

## INTERNATIONAL INDICES MEASURING QUALITY OF LIFE

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**Abstract.** *Monitoring the quality of life by means of appropriate performance indices in order to conclude on the need to implement policies aimed at a real improvement of the quality of life of the individual are the objectives of the present study. Analysis of the nature of the means that can provide adequate information on the reality in question is essential for establishing the right policies to optimise the quality of life. From what can be seen from the data analysis, it is important to link statistics that take a quantitative and general approach with statistics that take a qualitative and particular approach.*

**Keywords:** *Quality of life, measurement indices, well-being, happiness, health, social integration*

This study aims to highlight some important international benchmarks that monitor quality of life. In this respect, the World Health Organisation's indexes and those of the European Union, which over time have acquired international prestige, are particularly relevant. As can be seen from the analysis of the official data, it is essential to link the indicators that reflect the quantitative dimension of quality of life at macro level with the quantitative dimension at micro level in order to implement policies that will bring about a real improvement in the quality of life of individuals, and this is the aim of this study. Thus, statistical data obtained from a barometer of quantitative economic measurement, such as the Gross Domestic Product, in conjunction with data obtained from an indicator such as that provided by the measurement of Gross National Happiness, can articulately highlight the strengths and weaknesses of social structures both in time and space. These linkages can have a real beneficial impact on improving the quality of life of individuals, highlighting the importance of issues such as environmental conservation or the promotion of local culture in relation to productivity and economic efficiency. The importance of linking the two dimensions is particularly important in a context where pollution, inequality of opportunity, poverty and overpopulation in some urban areas are still very topical issues for the 'global village'.

The concept of quality of life has led from the outset to areas that are difficult to quantify. Even the quality of objects such as a shoe, a bag or a car is difficult to quantify, as the perception of quality is essentially subjective. This does not mean, however, that a generous concept such as quality of life was intended to remain purely theoretical. To this end, sociologists, economists and statisticians have joined forces and combined their skills to operationalise the concept of quality of life. This operationalisation is an ongoing process and subject to refinement (Filipescu, 2018, p. 21).

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Today, quality of life is measured on the basis of quantifiable data, and the most accurate model for reflecting reality is the statistical index. A term that the social sciences have borrowed from mathematics, the index or index is the objective value to which we relate quality of life. The socio-economic phenomena studied by statisticians often consist of many elements, whose weight or influence is asymmetrical, and must therefore be weighted in the mathematical model by which it is calculated.

The index method is one of the most frequently used methods of statistical analysis of socio-economic phenomena, especially since the increase in computing power through computers has facilitated the use of mathematical algorithms. Using specific indices, it is possible to study, for example, a national economy as a whole, as well as specific sectors of it, and individual activities of groups, associations, firms, companies, farms, etc. The index reveals the dynamics of the development of socio-economic phenomena, analyzes the implementation of plans or norms, determines the influence of individual factors on the overall result, reveals production reserves, makes territorial and international comparisons of relevant socio-economic indicators (Filipescu, 2018, p. 24).

A statistical index is a relative indicator that defines the ratio in a given unit of time compared to the plane or space of other socio-economic phenomena. By virtue of the fact that the index is a relative indicator, it is invariably obtained by the ratio of two or more quantities, which may be fixed or variable. In the particular situation where the level of the phenomenon for a period of time in the past is taken as the basis of comparison, dynamic (as opposed to static) indices are obtained. Similarly, in the situation where the level of comparison is based on the level of the phenomenon in a particular space or territory, territorial (as opposed to general) indices referring to a particular area are obtained (Neamțu, 2016, p. 103).

### **1. World Health Organisation Index**

The Quality of Life Index (QLI) is designed to assess the extent to which a country is able to provide its people with optimal conditions for a healthy, safe and prosperous life over a medium time horizon. The QLI is based on a method that combines subjective life satisfaction survey data with objective determinants of the quality of life in a country, combined with an element of perspective (WHO, 2018, [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)).

