and subjective indicators which are signs for social progress and show societal improvement. The study contains 162 countries and 40 indicators which are summarized to 10 subindices (Estes 2019) In the WISP-index many indicators are integrated and the various dimensions are weighted according to concepts of the author. The dimensions of the subindices are education, health status, women, defense costs, economy demographic, environment, social chaos, cultural variety and a sub-index for welfare policies.



Overview 3: The Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP) 2018: Top ten countries versus bottom ten

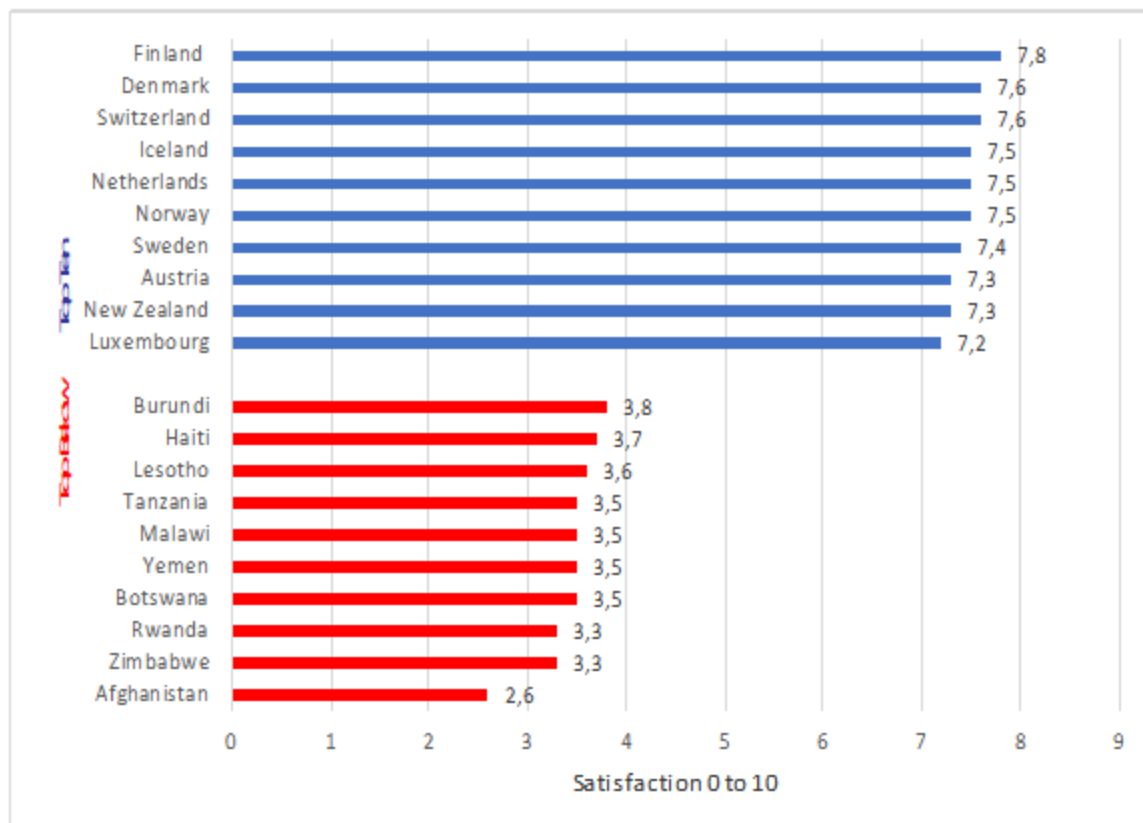
Source: Estes 2019, p.

Four leaders in respect to social progress are the top countries of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland with index values from 101 to 107. Also the additional top ten countries are in Europe: Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, Italy, Iceland and Belgium. The leading positions of Northwest-Europe are resulting from the measurements of many dimensions.

3.4 Happiness and Satisfaction Reports.

A basic alternative approach which measures the quality of life from a subjective perspective is to ask people for their satisfaction respectively happiness. Some different scales are used in international context. The concept of satisfaction has the advantage that people can do integrative evaluations of very different subjects in life. And people have nearly no difficulties to rate their satisfaction on a scale. A problem of comparison is that social scientists have developed different scales. Satisfaction and happiness with life are often used to rate people's lives on a scale from 0 to 10. There are two main approaches for a worldwide measurement of satisfaction and happiness. 160 respectively 146 are presented in the world happiness report which was published 2022 in the ninth edition (Helliwell et al 2021). Another important step was the creation of the central Archiv in Rotterdam, the „World Database of

Happiness“ (Veenhoven 1984 und 2005). Again the scale goes from 0 to 10. Recent approaches present a comparison of different scales showing that the differences are partly huge.



