

# SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2025:

CULTURALLY SENSITIVE COMPASS FOR WELL-BEING



# Introduction

What comes to your mind when you hear discussions about economic indicators of societal development?

Do you feel that while economics is important, other meaningful aspects of a society's well-being are often overlooked? And what about happiness rankings — do you believe happiness is important, but that a fulfilling life includes more than just being happy?

Perhaps you think that the Western model of societal development is a good option, but not the only one, nor the best for everyone.

If these thoughts resonate with you, this report offers reasons and evidence to support them. If they don't, we encourage you to keep reading — perhaps we can share a new perspective worth considering.



## Purpose of the Report

This report aims to translate findings from macro-psychological research conducted across seventy countries and administrative regions into accessible language for a general audience. It offers a culturally sensitive perspective on societal development and provides actionable recommendations for policymakers.

## Structure of the Report

The report is divided into three main parts.

- 1 Are We Using the Right Map to Reach a Good Life?**  
This section highlights key areas where the current understanding of societal development may need improvement.
- 2 Turning the Tide: New Ways to See Well-being in a Diverse World**  
Here, we offer fresh perspectives on approaching societal development through a culturally informed lens.
- 3 Charting a New Course: Culturally Sensitive Policies**  
In this final section, we present a set of foundational policy recommendations.

This is the second edition of the **Social Development Report**, published in 2025. The first edition, released in 2024, is available at [www.socialdevelopment.report](http://www.socialdevelopment.report), where we also plan to publish future editions. As you read this edition, please remember that we are at the beginning of a longer scientific journey. We hope to continue strengthening our arguments and deepening the evidence over time.

# Key Takeaways

## Societal Compasses Need to Reflect Cultural Diversity

For a long time, the common idea of societal progress has focused mainly on economic growth. In looking for alternatives, researchers and policymakers have started to consider societal happiness. While both economic health and happiness are important for development, assuming they are equally important in all cultures is a one-size-fits-all approach. This view misses the bigger picture of what makes life good.

In this report, we propose expanding the ways we measure development to better reflect each society's unique vision of progress. Our research shows that while people around the world generally want modernisation, their specific idea about what that means can differ enough to impact policymaking. These differences matter and should be considered when shaping development policies.

## Think of Society as a Unique Cultural Ecosystem

What works well in one culture might not work in another. So why do we keep using the same policies everywhere? Relying too much on dominant Western economic and psychological models can lead to poor outcomes. For example, programs focused on individual success may not succeed in cultures that value teamwork and collective achievement. We need a new approach that truly listens to diverse voices and addresses their specific needs.

## Let's Add More Instruments to Our Societal Development Toolkit

Well-being is about more than just feeling happy — it includes having strong connections, a sense of purpose, and belonging. Instead of only focusing on the individual ("me"), we should also emphasise community ("we"). Strong relationships, trust, and active civic participation are key to a healthy society. We don't need to discard current economic or happiness measures; instead, we should add new ones that reflect people's expectations and local values.

## Societal Compasses Need to Reflect Cultural Diversity



**Open Minds**  
Policymakers should explore and recognise the different ways people define a good life beyond just economic numbers.



**Craft Culturally Sensitive Policies**  
Solutions that work in one place may not work in another. It is important to develop strategies tailored to specific cultural contexts.



**Strengthen the Social Fabric**  
Building trust, promoting social unity, and reducing divisions are essential. Think of society as a single organism—its health depends on the strength of its social fabric.



**Empower Communities**  
Governance should prioritise inclusive processes, enabling communities to shape policies that meet their needs.



**Let Research Guide Us**  
Evidence-based policymaking that draws from various fields and perspectives will help us create more effective strategies for well-being.

By embracing a **culturally sensitive approach**, we can move beyond a narrow one-size-fits-all perspective. We can create frameworks that truly enhance well-being for everyone, fostering inclusion, trust, and a shared understanding of a good life based on what each society values. The future of societal development depends on our ability to view the world through multiple lenses, balance different priorities, and let a comprehensive compass guide our efforts.

	Large scale project 1	Large scale project 2
Number of countries covered by the research	50	70
Number of research participants	13 009	14 886
Number of different development aims analysed	28	31

“Development is about transforming the lives of people, not just transforming economies.”

— Joseph E. Stiglitz,  
Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences



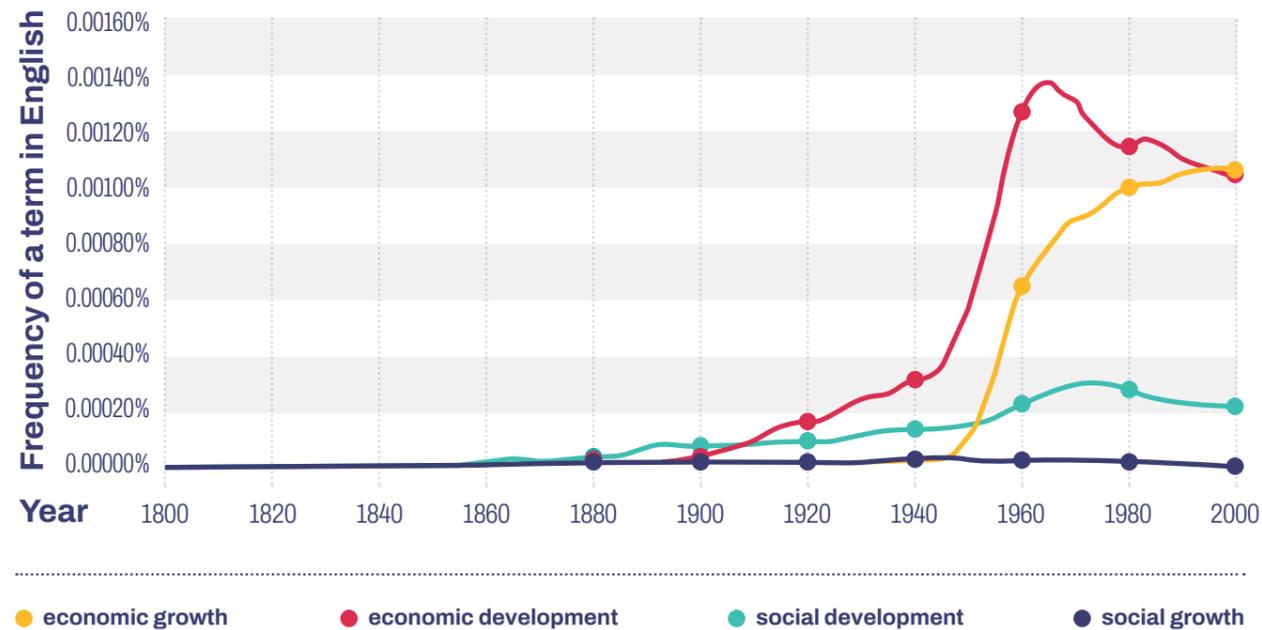
# 1

## Are We Using the Right Map to Reach a Good Life?

What drives societal progress? For decades, we have measured it primarily with two key indicators: economic growth and personal happiness. The common narrative has been to build more, earn more, consume more, and be happy. However, this narrow focus reduces well-being to just a private feeling — a personal pursuit of happiness. But does this really capture what makes a society thrive? Our research suggests a more complex picture. When we define progress solely through industry and individual satisfaction, we miss the bigger picture. Communities around the world want more than just wealth and happiness; they seek meaning, connection, and lifestyles shaped by their unique histories and cultures. By applying a rigid framework, we limit their ability to shape their own futures.