The main determinants of quality of life that make up the QLI are the following:

a) Mental (emotional) well-being. It is illustrated by sub-indicators such as happiness, self-satisfaction, sense of personal identity, avoidance of excessive stress, self-esteem, richness of spiritual life, sense of security.

b) Interpersonal relationships. These are represented by sub-indicators that make a person enjoy intimacy, affection, cultivate friendships, social contacts, social support.

c) Material well-being. It is measured by sub-indicators from the register of property ownership (movable/furnishable), job security, level of earnings, or quality food.

d) Physical well-being. This is expressed in terms of health, physical mobility, availability of leisure time, access to quality health care, health insurance, preferred

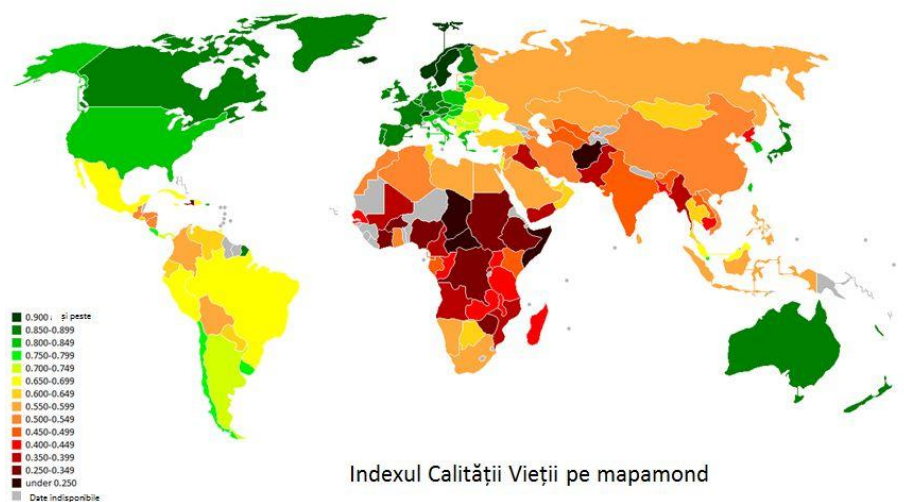
leisure activities (hobbies). In the English-language literature, optimal fitness is defined by the four 'S's: strength; stamina; suppleness; skills.

e) Independence. It is assimilated to autonomy in life, the possibility to make personal choices, the ability to make decisions, personal self-control, the presence of clearly defined values and goals, self-determination in life.

f) Social integration. Indicates presence of social status and role, acceptance in different social groups, accessibility of social support, stimulating work climate, participation in community activities, activity in civic or political organizations, membership in a spiritual or religious community.

g) Fundamental human rights. Although agreed by all countries around the world, the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to dispose of one's own body, access to education and culture, and the right to a fair and speedy trial are unequally distributed around the world.

h) Empowerment. Refers to professional competence, promotion to higher positions according to ability, participation in intellectual activities, professional skills or abilities, professional fulfilment, institutional or informal training appropriate to the profession (who.int).



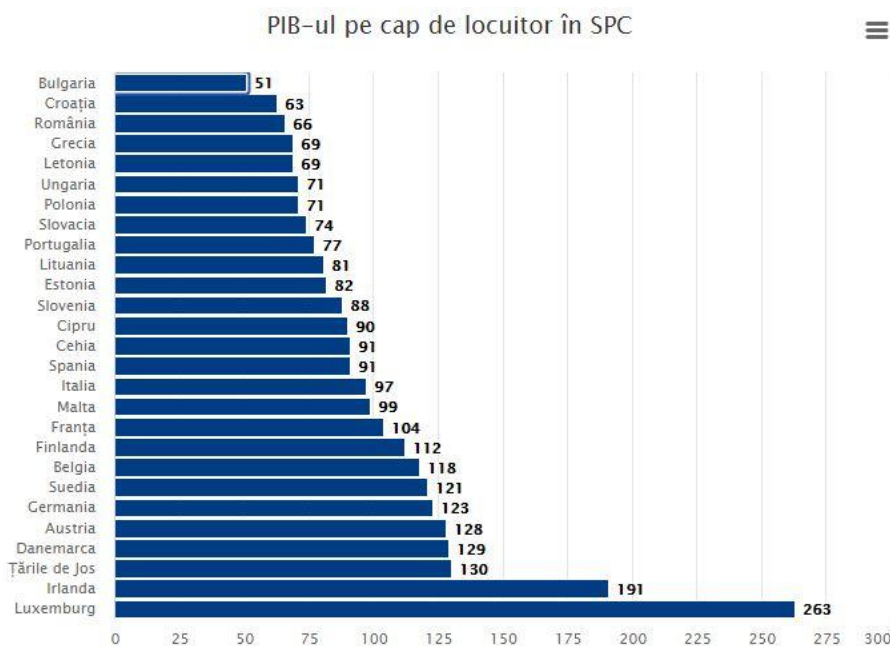
**Fig. 1** - Distribution of quality of life in the world, according to the World Health Organization  
*Source:* WHO, 2018, who.int