Overview 5: Happiness with Life in the Worlds Countries 2020: The ten most satisfied and the ten least satisfied countries

Source: World Happiness Index 2022 – Country wise Rank & Report, N = 146 World Database of Happiness, Average Happiness in 160 Nations 2010 - 2019

At the top of satisfied countries stands Finland followed from Denmark and Switzerland. Close to them are always European countries with only one exception among the most happy ten countries namely New Zealand. European countries are in a privileged situation among the most happy nations in the world.

The lowest happiness exists in Afganstan, Zimbabwe, Rwuanda, Botsana, Lesotho, Malawi, Haiti, Tanzaia, Yemen and Burundi. The world of nationes is divided in natons whose popoplation goes above 7,2 and ten countries which reach a satisfaction value below 3,77. This is an extremely divided world. which people express in their ratings.

The lowest satisfactions exists in the East of Europe and the middle of Africa. War countries like the Irak developpe a low satisfaction. Of the 132 countries with data for 2005-2008 and

2016-2018 there were 106 with significant changes. 64 were significant increases and 42 significant decreases, while the remaining 26 countries revealed no significant trend (Helliwell 2019). An improvement is overwhelming.

„The change from 2017-2019 to 2020 varied considerably among countries, but not enough to change rankings in any significant fashion materially. The same countries remain at the top.“ The countries at the top of satisfaction ladder attain the same values in 2020 and 2022: Finland with 7,8; Denmark with 7,6; Iceland with 7,5; Norway with 7,3; Luxembourg with 7,2;

Nearly the same picture prevail among the least happy countries No change of the low satisfaction in Burundi, Haiti and Botswana but in a lot of countries small reductions of satisfaction are monitored

This irritating picture can be caused from the distributipons of satisfaction within the countries. High values may be improved despite burdens and low value can a diffeent path.

In a sandwich position are especially East European countries Czech Republic 6,9; Slovenia 6,4; Lithuania 6,2; Estonia 6,2; Poland 6,2 Latvia 6,0; Hungary 6,0. They are all in similar scale values between high and low satisfied countries. In a rather low position is Russia with 5,5 which is the agressor in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

4,5 Multiple Rank-Comparisons of Indices for Quality of Life

Many concepts and indicators are used in the international working field of quality of life. One interesting research step is to compare the rank-orders resulting from the different indicators.

Overview: The Top Ten of the World Countries: Measured by four Concepts, the Human Development Index (UN), the Better Life Index (OECD), the Weighted Index for Social Progress (US-scientists), the Happiness Index (World Inventory.)

Development Index (UN-ranking)	Better Life Index (OECD-ranking)	Social Progress Index (US-ranking)	Happiness (World-ranking)	Value
Norway (0,957)	Norway (1)	Denmark (99)	Finland (7,8)	
Ireland (0,955)	Australia (2)	Germany (98)	Denmark (7,6)	
Switzerland (0,955)	Iceland (3)	Austria (97)	Switzerland (7,6)	
Hongkong (0,949)	Canada (4)	Japan (97)	Iceland (7,5)	
Iceland (0,949)	Denmark (5)	Sweden (95)	Netherlands (7,5)	

Germany (0,947)	Switzerland (6)	Italy (95)	Norway (7,5)
Sweden (0,945)	Finland (7)	Finland (95)	Sweden (7,4)
Australia (0,945)	Netherlands (8)	Iceland (95)	Austria (7,3)
Netherlands (0,944)	Sweden (9)	Belgium (94)	New Zealand (7,3)
Denmark (0,94)	United States (10)	Norway (94)	Luxembourg (7,2)

Sources: Human Development Index at United Nations (2020) (N=189); Index of Better Life at (OECD) (N=40), Weighted Index of Social Progress at Estes (2019) (N=189) p.91; World Happiness Index at Helliwell et al (2021) (N= 146) In brackets is told the number of countries included in each study.