## Beyond the GDP Scoreboard: Are We Measuring What Truly Matters?

The current understanding of societal development is heavily influenced by an economic perspective, where economics plays a central role in setting goals and measuring societal progress. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita has become a widely accepted indicator of development. This economic approach is deeply embedded in our thinking and public discussion, often centred around economic growth, recessions, entrepreneurship, and national competitiveness. However, this viewpoint is relatively recent; it gained prominence after World War II, coinciding with the rise of terms related to economic growth and development.



Frequency of occurrence of terms related to economic and social development in English-language literature over the last 200 years. (Source: <https://books.google.com/ngrams/>).

## The Happiness Trap? Multidimensional Well-being in Cultural Context

In social sciences, especially psychology, societal well-being is often viewed as the sum of individual happiness. Much of the previous research has focused on measuring individual happiness and then aggregating these figures to assess overall societal well-being. However, the findings presented in this report suggest that well-being can be understood differently across cultures, with varying emphasis on aspects like harmony, communality, meaning in life, or spirituality.

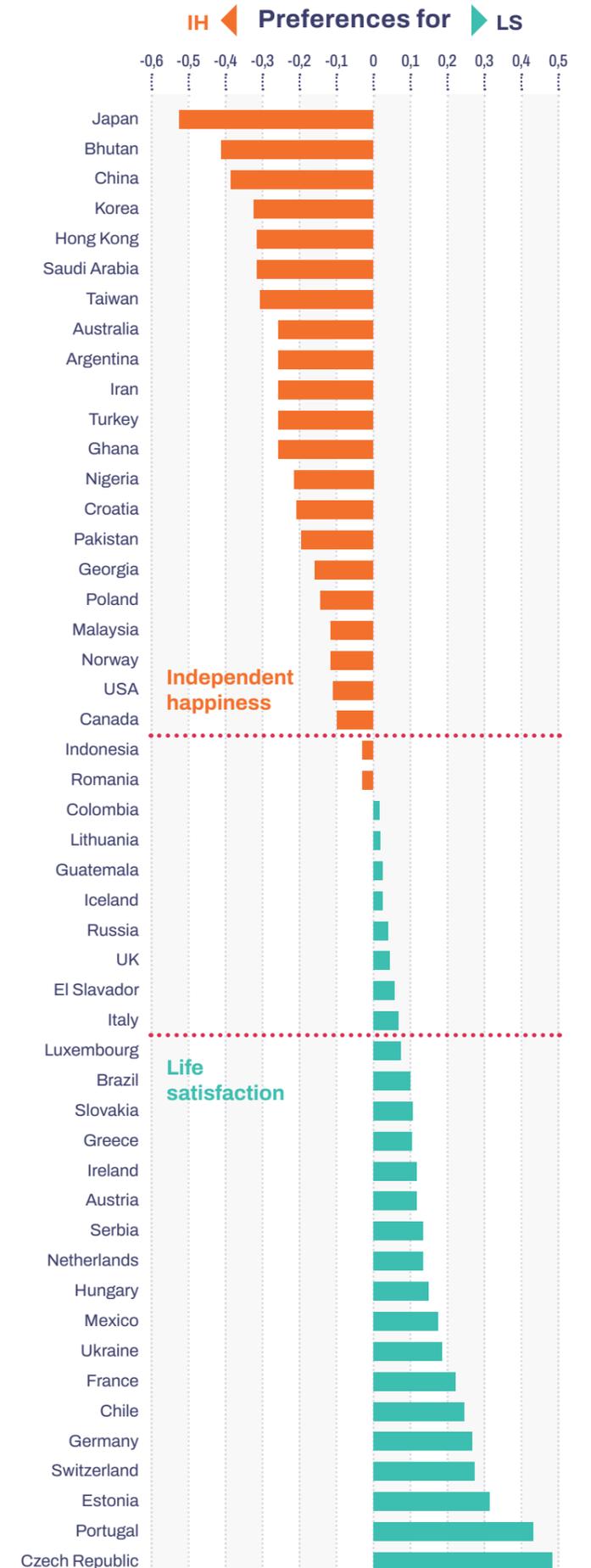
This difference is illustrated by comparing two types of happiness indicators: **Life Satisfaction (LS)** and **Interdependent Happiness (IH)**. LS reflects personal achievement and individual fulfilment, which align with Western cultural values. In contrast, IH emphasises social harmony and relationships, often found in East Asian cultures influenced by Confucian traditions.

Our research, conducted across 50 countries, reveals that LS is favoured over IH in only a few countries. In many others, people value happiness in the form of IH more than LS.

As the graph shows, the concept of happiness varies significantly across cultures —different cultures understand and value happiness in unique ways. This only scratches the surface by comparing two types of happiness. When we incorporate other dimensions of well-being, such as meaning, harmony, and spirituality, the picture becomes even more intricate.

Exploring the complex nature of well-being leads us to question how it influences our understanding of societal progress. This raises important questions: “Can we really base our entire model of well-being on just these factors?” What other influences shape societal aspirations and determine a community’s capacity for development?

These enquiries prompted our research, which combines insights from psychology and societal development. Relying too heavily on the Western notion of happiness as a universal measure could steer us in a problematic direction. It risks distorting evaluations and overlooking key elements that define a good life in various cultural contexts.



Comparison of the idealisation of two types of happiness: Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and Interdependent Happiness Scale (IHS). (Source: 50-country empirical study on ideal levels of two types of happiness).

## The Western Lens: How Dominant Theories Miss the Global Picture

Western psychological theories, which dominate many areas of research on humanity and society, significantly impact global justice and the well-being of communities worldwide. Their widespread application often occurs without sufficient consideration of cultural context, potentially leading to outcomes that do not align with the realities of non-Western societies.

Western frameworks typically prioritise individualism as a pivotal component of development and well-being. In contrast, many other regions place greater emphasis on collectivism and communal well-being. Imposing an individualistic model can undermine local value systems and social bonds.

**“If we look at the methodology and theoretical assumptions behind international happiness rankings, we see that they are mostly created by Western researchers, based on Western theories, and using Western measures of well-being. These rankings focus on a narrow aspect of psychological well-being, specifically on indicators centred around happiness — emphasising positive emotions, a focus on the self, and the pursuit of individual status.”<sup>1</sup>**

*Maciej Górski,*

*Institute of Psychology of the Polish Academy of Sciences*

The implications of these Western theories for the global system are significant. Using Western-centric measures can lead to unequal treatment and a misunderstanding of the diverse needs of various societies. If public policies and development programs are grounded in psychological assumptions that overlook cross-cultural differences, they may be ineffective. For example, initiatives designed to enhance well-being based on individual happiness, it may fail in cultures that prioritise family or community well-being.

Furthermore, the dominance of Western psychological theories perpetuates a cultural postcolonialism that marginalises local knowledge, perspectives, and practices. This undermines a complete understanding and appreciation of the diversity of human experience.

Our research indicates that even within Western societies, an excessive focus on individual happiness and economic growth can lead to negative outcomes, such as existential crises and diminishing meaning in life. If global development policies uncritically replicate this model, they may create similar issues elsewhere, neglecting the social dimensions of development related to building trust and fostering social connections.



## Can One Map Guide Us Through All Cultures?

Public policies are more than mere actions—they represent decisions made by government actors at all levels, aiming to benefit citizens. However, their scope and impact extend far beyond this simplistic view. Given the wide-ranging influence of public policies, they should embody the cultural values and well-being priorities of the communities they serve. Decision-makers play a critical role in shaping the socio-economic landscape, and their choices can either enhance or undermine the happiness, sense of purpose, harmony, and spiritual well-being of different groups.

Is it accurate to assume that all societies are simply striving to maximise happiness? Shouldn't policies consider the diverse needs and values within society?

Public policies cannot be one-size-fits-all; they must be dynamic and adapt to the ever-changing social landscape. Whether aiming to promote mental well-being, foster social cohesion, or address the spiritual needs of a community, policies need to reflect the specific aspirations and realities of the people they are designed to serve.