The main merit of this approach is to take a global view of quality of life and avoid focusing exclusively on local approaches relating to the industrialised world or developing countries. Based on the criteria listed above, the WHO calculates a global index, relating each country to the same standards. Although a comparison of quality between rich countries such as Norway or Australia and poor ones such as Sudan or Haiti may seem irrelevant, each country's score on different indicators and sub-indicators is useful for highlighting weaknesses and tracking their dynamics over time. It also gives developing countries a model to follow in terms of growth on different social, economic and environmental dimensions (WHO, 2018, who.int).

The annual publication of the world ranking has also drawn some criticism from the WHO. Those questioning the relevance of the figures argue that some top-ranked countries advertise themselves internationally on the basis of the QLI, attracting foreign investment and highly skilled labour. At the same time, countries at the bottom are doomed to remain permanently behind, with negative publicity discouraging investment and development prospects.

## 2. Purchasing Power Standard (PPS)

In 2009, the European Union published the report *Beyond GDP*, which recognised that measuring progress in a rapidly changing world created the need to develop indicators that would complement Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as comprehensively as possible. These new indicators were intended to reflect the current political and technological context, with the potential to measure progress in both environmental conservation and social inclusion. The report also pointed out that the use of economic indicators as the only way to measure progress was rather rejected by citizens, who perceived a discrepancy between reports of GDP growth and concomitant stagnation in income or levels of social services.



**Fig. 2.** EU-28 situation from a Purchasing Power Standard (PPS) perspective in 2017

*Source:* Eurostat, 2018, europa.eu

Among the statistical measurements regularly carried out by the European Union institutions is that of purchasing power, often associated with quality of life. From an EU perspective, standards of living in the Member States can be compared by relating the price of a package of goods and services to the income in each country. As prices, but also incomes, in each Member State differ, statisticians have created the virtual model of a common 'currency', which they have called the Purchasing Power

Standard (PPS). By comparing GDP per capita expressed in PPS, an overview of living standards in the European Union can be obtained, as shown in Fig. 2. EU-28 situation from a Purchasing Power Standard (PPS) perspective in 2017.

The ongoing measurement of CPS is important in view of the European Union's efforts to improve the living standards of its citizens, protecting the environment, encouraging sustainable job creation, reducing regional disparities and connecting isolated communities through the development of cross-border infrastructure.

### **3. European "8+1" index**

The European Union has defined its own set of criteria and indicators against which it measures quality of life in Member States and makes comparisons with countries outside the EU. In 2017, the European Statistical Institute Eurostat published a comprehensive report on the methodological background of the "8+1" quality of life assessment system.

According to the report by experts in various fields, quality of life is a broad concept that includes a number of dimensions. The term 'dimensions' should be understood as those elements or factors that make up a complete entity, which can be measured by a set of sub-dimensions, with an associated number of indices for each. Quality of life includes both objective factors (e.g. material resources at one's disposal, health, occupational status, living conditions and many others) and the subjective perception that the individual has of each of these factors. From a psychological perspective, this perception subjective is formed according to the needs and priorities of each person. As a result, measuring quality of life for different populations and countries is a highly complex task, for which a scoreboard of indicators covering the most relevant dimensions selected for this purpose has been developed (europa.eu).