The most successful country is at the first positions of each scale. There is a chance of four times to arrive at the first position, Norway (in blue) has two times the first position among the top ten countries and in two cases it is on number 5 and on number 10. No doubt that Norway fulfills highest standards for their people insofar it is the top on the Human Development Index and the Human Betterment Index and it is among the top ten in respect to Happiness and Social Progress. Three Nordic countries attain best positions in respect to comparative country measurement. From 40 top positions 35 were held from European especially North and Middle European countries. This is a main reason for the high attraction of Europe for migrants all over the world. Australia, Canada, Hongkong, New Zealand, Singapore and the United States are six from 40 nations, which are situated outside Europe and join the high European level. No country from Africa and South America is among the top ten countries which imposes a challenge to improve the quality of life in less developed countries.

4. Negative Wellbeing

Quality of life research has shown up and on that the world has plenty of positive well-being and also that people are suffering a lot. „Quality of life and world suffering“ are complementary feelings (Anderson 2015). „Satisfaction and hardship“ are existing complementary (Veenhoven 2003). To increase the relative weight of wellbeing towards the relative impact of misery is a main goal for people and countries.

Negative wellbeing takes different expressions. Often low values on ten point satisfaction- and happiness-scales are regarded as substitutes for explicit negative evaluations. Zero on a satisfaction scale means no satisfaction at all and ten means highest satisfaction. The top ten countries are above 7,2. The lowest countries are below 3,9. In between there are 3.3 scale units. The scale value of 7,5 for Europe implies that 30% of the people are on low scale

values between 0 and 4. This implies that in country with a high satisfaction level there is always a reasonable number of less or dissatisfied people.

On the individual level negative expressions have often their special words for negative circumstances: anxiety, burden, fear, hardship, harm, misery, pain, sadness, sorrow, suffering, and worry are some categories for people describing their negative wellbeing.

In worldwide surveys carried through in the last decades the interest grew into topics which were threats for the people.¹ These anxieties and worries were in the worlds view related to three threat areas: suffering due to **personal health, standard of living and unemployment.**

In actual world surveys is asked “what worries the world?”

Overview 6: What Worries the World? Answer in % of global population in September 2021

Coronavirus (Covid-19)	36%
Unemployment	31%
Poverty and social inequality	31%
Financial/Political corruption	27%
Crime & violence	26%

Research among 20,000 adults aged 16-64 in 28 participating countries.

August 20th – September 3rd 2021.

Source: [\(Ipsos Global Advisor\)](#) [Download image](#) Created with [Datavrapper](#)

Again for a rather high satisfaction in the average we find at the same time a lot of dissatisfaction due to different reasons, In the year 2021 the Covid-19 virus claimed in world terms the top of the fears with 36 %. At the same time unemployment and poverty remained rather high threats. Also financial and political corruption and crime and violence were seen from more as a quarter of the adults as a worry. COVID-19 has killed millions of people in the world and altered how people live and how they think about life. Although there were some increases in average sadness and worry, An interesting result was that overall life evaluations, and happiness rankings, were surprising stable (Helliwell 2021).

A special measurement of quality of life happens with the concept of the Affect-Balance, that includes at the same time positive and negative experiences of life (Bradburn 1969). The ABS-Index is counted as sum from positive and negative affects (Diener & Suh 1999).

This index demonstrates that negative burdens of life and positive burdens vary independently from another. And it is again a general result that quality of life is always a mixture from positive and negative components of quality of life.

5. Resümee

Modern societies are established with procedures of measuring their significant traits. A traditional measurement procedure is available with the national accounts which is focussing at the indicator GDP per capita. Nowadays we find in international comparisons some different measurement procedures which articulate their specific basic concerns. This is the case for the Human Development Index, the Betterment Life Index, and the Weighted Index of Social Progress. Another innovation are subjective indices for Happiness and Satisfaction with life.

These concepts are oriented towards different concerns

- the enlargement of peoples choices (human development);
- the betterment of fields of well-being, environmental quality, quality of public services and security (better life index);
- the support of goals for social progress, (weigthed index) (
- the enforcement of happiness and satisfaction with life and to control for ill-being (for example world happiness reports)

Some European countries are according to these indicators models for a better world though there is no doubt that a significant numbrt of the people are everywhere suffering from bad conditions. Wellbeing on the continents is a mixture of wellbeing and worries and consists of positive and negative components. The differences among the continents and countries are huge. And the newly arising threats with covid-19, the russion-ukrainian war and the climate change are leading to new challenges.

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