So, are we truly addressing the diverse realities of society, or are we oversimplifying a much more complex landscape?

### EXAMPLE

**A notable instance of a universalist approach is seen in a key global organisation that recently adopted life satisfaction as a primary indicator in its international educational assessments. Based on this measure, Japan was advised to implement actions to enhance student happiness, as their reported life satisfaction was lower than that in other countries. However, this recommendation failed to consider that, in Japanese culture, happiness is not idealised to the same extent as in Western cultures, which may have influenced the findings.<sup>2</sup>**



1. Górski, M. (2025). Individual interview.

2. Rapple, J. et al. (2019). 'Better policies for better lives'?: constructive critique of the OECD's (mis)measure of student well-being. *Journal of Education Policy*, 35(2), 258–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1576923>

# 2

## Turning the Tide: New Ways to See Well-being in a Diverse World

NEW INSIGHTS

In this report, we advocate for a broader understanding of societal well-being and development. Current research often treats these concepts as universal, but deeper analysis reveals significant cracks in that assumption. Different cultures possess unique visions of a good life, yet mainstream approaches frequently overlook this diversity.

To create a more comprehensive picture, we must amplify all voices and rethink how we define societal development and its ultimate aim: societal well-being. This shift has the potential to drive real change — encouraging interventions that do not impose a one-size-fits-all model but instead support well-being as communities understand it.

However, this transformation will not happen automatically. It requires challenging dominant ideas and fostering research that reflects the complexity, diversity, and humanity of our world.

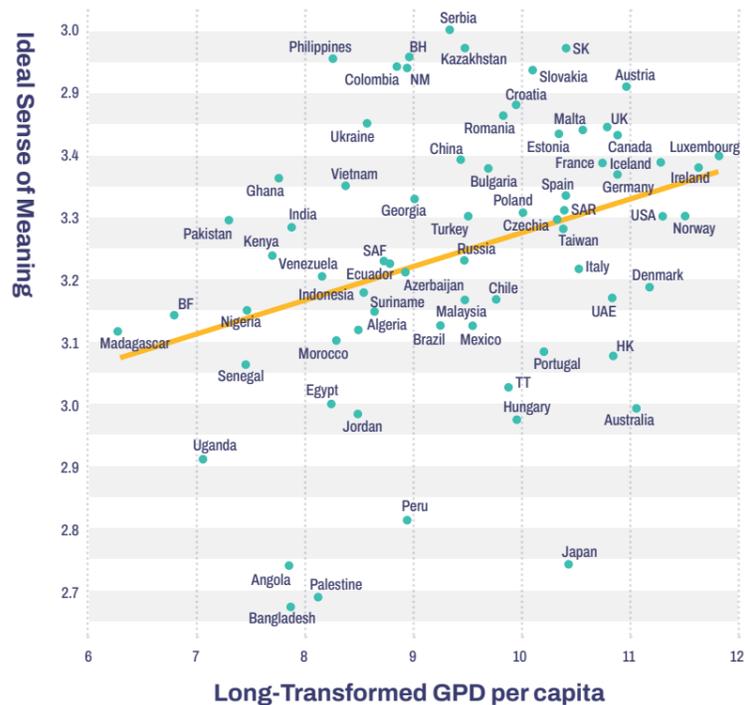
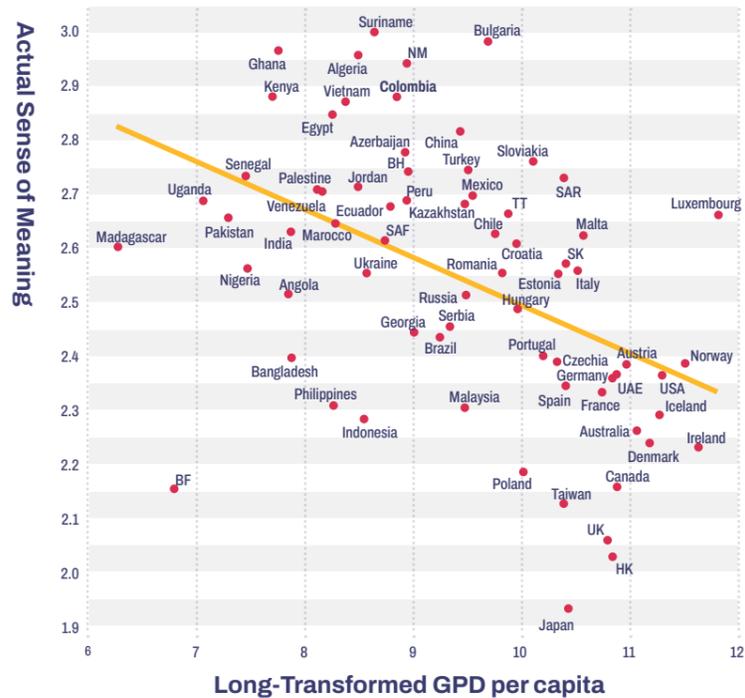
# Are Happiness Rankings Telling the Whole Story of Societal Well-being? Exploring Alternative Metrics

International rankings of societal well-being are predominantly based on happiness measures, which are closely linked to economic performance indicators like GDP per capita. This alignment often results in happiness-based and economics-based measures presenting a similar picture and leading to comparable policy recommendations. However, happiness alone is insufficient for assessing societal well-being, just as economic performance fails to fully capture societal development.

Happiness rankings frequently overlook critical aspects such as whether individuals find their lives meaningful or experience harmony and spirituality. Similarly, GDP does not consider factors like social inequality, mental health, the quality of social relationships, or the state of the natural environment.

One of our studies revealed what we termed as the **affluence-meaning paradox**: citizens of wealthier countries report lower levels of meaning in life, even as they aspire to it more. By analysing data from 70 countries, we confirmed previous findings that a sense of meaning tends to be higher in less affluent societies. Moreover, people in wealthier nations placed greater importance on meaning but struggled to achieve it.

Our analysis also explored the mechanisms underlying this paradox. We found that a decline in spirituality and in values such as honouring parents and elders, politeness, and self-discipline may significantly diminish the sense of meaning in more affluent societies.



Actual and ideal meaning in life association with GDP (Source: The Psychological Cost of Economic Prosperity...)



**“We found that economic wealth correlates with lower societal well-being if societal well-being is conceptualised as a sense of meaning. Importantly, we also demonstrated that the lower sense of meaning in more affluent nations is not due to lower aspirations for meaning. In our study, GDP per capita was, if anything, positively correlated with ideals about the sense of meaning.”<sup>3</sup>**

## Does this matter?

Absolutely. A substantial body of research indicates that GDP per capita is positively associated with societal happiness. However, our findings reveal that in more economically affluent nations, the sense of meaning in life is often lower. This implies that if policies were guided by subjective well-being conceptualised as meaning, rather than solely by happiness or GDP per capita, they might lead to different and potentially more effective recommendations.

A similar critique applies to all economic indicators. GDP per capita provides only a partial view of people’s lives. Thus, there is a pressing need for new metrics. While economics is—and will remain—critically important, other indicators should also be integrated into policymakers’ toolkits.

Broadening the focus beyond pure economics to the core of social progress—how people feel, how their needs are met, and whether they thrive in their communities—will offer a much fuller and richer narrative of development, one that we can no longer afford to ignore.

## Culturally Sensitive National Accounts of Well-Being

The concept of National Accounts of Well-being (NAWB) aims to guide social policy using indicators of subjective well-being. However, current NAWB models often equate social well-being primarily with social happiness, which tends to closely align with economic indicators. We suggest that NAWB could be expanded in two key ways:

-  **(1) Incorporating a Broader Range of Well-being Components:**  
This should include aspects of meaning, harmony, spirituality, and others that reflect a more comprehensive understanding of well-being.
-  **(2) Becoming Culturally Sensitive:**  
NAWB should take into account societal ideals and values related to different aspects of well-being, acknowledging the cultural diversity in how well-being is defined and experienced.