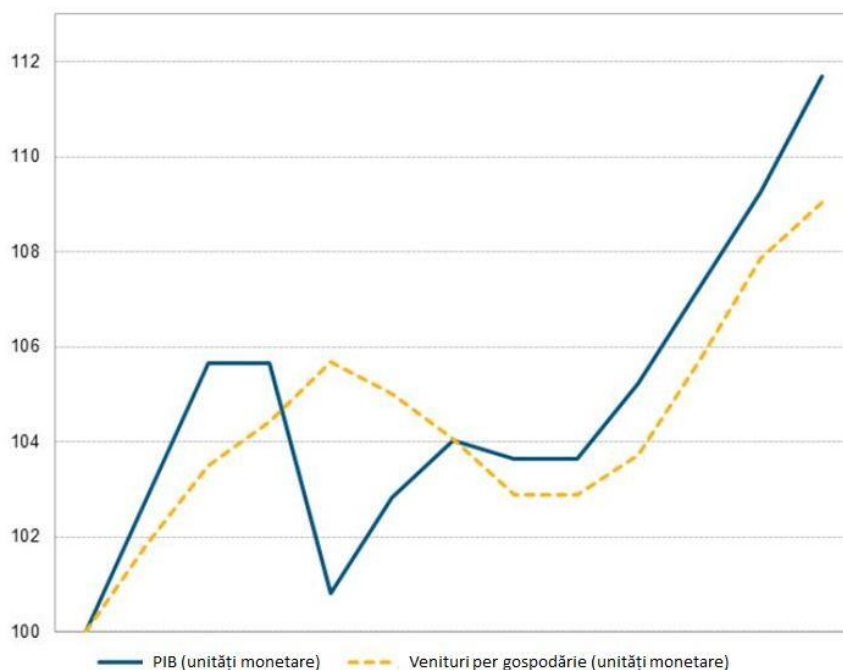
The macroeconomic account statements of individual countries have become a key indicator of economic performance and living standards in today's society. This is because they allow direct comparisons to be made very easily. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is one of the components of national macroeconomic account statements and is the most common way of measuring the economic activity of a region or country at a given point in time. Because economic activity is dependent on conditions such as seasons, the typical unit of time for calculating GDP is a calendar or fiscal year. In the northern hemisphere, the largest contribution to GDP is made in autumn, while the opposite is the case in winter, when certain branches of the economy (agriculture) go into conservation. Some relevant comparisons, for example between own past and current performance, can also be made on quarterly or half-yearly GDP (europa.eu).

The GDP index is used as an international standard benchmark for many public policy decisions. In economic theory, GDP includes all the finished goods and services that an economy produces and provides a snapshot of economic performance. GDP is expressed in monetary units and is a very useful tool for measuring output for sale, i.e. the market. Although it was not originally intended to be an indicator of social progress and was not designed for that purpose, the national GDP index is considered to be closely linked to the well-being of the citizens of the country concerned.

Experts working for the European Union have highlighted a number of reasons why the GDP index itself is not relevant enough to show social progress. As a result, they have weighted its importance by including a number of other complementary

indicators. Building on an earlier report issued in 2009 by a team of researchers at the University of Strasbourg (J. Stiglitz, A. Sen, J.P. Fitoussi apud Filipescu, 2018, p. 86), citizens' living standards can be more adequately monitored using measures of income levels at the household or family level, analysis of consumption and individual citizens' well-being. The report signed by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi recommended the European Commission to use the main conclusion of the research, namely that citizens' incomes are more relevant to measure well-being and its distribution at the societal level than national production (Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi apud. Filipescu, 2018, p. 87).

In many situations, income per household may evolve differently from GDP, which is why the picture of social well-being is also different. As can be seen in the graph below, which looks at the period 2005-2017, the combined GDP of the 28 Member States that were part of the European Union peaked in 2007-08, then plummeted dramatically just one year later, in 2009. The steep decline in GDP reflected the start of the financial crisis ('Great Recession') facing the world economy at that time. However, in the early years of the crisis, it can be seen that the decline was not replicated at the level of disposable income per household, which seemed to be immune to the collapse of stock markets around the world.



**Fig. 3** - Evolution of GDP versus income in the EU28, 2005-2017,

*Source:* Eurostat, 2018, europa.eu

On the contrary, household incomes increased slightly between 2007-09 and started to decline only from the following year, reaching in 2012-13 the lowest point of the period under analysis. One of the reasons for this apparent inconsistency is that social transfers (social security fund benefits, compensation, etc.) absorbed and limited the effects of the financial crisis, at least in the first few years. Since 2014, the trend

has become positive again for both indicators, but it is clear that income per household is lagging behind the increase in Gross Domestic Product. Household incomes therefore remain constantly behind the GDP index, which they will only be able to match if there is another major economic crisis. In the first half of 2020, the pandemic of the new type of coronavirus (COVID-19) has created the conditions for such a crisis with consequences for the global economy and it is expected that the evolution of the ratio between GDP and income per household will experience the same dynamics as during the recession of a decade ago (Zamfir & Zamfir, 2020, p. 31).

Social, economic and environmental progress do not always go hand in hand with GDP growth. For example, if a country decides to commercially exploit all its forests, it will dramatically increase the level of exports of timber and timber products, thereby increasing GDP. If GDP were the only indicator of quality of life, then it would mean that the population of that country had significantly improved its quality of life. However, today it is beyond doubt that deforestation has a strong impact on the quality of life in the medium and long term. Through loss or degradation of natural habitat, soil erosion, landslides and much more, quality of life suffers, for example, from any national programme of unsustainable logging.

It is therefore understandable that GDP measures quantity, but not necessarily other aspects of production, such as the distribution of benefits and the potential impact on the future. If not built on a solid, sustainable foundation, a dramatic jump in GDP can equate to the depletion of wealth resources for decades and generations to come, which would also impact quality of life (Filipescu, 2018, p. 92).

Moreover, GDP is a macroeconomic indicator and cannot give us information about the distribution of wealth among the population. Even in the hypothetical situation where quantity is the only measure of economic performance and quality of life, GDP still does not give us the full picture of living standards. A significant increase in a society's GDP does not automatically translate into better living standards for the majority of its citizens. Only a small part of society, such as the financial and political elite, might benefit from this increase, leaving instead large sections of citizens on the same level of well-being or even worse off than before. As a result, it is clear that general economic measures need to take account of indicators of wealth distribution in order to provide a more accurate picture of realistic on the standard of living and quality of life of citizens (Papalia, Wendkos, Feldman, 2010, p. 91).

### **3.1 Poverty as a social phenomenon**

Although material well-being is not always translated into a high quality of life, it is widely accepted that poverty prevents people from living comfortably. Poverty essentially means a life without the chance to live within a certain minimum standard of living. The minimum standard is relative, differing from country to country, area to area, city to city, culture to culture and so on. The benchmarks for determining the standard that indicates the relative poverty line are insufficient earnings to sustain a daily diet or the need for clothing, heating, transport and other indispensable necessities (Preda, 2007, p. 51).

Sociologists analyse the phenomenon of poverty in relation to the socio-cultural context and state that this context varies in time and space and is distributed within society not only through factors related to the individual, but also through macro-social variables such as race, gender, age, occupational status, educational level and marital status. In terms of the social system's footprint, poverty takes on different

forms: poverty in rich countries is different from poverty in poor countries. Also, in highly statistised countries with an authoritarian administration, social poverty takes on distinct forms, regardless of national wealth. The constant content of poverty, regardless of the system of social and political organization, boils down to two key aspects: inequality and deprivation (Nussbaum, 1993, p. 177).

According to the theory of the American political scientist Michael G. Roskin and his collaborators, it is not easy today to define poverty, nor is there a universally valid yardstick in the world, but it is essentially a relative concept. "What 'poor' means today might have meant 'comfortable' in past eras. Consider how Americans were faring during the Great Depression of the 1930s. A statistician at the Department of Labor created a formula in 1963 that has become standard, though many argue it is no longer the norm. The statistician found that families were spending about a third of their monthly income on food, so a "poverty line" is three times the minimum food budget for families of four not living from farming. Using this formula, the percentage of Americans below the poverty line fell from 17.3 percent in 1963, when President Johnson's administration began the War on Poverty program, to 11.7 percent in 1973. In 2007 it was 12.5 percent, but the poverty rate among black Americans and Hispanics is much higher, and one-sixth of American children are below the poverty line," Roskin noted in 2008 (Roskin et. al., 2011, p. 192).

A valuable contribution to the definition of the social concept of poverty belongs to Cătălin Zamfir, who insists on an aspect concerning the complexity of the phenomenon: "Poverty is not only the lack or insufficiency of income, it is in fact its cause. Poverty is a social-psychological-cultural complex" (Zamfir, 1984, p. 51).

### **3.2 Overpopulation of urban areas**

The trend over the last hundred years of human history in terms of people's living environment has been the process of urbanisation, with people migrating from rural areas to cities. There are various explanations for this phenomenon, starting with economic and social ones, namely that the mechanisation and chemisation of agriculture have made it redundant for large numbers of people to live near farms. The distribution of most villages in a territory indicates nothing other than how human resources have been distributed to farm arable land.