## Positive and Negative Societal Emotional Environment

Indicators of positive societal emotional environment (PSEE) and negative societal emotional environment (NSEE) capture the emotional atmosphere of a society.<sup>4</sup>

-  **PSEE**  
reflects a positive socio-emotional environment, measured by the frequency of expressed positive emotions.
-  **NSEE**  
focuses on the negative side, emphasising the expression of negative emotions.

3. Kryś, K., Buźniak, A. et al. (under review). The psychological cost of economic prosperity?  
4. Kryś, K. et al. (2021). Societal emotional environments and cross-cultural differences in life satisfaction: A forty-nine country study. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 17(1), 117–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1858332>

Together, these indicators provide insight into how emotional expression shapes a society's atmosphere. In societies with high NSEE, achieving a fulfilled life becomes more challenging—the link between happiness and meaning weakens, making it harder to experience both simultaneously. In contrast, societies high in PSEE, such as those in Latin America, tend to foster societal happiness through the frequent expression of positive emotions, even in the absence of economic affluence. Importantly, PSEE and NSEE can also be adapted in culturally sensitive ways, reflecting societal norms regarding the maximisation or moderation of positive expressivity, as well as the extent to which negative emotional expression is avoided.

### Need Balance Indicators

Need balance indicators denote the unequal satisfaction of diverse psychological needs. Our research suggests that a balanced need satisfaction is connected to a higher level of well-being. These indicators may constitute a significant element in well-being research, underscoring that not only the satisfaction of needs but also the mutual balance of these needs is crucial for quality of life.<sup>5</sup>

### Culturally Sensitive Alternatives to GDP per Capita

In addition to introducing new well-being metrics, such as the three examples presented above, currently popular alternatives to GDP per capita can also be adapted to be culturally sensitive. For instance, in the first edition of this report (in 2024), we presented a **culturally sensitive variant of the Human Development Index (CS-HDI)**. The CS-HDI incorporates data on social preferences regarding the three subindices of the traditional HDI: life expectancy, education, and economic performance. By doing so, the CS-HDI more accurately reflects the relative importance of these factors as understood by different societies.

This approach allows for a more precise assessment of how well societies are meeting their own development goals, based on what they actually value. By aligning the index with cultural priorities, the CS-HDI provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of societal progress, moving beyond a purely economic perspective. This adaptation emphasises the need for metrics that resonate with local values and aspirations, ultimately fostering more effective and relevant policy recommendations.



## COMPONENTS OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING HAPPINESS, SENSE OF MEANING, HARMONY, AND SPIRITUALITY

### HAPPINESS

In WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) cultures, happiness is often characterised by a drive toward maximising individual happiness. This drive is exemplified by the promotion of personal achievements, positive emotions, and the pursuit of continuous growth. However, this approach can lead to negative consequences, such as excessive consumerism, egoism (a focus on “me” rather than “we”), various addictions, or a lack of a deeper sense of meaning.<sup>7</sup>

### HARMONY

In Asian cultures, such as Japan and China, social and inner harmony hold greater importance than individual happiness. Harmony refers to balance and peace in life and relationships with others. In Confucian contexts, individuals may forgo personal happiness in favour of family or social harmony, as these collective goals are deemed more relevant to their subjective well-being than individual pursuits.<sup>9</sup>

### SENSE OF MEANING

A sense of meaning in life is associated with striving for goals that extend beyond one's own needs, such as serving others through humanitarian actions or civic initiatives, as well as personal and spiritual growth. Our research conducted in affluent countries indicates that as individuals attain a basic level of both happiness and meaning, the prioritisation of meaning increases, while the emphasis on happiness diminishes.

### SPIRITUALITY

For many societies, spirituality plays a key role in well-being, providing a sense of purpose and belonging. Interestingly, wealthier societies often display lower levels of spirituality. In some communities, spirituality is closely tied to religiosity, which is heavily influenced by the cultural upbringing. Countries with higher religiosity tend to prioritise meaning in life, while more secular societies focus more on happiness.<sup>10</sup>

A well-being model that balances happiness with spirituality is often observed in societies with strong traditional values, demonstrating the diverse ways in which well-being can be understood and experienced across different cultures.

**“There is a discernible inclination for individuals to seek the fulfilment of their happiness first before navigating toward meaning.”<sup>8</sup>**

## Well-being Unpacked: It's Not Just About Being Happy

Subjective well-being is a broader concept than just happiness and encompasses various components. Our research shows that life satisfaction—the most commonly used measure of well-being—effectively captures happiness but reflects other dimensions of a good life, such as meaning, harmony, or spirituality, to a lesser extent. This highlights the necessity for more diverse well-being measurement tools that account for these different dimensions<sup>6</sup>. By broadening our understanding and measurement of well-being, we can better address the complexities of human experience and create more effective policies that truly enhance quality of life.



5. Szumowska, E. et al. (under review). The golden mean of happiness.

6. Palikot, E. et al. (under review). Satisfaction with Life as a Measure of Subjective Well-being Components. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CMPX8>

7. Górski, M. (2025). Individual interview.

8. Górski, M. et al. (2024). First happiness, then meaning. A cross-cultural investigation into well-being dilemmas. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2024.2417108>

9. Kryś, K., Kostoula, O. et al. (2024). Happiness Maximization Is a WEIRD Way of Living. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231208367>

10. Palikot, E. et al. (2025). Words of well-being: language reveals differences in the relational nature of five components of subjective well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2025.2461538>

# Is the Pursuit of Ceiling Levels of Happiness Leading Us Astray?

“For some people across the world, pursuing and expressing happiness is associated with negative properties such as shallowness, selfishness, reduced empathy, and lack of morality.”<sup>11</sup>

Dominant in Western thought, equating well-being with individual happiness exerts social pressure on individuals to strive for high levels of happiness. Consequently, contemporary definitions of happiness often emphasise hedonistic aspects, focusing on maximising pleasure and minimising pain.

## Negative Consequences of Idealising Happiness

Our research identifies correlations between the idealisation of high levels of happiness and potential negative consequences, such as:



**Excessive Consumption:**  
There is a notable link between the pressure to appear happy and the increased consumption of alcohol and drug abuse.<sup>12</sup> While the causal relationship remains unclear, it appears that in societies with strong expectations of happiness, individuals may resort to psychoactive substances as a quick escape from negative emotions, attempting to conform to these social expectations. This approach can lead to detrimental long-term consequences.



**Feelings of Inadequacy:**  
In contexts where achieving high levels of life satisfaction is emphasised, many individuals may feel they are failing to meet societal expectations. This perceived shortfall can enhance feelings of disappointment and failure, especially when one believes their quality of life is inferior to that of others.  
Additionally, “In a context where people tend to espouse the attainment of high levels of life satisfaction, many people may feel they are failing to live up to societal expectations in terms of living a good life. Feeling that one’s quality of life is below those of others around them may enhance feelings of disappointment and failure.”<sup>13</sup>

**In conclusion**, the pursuit of ceiling levels of happiness may lead us astray, fostering a cycle of superficiality and dissatisfaction. It is essential to reconsider how we define and value happiness, recognising the importance of deeper, more meaningful aspects of well-being that extend beyond mere pleasure. A more holistic approach that balances happiness with other dimensions of well-being could lead to healthier societal norms and individual fulfilment.