Whereas in the past these inhabitants ensured agricultural production by physical, often manual, labour, today this work is increasingly done by high-performance agricultural machinery. As these technologically advanced machines are more productive and require a comparably smaller (and significantly more skilled) number of workers, a large part of the rural population is forced to migrate. Typically, cities offer well-paid professional opportunities for institutionally trained labour in the education system (Preda, 2007, p. 131).

With short breaks caused by wars, natural disasters or major economic crises, when some city dwellers have relocated to the countryside, the trend of accelerated urbanisation is irreversible. At the forefront have been large cities, which have 'swallowed up' metropolitan areas and sometimes formed conurbations with other cities in their vicinity, making the distance between them disappear through organic expansion of the inhabited area. This is how giant cities (megapolises) have emerged, concentrating tens of millions of inhabitants and becoming the most densely populated regions of the planet (Rebedeu & Zamfir, 1982, p. 149).



Increasing population density, pollution-generating human activity and the transformation of the natural environment by maximising the physical space in these large cities have contributed to the degradation of the quality of life of the inhabitants. Moreover, some of these urban agglomerations are surrounded by poor and unhealthy suburbs or slums (known as favelas in the Hispanic world) occupied by those who work in the city but do not earn enough money to afford housing within the administrative limits of the city (Ibid, p. 153).

#### **4. Social Progress Index (SPI)**

In 2016, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG Regio) designed the Social Progress Index (SPI) to help each country's regions explore their strengths as well as their weaknesses. The results can serve as a basis for comparison with other European regions with similar economic and social performance. The index has been designed from the outset to measure social progress for 272 European regions, complementing traditional tools for measuring economic progress based on GDP, income and employment (europa.eu).

DG Regio's Social Progress Index looks at three broad dimensions (europa.eu):

- 1) essential human needs;
- 2) basic well-being;
- 3) opportunities.

Each of the above three dimensions is broken down into four thematic components. This results in 12 sub-components which vary in a number of ways, both within and between EU Member States. The components cover topics of interest such as the level of access of citizens to health services, the quality of housing, affordability, personal security, access to higher education and environmental conservation. Each component also has one or more indicators that operationalise the GPI concept.

The architects of this DG Regio project envisaged that measuring social progress can provide insights into the development strategies of EU regions. Basically, the GPI presents absolute performance on a scale from 0 to 100 for each of the 50 indicators included in the basis for calculating the index components. The overall figures show that the GPI is lowest in the former communist countries in the east of the continent and highest in the northern and western regions. The results also revealed some apparent anomalies, for example in Spain and France, which score high, even though some regions scored significantly lower than the rest of the country. Italy and Greece are in line with the European average, but some of their regions score particularly low, at the level of Eastern European countries (europa.eu).

A number of interesting parallels and conclusions can also be drawn from comparing the GPI with other social and economic indicators. For example, the comparison of GPI and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita shows a strong and positive link between the two. However, the link tends to decrease in strength at higher levels of GDP per capita, and this is particularly evident in capital city regions. Budapest, Lisbon, Warsaw, Prague, but also Bucharest have a relatively low level of GPI relative to GDP per capita. This is while other regions score higher than their GDP per capita would suggest, such as the Nordic regions and most parts of the Netherlands, but also in isolation in the Czech Republic, the UK and Belgium (europa.eu).

## 5. Exotic" indices

Although the World Health Organisation's index and those of the European Union are internationally recognised and widely accepted, in some countries alternative indices are calculated which take into account aspects that the above-mentioned indices do not include. These are collectively known as 'exotic indices' and each represents an original component of the way quality of life is measured. By the very breadth of interpretation and meaning of the concept of quality of life, these indices complete the overall picture of well-being and fulfilment in the world. Their uniqueness lies in the criteria they use and/or their weight in the overall score structure of countries. Seen as a local curiosity and initially of rather symbolic importance, the exotic indices have entered the mainstream in the last decade, with their inclusion in the reports of global institutions such as the UN ([hdr.undp.org](http://hdr.undp.org)).