11. Joshanloo, M., Weijers, D. (2014). Aversion to happiness across cultures: A review of where and why people are averse to happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, 15(3), 717–735. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-013-9489-9>  
12. Krys, K., Kostoula, O. et al. (2024). Happiness Maximization Is a WEIRD Way of Living. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231208367>  
13. Haas, B. W. et al. (under review). Cultural-level aspirational life satisfaction strengthens the association between actual life satisfaction and negative emotional experience.

# Discover Our Work: How We Study Preferences in Well-being

With a research interest in the intertwining of happiness and meaning, we conducted studies to explore this relationship. In one of our studies, participants answered four similar questions requiring them to choose between happiness and meaning, with each question varying in levels of both values.

## A question asked in the study: Which type of life would you prefer to live?



### PARTICIPANTS WERE PRESENTED WITH DILEMMAS LIKE THE FOLLOWING:

- Extremely meaningless but moderately happy vs extremely unhappy but moderately meaningful
- Extremely happy and moderately meaningful vs extremely meaningful and moderately happy
- Extremely meaningless and moderately unhappy vs extremely unhappy and moderately meaningless
- Extremely happy but moderately meaningless vs extremely meaningful but moderately unhappy

The most important conclusion from the study was that in the second dilemma, where both happiness and meaning were satisfied to a basic level, more people chose meaning. This indicates that when people feel a sufficient level of happiness and do not experience a lack of meaning, they are more inclined to prioritise meaning over happiness.

The results suggest that well-being priorities depend on whether the basic levels of different components of well-being are met. Thus, we conclude that “subjective well-being is more than just happiness.”<sup>14</sup> This insight reinforces the need for a broader understanding of well-being that incorporates various dimensions beyond mere happiness.

## Summary of the study



- **Prioritisation of Happiness:**  
Most people in affluent countries prioritise happiness over meaning.
- **Variable Priorities:**  
These priorities vary based on the current levels of happiness and meaning.
- **Shift in Preference:**  
When both happiness and meaning are satisfied to a certain level, individuals are more likely to prioritise meaning over happiness.
- **Research Gap:**  
There is still a lack of research on well-being priorities in less affluent and more religious countries.

14. Krys, K., Buźniak, A. et al. (under review). The psychological cost of economic prosperity?

## How Do Social Ties Shape Well-being?

What matters more: family happiness or personal happiness? The answer is not solely personal; it's deeply cultural. Our research shows that how individuals prioritise happiness depends on relational mobility, which refers to the freedom to form and change social connections.

**“Relational mobility is a cultural construct that differentiates societies on how fluid and open interpersonal relationships are.” Relational mobility is defined as “a socio-ecological variable that represents how much freedom and opportunity a society affords individuals to choose and dispose of interpersonal relationships based on personal preference.”<sup>15</sup>**

### Cultural Variations



#### Low Relational Mobility:

In societies like those in Confucian Asia, relational mobility is low. Relationships are stable, take time to build, and require effort to maintain. In these cultures, family happiness carries more weight, as strong, lasting ties shape well-being.



#### High Relational Mobility:

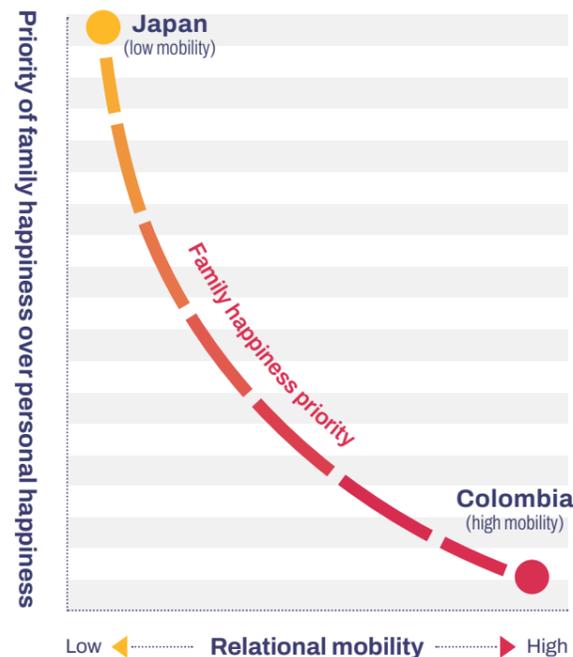
In contrast, cultures with high relational mobility, such as those in Latin America, allow for easier formation and replacement of relationships. Here, the gap between valuing family happiness and personal happiness diminishes due to looser social ties.

### Insights Beyond Individualism vs. Collectivism

Interestingly, this pattern does not strictly adhere to the traditional individualism vs. collectivism divide. Data shows that relational mobility better explains the differences in happiness priorities than the conventional East-West mindset. Across cultures, the tendency to prioritise family happiness remains consistent; it is merely a matter of degree depending on relational mobility.

Take Japan and Colombia as examples. Japan, with its low relational mobility, demonstrates a strong preference for family happiness. In contrast, in Colombia, where relationships are more fluid, the preference for family happiness over personal happiness is much smaller.

Ultimately, who we are depends on how we connect. The way societies structure relationships subtly shapes what we value most: our own happiness or the happiness we share with others.



15. Thomson, R. et al. (2018). Relational mobility predicts social behaviors in 39 countries and is tied to historical farming and threat. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(29), 7521–7526. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1713191115>



## Emotions Outward: Culture and the Unspoken Language of Feelings

Emotional expression varies widely across cultures, shaping the “emotional environment of society.”<sup>16</sup> Let’s look at this through the contrast between Confucian Asia and Latin America.

In Latin America, people openly share their emotions—both joy and frustration—making feelings a visible part of daily interactions. In contrast, in Confucian Asia, emotional restraint is the norm, and people often suppress outward displays of emotion. But what impact does this have on well-being?

Our research suggests that frequent expression of negative emotions may weaken the connection between happiness and meaning. In cultures where negative emotions are visibly expressed, it can be more challenging to achieve a sense of fulfilling life. Focusing on one’s happiness while detaching from the problems of others can diminish the sense of meaning.

Emotional expression is more than just a personal habit; it reflects deeper cultural patterns that shape how individuals define and pursue a fulfilling life. Understanding these dynamics may help explain why well-being looks different across the world.

16. Krys, K. (2025). Individual interview.

## Embracing Civickness for the Common Good

What drives us to act for the greater good, even at the expense of personal or group interests? We propose the Theory of Civickness as a new framework — an alternative to the traditional individualism-collectivism paradigm in the psychology of societal development.

**“In our theory, we conceptualise civickness as a way of being in which an individual, when faced with an objective dilemma, prioritises the well-being of a larger communal unit over that of a smaller, more immediate one. Civickness reflects a psychological orientation toward the greater common good, emphasising pro-social behaviours rooted in responsibility, duty, and concern for others.”<sup>17</sup>**



The theory of civickness suggests that different cultures may possess unique forms of “social glue.” It extends research on psychological foundations and examines various levels of analysis, from individuals to global societies.

This theory challenges the assumption that individualism is a universal model of development. Instead, it argues that different forms of civickness play distinct roles in societal progress. By recognising cultural diversity, it emphasises responsibility to the larger community, moving beyond the traditional individualism-collectivism framework.

A well-understood communitarianism is not contradictory to progressivism. Communal values such as self-discipline, honouring parents and elders, and politeness — while relating to the individual — have positive consequences for the entire community. The concept of civickness supports this idea; prioritising the good of the larger social group over the interests of a narrower one embodies as well-understood communitarianism and can be seen as a progressive way of organising society.

17. Kryś, K. et al. (under review). Expanding the psychological software for societal development: Going past individualism towards civickness.

## Can “Open Societies” Be the Glue That Holds Us Together?

What does it mean to thrive as a society? The concept of the “open society” shifts the focus from individual rights alone to building stronger, more connected communities based on trust, civic engagement, and tolerance.