### 5.1 Gross National Happiness

The government of the small Asian state of Bhutan, located between China and India, is guided by a political philosophy it calls Gross National Happiness (GNH). Known in the international literature as GNH by its English translation (Gross National Happiness), the concept includes an index used to objectively measure the collective happiness and well-being of the population. The GNH was established as the main purpose of Government of Bhutan, defined as such by the Constitution currently in force, adopted on 18 July 2008.

The notion of Gross National Happiness appeared as a figure of speech in an interview the former King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, gave to a journalist from the Financial Times business publication in 1979. After the British reporter asked him about the economic state of his country and specifically about GDP, the monarch replied that, in religious key, "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product". Becoming a headline in the prestigious financial periodical, the notion of Gross National Happiness gained worldwide fame and the status of a true country brand for Bhutan. But more importantly, GNH has emerged as a central concern for senior officials in the Bhutanese administration ([grossnationalhappiness.com](http://grossnationalhappiness.com)).

In 2011, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly passed a resolution entitled "Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development", urging member country representatives to follow Bhutan's example by measuring happiness and well-being of citizens, and to consider happiness a "fundamental human goal". A year later, Bhutan's Prime Minister and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon agreed to encourage the spread of the FBN philosophy around the world. As a result, the UN produced the World Happiness Report and 20 March was declared International Happiness Day ([worldhappiness.report](http://worldhappiness.report)).

GNH (Gross National Happiness) is different from GDP in that it emphasises collective happiness as the goal of government, with an emphasis on harmony with nature and traditional values. Gross National Happiness rests conceptually on four pillars of strength:

- 1) Sustainable and equitable economic development;
- 2) Environmental conservation;
- 3) Preservation and promotion of culture;
- 4) Good governance.

Specifically, the NBF is calculated by assessing nine domains: psychological well-being, health, time management, education, cultural diversity, good governance, community vitality, biodiversity and standard of living. Each domain is composed of subjective (questionnaire-based) and objective indicators. The nine domains have equal weight in the composition of the NBF, but the indicators that make up each domain have a variable weight. The domains are also assessed differently, depending on the GDP generated by each individual. The philosophy of the FBN is a tribute to the Buddhist religion, which promotes balance as a way to achieve happiness ([grossnationalhappiness.com](http://grossnationalhappiness.com)).

## **5.2 Happy Planet Index**

As mentioned above, the UN issues a World Happiness Report (WHR) every year since 2012, modelled on Bhutan's FBN. But the criteria are significantly different: GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom to make choices in life, generosity and perception of corruption. The 2019 report places Finland, Denmark and Norway at the top of the global rankings, with overall scores between 7.76 and 7.55, while the bottom places are occupied by Afghanistan, Central African Republic and Sudan. Romania is ranked in the top third (48th) with an overall score of 6.07 ([worldhappiness.report](http://worldhappiness.report)).

Since 2006, the New Economics Foundation (NEF), a UK-based environmental think-tank specialising in "social, economic and environmental justice", has been producing an annual Happy Planet Index, an exotic index that focuses on the sustainability of human activities and looks at the social and economic impact of the world's countries on the environment. Countries that generate more pollution and have a harsher footprint on nature are penalised, while countries that protect the environment best are praised ([happyplanetindex.org](http://happyplanetindex.org)).

In the most recent (2018) edition of the Happy Planet Index, Costa Rica was in first place, with nine of the top ten positions going to countries in the Caribbean, despite the fact that some of these countries face endemic poverty. The US ranks just 105th out of 151 countries surveyed. The configuration of the rankings can be explained by the fact that the NEF does not take into account GDP or HDI (Human Development Index), which it considers inadequate because they do not account for sustainable and durable development ([happyplanetindex.org](http://happyplanetindex.org)).

## **Conclusion**

The accelerated pace of technological development coupled with the challenges of migration and global warming are just some of the important aspects of today's world that draw attention to the dynamics involved in the quality of life of the contemporary individual. More than ever, the ability to adapt to new forms of social existence is a common goal for improving quality of life. In this context, an analysis of the nature of the means that can provide adequate information on the reality in question is essential for establishing the right policies to optimise the situation. From what can be seen from the data analysis, linking statistics that take a quantitative and general approach with statistics that take a qualitative and particular approach is essential. The extent to which this link can be made in proportion to the accelerating dynamics of the 21st century world remains a desideratum, one that is quite competitive but not impossible to achieve.

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