One interpretation of individualism links it to societies that promote trust, freedom, civic engagement, equality, and tolerance. However, our research suggests that these qualities—collectively referred to as the ‘open society’—primarily benefit those who are trusted, accepted, and included, rather than those who extend trust and tolerance. In this context, an open society may be better understood as a form of large-group collectivism rather than individualism. In a separate study, we found that ‘ordinary people’ tend to perceive the open society syndrome as more collectivist than individualistic.

Interestingly, the open society is a strong predictor of various societal development indicators, including GDP per capita, HDI, technological progress, and democracy. Thus, the open society stance benefits the entire community rather than directly and significantly increasing individual satisfaction. Societies that embrace open society attitudes tend to exhibit greater happiness than those that do not.

Open society functions as a social glue, integrating individuals from diverse yet connected groups into a larger social structure. It should also be viewed through the lens of cultural conditions and varying approaches to societal development across different regions.

Our research indicates that people are increasingly wary of societal development that overlooks social dimensions such as longevity, health, trust, and the building of social bonds. When these elements are neglected, fears of a dystopian future arise — one where technological and economic progress occurs alongside a fraying social fabric and the erosion of trust.<sup>18</sup>

18. Olechowski, M., (2025). Individual interview.

If, as our findings suggest, that a sense of meaning is more deeply rooted in community than individual happiness, and if societal development aims to enhance overall societal well-being, then fostering communal modes of being, such as the open society, civickness, and communitarianism, should become a central goal of development efforts.



## Adapting to Paradigm Shift

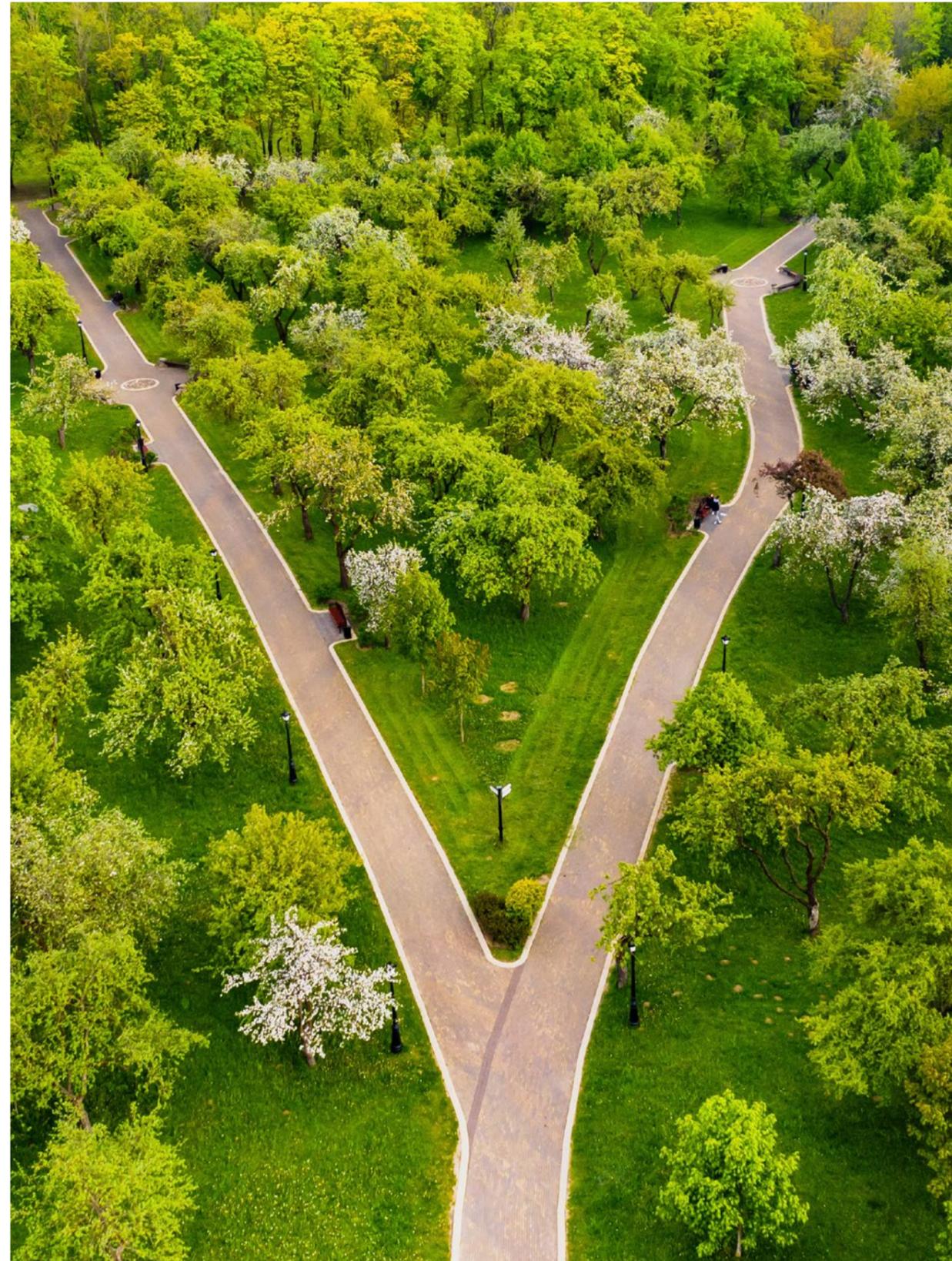
A paradigm shift may be necessary to progress towards culturally sensitive frameworks. We must ask ourselves: Are we truly understanding the world in its full complexity, or are we limiting our perspective by relying solely on our own cultural context? To broaden our understanding, we should recognise the value of alternative approaches that reveal aspects of human experience often overlooked by a single cultural tradition. How often do we critically examine our assumptions in light of other cultural perspectives?

Addressing the multidimensionality of well-being requires a more nuanced approach that balances cultural dynamics with individuals' psychological needs. How can we meet these needs sustainably?

In public policy, we need to move away from universal solutions and tailor approaches to local contexts. Why impose universal policies when local insights can lead to more effective strategies? Societies should have the opportunity to define the "good life" based on their own values and traditions. By embracing this paradigm shift, we can foster a more inclusive and effective framework for understanding and promoting well-being across diverse cultural landscapes.

**"Policymakers cannot rely solely on lay expectations; they must guide our societies according to the mechanisms of actual societal development processes. However, societal expectations can become one of the key pieces of information necessary for sound decision-making in guiding policy. Laypeople, or non-experts, play a critical role in development processes because development is ultimately about improving the lives and living conditions of the general public. What laypeople expect from development could and should be taken into account in policy-making. Understanding how lay people conceptualise development can help policymakers and researchers guide societies in a more tailored, indigenously defined, and effective way."**<sup>19</sup>

*Mateusz Olechowski,  
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DEVELOPMENT  
THROUGH  
CONQUEST AND  
DOMINATION

### MILITARY EXPANSIONS

For times before World War II

- Military power as the primary growth mechanism
- Centralised decision-making and hierarchical rule

#### Consequences:

Short-term expansion at the cost of conflict and instability



GROWTH DRIVEN  
BY ECONOMIC  
EXPANSION

### ECONOMISATION

From the 18th century,  
rising since World War II

- Focus on fulfilling basic human needs
- Market economy as the primary societal regulator

#### Consequences:

Increased prosperity but also inequality and environmental degradation



DEVELOPMENT  
THAT INTEGRATES  
CULTURE AND  
SOCIAL DIVERSITY

### CULTURALLY SENSITIVE PARADIGM?

21 st century - future

- Holistic approach combining economy, culture, and ecology
- Adaptation of solutions to local needs and values

#### Consequences:

Sustainable development and stronger social cohesion

Brief and Simplified History of Societal Development Paradigms  
(Source: supplementary online material to Kryszewski, Uchida, & Dominguez-Espinosa, 2019)

19. Olechowski, M., (2025). Individual interview.

# 3

## Charting a New Course: Culturally Sensitive Policies

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research is not just about theories; it is a blueprint for action. But how can we turn findings into real change? The insights shared here can shape effective strategies for governments, public institutions, and social organisations. They have the potential to address social challenges and improve lives. Understanding that each community has unique histories, cultures, and needs is crucial. When decision-makers recognise this, their actions can truly connect with the people they aim to support. Here are our recommendations based on our research, aimed at fostering lasting change.

## Keep an Open Mind

### Look Beyond Universals

Policymakers should actively explore the diverse needs and expectations of different social groups. Our research shows that visions of an ideal society vary widely across cultures and individuals. Moving away from one-size-fits-all solutions and tailoring policies to the local contexts can enhance their effectiveness. Also, priorities regarding well-being may differ by region, encompassing not just happiness but also the significance of social and family relationships and the basic psychological needs, such as security and justice.

### Add More Instruments to Our Social Development Cockpit

Currently, too much emphasis is placed on economic indicators such as GDP to measure societal progress. This “top-down” approach often overlooks the voices of the community. As one expert noted, “Those guiding our economy and society are like pilots steering without a reliable compass. Our decisions depend on what we measure, and poor metrics can leave us almost blind.”<sup>20</sup>

To improve this, we shall include more “gauge” in our assessment of societal development by actively seeking input from individuals about their expectations, needs, and ideals. This will provide a more comprehensive view of progress, complementing traditional economic metrics without discarding them.

Paradigm shift may be necessary to progress towards culturally sensitive frameworks. We must ask ourselves: Are we truly understanding the world in its full complexity, or are we limiting our perspective by relying solely on our own cultural context? To broaden our understanding, we should recognise the value of alternative approaches that reveal aspects of human experience often overlooked by a single cultural tradition. How often do we critically examine our assumptions in light of other cultural perspectives?

Addressing the multidimensionality of well-being requires a more nuanced approach that balances cultural dynamics with individuals’ psychological needs. How can we meet these needs sustainably?



## Explore Cultures, Trust Science

### Learn from Different Cultures and Traditions

Incorporating knowledge from various cultures can lead to more holistic approaches to well-being. It is important to understand how different societies define well-being and which factors they consider essential. For instance, the emphasis on family and community bonds is often stronger in many cultures than in Western contexts. Highlighting family well-being could be beneficial across all types of families. In short, local knowledge is vital — policymakers should observe and understand their communities to craft relevant solutions.

### Let Science Guide You

Decisions should be grounded in reliable scientific research from fields like economics, psychology, and sociology. Creating platforms for dialogue between researchers, practitioners, and community representatives is crucial for sharing knowledge and experiences. This collaboration can lead to more innovative and effective policies tailored to complex social challenges.

Cross-cultural research is needed to uncover noteworthy cultural nuances in well-being.

**“Despite calls for broader representation in psychology, many cultures remain under-represented. More studies involving diverse populations can help address this gap.”<sup>21</sup>**

## Value Community Perspectives

### Consult the People

Public policy should systematically gather data on community expectations regarding development and quality of life. Large-scale surveys and local polls can help identify different social groups’ priorities, such as happiness, meaning, and community values. Policy-making should adapt based on social feedback, ensuring alignment with evolving community needs.

Regular consultations throughout program development and implementation are essential. Rather than imposing solutions, testing programs and gathering feedback allow for necessary adjustments. Directly asking about community expectations for key to understanding their views.

### Empower Local Expertise

The process of creating public policies should engage the community meaningfully; involving local leaders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and experts familiar with specific contexts can significantly improve policy effectiveness. Mechanisms for social consultation at various stages of the decision-making process are essential to reflect the actual needs and priorities of residents. Addressing community concerns can build trust and a sense of shared responsibility for implemented changes.

20. Stiglitz, J. E. et al. (2009). Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/8131721/8131772/Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Commission-report.pdf>.

21. Krys, K., de Almeida, I. et al. (2024). WEIRD–Confucian Comparisons: Ongoing Cultural Biases in Psychology’s Evidence Base and Some Recommendations for Improving Global Representation. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0001298>

# Promote Social Cohesion and Intergroup Harmony

## Strengthen Social Fabric

Belonging to a local community enhances an individual's sense of security and well-being. However, excessive insularity within groups can foster prejudices and hinder social cohesion. To counter this, it is essential to implement actions that strengthen intergroup ties, such as integration programs, intercultural education, and initiatives that promote cooperation and dialogue among diverse communities. These policies can help to prevent societal fragmentation and create more integrated, open, and cohesive communities.

Addressing social inequalities is crucial in this context. In societies marked by significant inequality, individuals may feel compelled to rely solely on themselves, leading to a reduced willingness to cooperate and support each other.<sup>22</sup> To combat this, programs that bolster social capital and promote solidarity mechanisms, alongside local initiatives, should be prioritised.

Creating spaces for meetings, organising social events, and supporting non-governmental organisations can enhance social capital and a sense of belonging.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, public policies should actively support initiatives that strengthen interpersonal relationships.

## Bridge Cultural Divides

Integration policies should focus on building trust in public institutions and ensuring that governance systems are effective and fair for all residents, regardless of their background. While group prejudices and xenophobic attitudes are deeply ingrained in human nature, they can be exacerbated by misinformation. It is important to prioritise psychosocial well-being, individual identity, and a sense of security, as individuals who feel secure are more likely to embrace diversity.

**As noted, “Individuals who feel secure in their society and have confidence in their own identity are more likely to accept people different from themselves. Therefore, in the debate on xenophobia, governments and policymakers should pay more attention to psychosocial and subjective well-being, individual identities, and the sense of security. Global research on xenophobia should also give more weight to psychological factors at the macro level instead of focusing solely on social and economic aspects.”<sup>24</sup>**



Recognising the importance of communal mindsets, such as civicness, communitarianism, and an open society, can significantly strengthen social bonds. Societies with high levels of civic engagement are more likely to cooperate, solve problems, and pursue the common good. Preliminary research shows that certain forms of civicness correlate positively with various indicators of societal development, including GDP per capita, HDI, technological advancement, democracy, and overall happiness.

Our research demonstrates that effective governing institutions and security are key factors in well-being. “Perceiving the social system as well-functioning promotes a sense of happiness, especially when it is based on effective institutions such as governments, elections, justice systems, banks, the military, and the police. Trust in these institutions makes people feel protected and supported, which promotes their overall well-being. Similar to the factor of satisfying basic needs, the factor of ‘effective governing institutions’ works mainly through an individual pathway - it increases the happiness of people who perceive the social system as efficient and trustworthy.”<sup>25</sup>



22. Sánchez-Rodríguez, Á. et al. (2023). Unpackaging the link between economic inequality and self-construal. *Self and Identity*, 22(4), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2023.2200032>

23. Górski, M. (2025). Individual interview.

24. Joshanloo, M. (2024). A global index of anti-immigrant xenophobia: Associations with cultural dimensions, national well-being, and economic indicators in 151 nations. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 12(2), 494-503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2022.2097097>

25. Palikot, E. et al. (under review). Global mapping of happiness.



## Enable Self-determination and Well-being

### Support Communities' Right to Chart Their Own Course

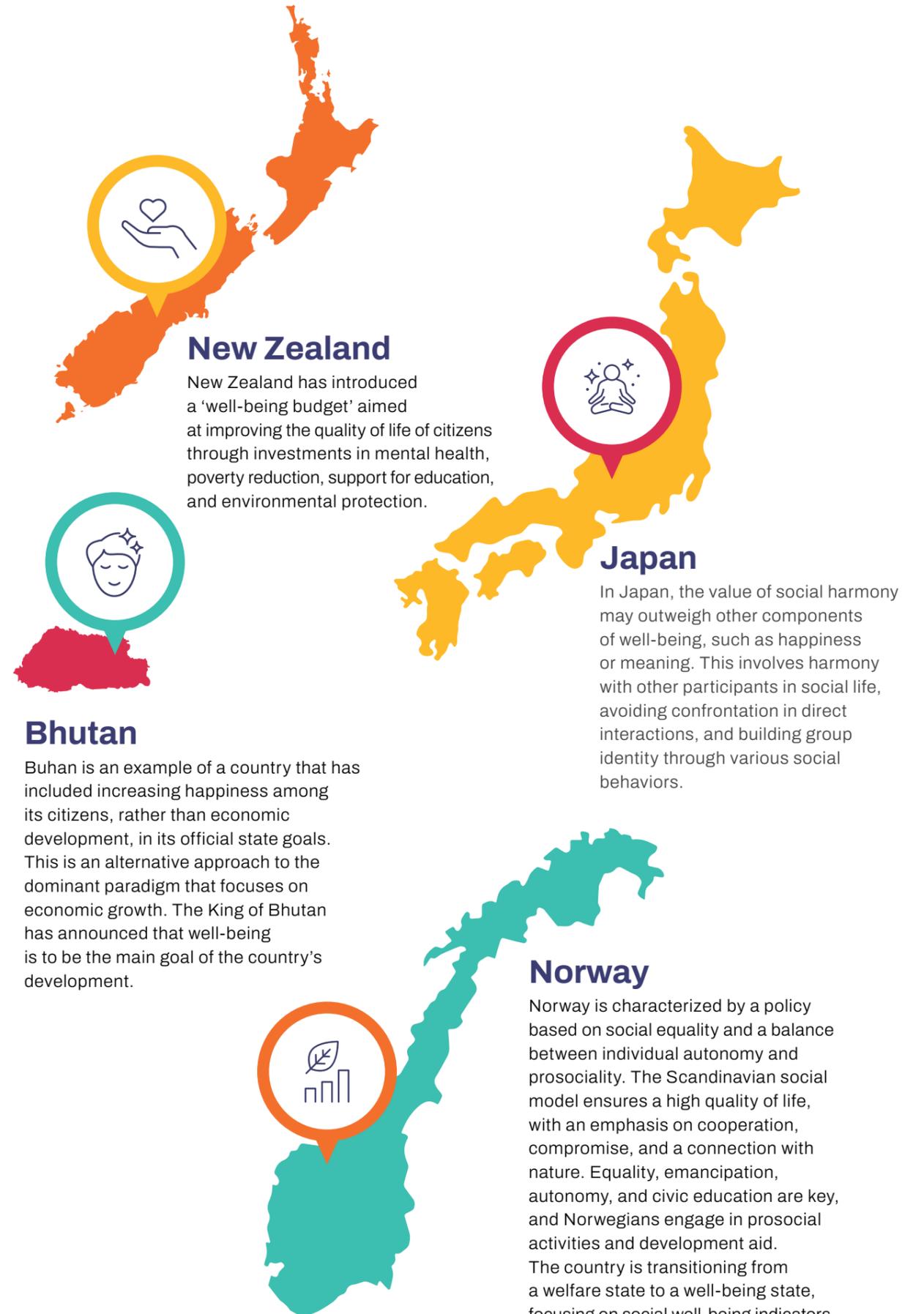
The socio-political context that empowers individuals to express themselves and pursue their aspirations is crucial for fostering well-being. It is worth striving to eliminate barriers that restrict the freedom of choice and self-determination, especially for marginalised groups. Supporting individual choices and self-determination fosters a society where citizens feel empowered and can shape their lives according to their aspirations. This requires promoting social attitudes that embrace diverse lifestyles and uphold the rights of minorities. Policies should strive for a balance between the common good and individual freedom, allowing people to make informed decisions about their lives.<sup>26</sup> In various cultures, creating an environment that encourages individual freedom not only increases citizens' well-being but also strengthens societal cohesion and openness.

Our research highlights autonomy<sup>27</sup> as a fundamental psychological need that is crucial for healthy functioning. Enabling individuals to determine which needs they wish to fulfil and how to do so, while ensuring they feel capable of changing their circumstances, is essential for their overall well-being.

### Secure Need Balance

The approach described above involves fostering environments that support the balanced satisfaction of basic psychological needs — relatedness, competence, and autonomy — rather than prioritising one at the expense of others. Achieving this balance is crucial for the well-being of both individuals and society.

Public policies should also encourage a healthy balance between professional and personal life. Employers and policymakers must recognise the benefits of maintaining this balance, which not only improves employee well-being but also prevents burnout. Raising awareness about the importance of work-life balance and implementing supportive programs are essential steps toward improving employees' quality of life and overall economic efficiency.



26. Palikot, E. et al. (under review). Global mapping of happiness.

27. Joshanloo, M., Weijers, D. (2024). Ideal personhood through the ages: Tracing the genealogy of the modern concepts of well-being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, Article 1494506. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1494506>

# 4

## Closing Remarks: Navigating the Future

The 2008 economic crisis highlighted the limitations of public policies that rely solely on economic indicators, sparking renewed interest in more comprehensive strategies for societal development.<sup>28</sup>

Public policies should strive to be culturally sensitive, taking into account the unique needs of each community. Are we truly listening to the diverse voices around us, or are we focused on a narrow, uniform perspective? Acknowledging differences is not enough; we must actively embrace them by creating platforms for dialogue, fostering intercultural initiatives, and promoting mutual respect. Communities flourish when trust and social cohesion are prioritised, guiding them toward sustainable development.

Pursuing simplicity through homogenisation risks undermining the richness of local realities. The key to supporting societal well-being lies in finding a balance—strategies must be tailored to the specific needs of each community.

Our research on well-being emphasises the importance of a nuanced approach. It calls for examining the concept of a “good life” through the lens of cultural sensitivity, considering the distinct histories, values, and aspirations of each culture. After all, how can we improve the quality of life without fully understanding the complexities of different societies?

Policy-making must be adaptable and responsive to the uncertainties and intricacies of our world. Can we progress without considering these factors? By embracing this challenge and continuing our research, we can refine and adapt strategies over time. Policies should evolve, rooted in scientific evidence yet flexible enough to accommodate change. Science can guide the development of policies that reflect the diverse aspirations of society.

28. Palikot, E. et al. (under review). Global mapping of happiness.

# Behind the Report

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## Editorial Note

The content and structure of this report were developed by experts external to the research project—Ada Szostak and Maciej Głogowski—based on a series of interviews conducted with the core research teams and selected subject-matter experts. The aim of the report was to reflect on the research from an outsider’s perspective and to present the findings in a way that engages and informs a broad intellectual audience, particularly policymakers and government officials around the world.

The recommendations and interpretations presented in the report were formulated by Ada Szostak and Maciej Głogowski in close collaboration with the core research teams and selected subject-matter experts. Other contributors to the project—especially the leaders of local research teams within the consortium, as well as the institutions that endorsed and supported the process (see logos below)—did not influence the report’s content.

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The Norway Grants and the EEA Grants represent Norway’s contribution towards a green, competitive and inclusive Europe. Through the Norway Grants and the EEA Grants, Norway contributes to reducing social and economic disparities and to strengthening bilateral relations with beneficiary countries in Central and Southern Europe and the Baltics. Norway cooperates closely with the EU through the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA). Together with the other donors, Norway has provided €3.3 billion through consecutive grant schemes between 1994 and 2014. Norway Grants are financed solely by Norway and are available in the countries that joined the EU after 2003. For the period 2014-2021, the Norway

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