

# Happiness gap in the Land of Smiles



In this 2010 file photo, visitors view an exhibition, 'Siam, Land of Smiles' presenting various expressions of smiles at a Bangkok department store.

## POLICY FOCUS

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**H**ow happy are people in the “Land of Smiles?” Not too happy. In fact, the Thai people’s spirit was at its lowest last year, and things don’t look much brighter in 2021.

According to the World Happiness Report which ranks countries around the world by how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be, Thailand’s level of happiness has been steadily declining since 2012 with 2020 being the worst year in the past decade.

The report also shows Thais’ life satisfaction is increasingly lagging behind other countries in the region. People in the Philippines, for example, used to have a lower self-rating of happiness than the Thais. It is no longer the

case now.

The World Happiness Report stems from the premise that although material development and income are significant for physical well-being, they alone cannot make people feel happy.

Many countries agree and have started conducting their domestic surveys to have a more accurate pulse on how their citizens feel about their lives and the country’s development.

Germany started happiness and life satisfaction surveys in 1984; the United Kingdom started in 1991 and Australia in 2001.

The UK, for example, asked its citizens four questions to assess their well-being in its Annual Population Survey organised by the Office for National Statistics.

The first question is: “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?” It aims to assess the respondents’ overall satisfaction with their lives.

The second and third questions: “Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?” and “Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?” aim to assess the respondents’ emotional

states.

The fourth question: "Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile" aims to assess the respondents' values.

People are asked to rate their feelings on a scale of 0 to 10. 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely".

Many organisations have adopted these questions designed by the Office for National Statistics for their surveys. There are now more than 33 well-being surveys conducted by educational institutions, state agencies, and independent organisations in the UK. The surveys are done monthly, quarterly, bi-annually, and annually. These surveys have expanded extensively since the David Cameron administration.

Last year, the Public Policies and Life Satisfaction Project, supported by the National Research Council of Thailand under its Integrated Strategic Research Program on Social Sciences: Khonthai 4.0, conducted a happiness survey between May 1 and June 15, 2020, which revealed the gap of life satisfaction



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between the young and the older generations.

The survey used the same set of questions from the UK to assess people's life satisfaction. Interestingly, the findings expose the generation gap that may well explain why the young are taking to the streets and demanding change.

On a scale from 0 to 10, about 48% of the 3,880 respondents gave a generally high rating for their happiness from 8 upwards. But the devil is in the details.

When divided by age groups, those who gave the highest happiness ratings are the baby boomers who are between 56 and 74 years old. The least happy are the the young generation aged between 15-23 years old.

About 36% of the baby boomers rated their life satisfaction highly at between 9 and 10. Only 20% of Generation Y (24-39 years old) gave the same rating. Interestingly, only 7% of

Generation Z, youngsters born between 1997 and 2012/15 said they have the same level of happiness.

On the respondents' overall emotional states, the findings also show the baby boomers are happier and less stressed than other generations. Generation Y and Z, in particular, are frustrated that their quality of life is lower than their parents and grandparents.

Self-empowerment through active social participation and youth movements may be part of these young generations' efforts to make their lives more meaningful.

Will Thai people's happiness grow or sink further in the next two years? Predictions based on common sense or wishful thinking are often ridden with biases. What we need is consistent and systematic surveys every year to assess how the Thai people feel about their lives to gauge their happiness, anxiety, and what they see as a meaningful life.

We need to know what makes Thai people happy, unhappy, and why. We need to know what the government did which increased or lowered people's life satisfaction. The surveys will help provide some answers to what the government should do or refrain from doing to increase the people's level of happiness. The government's primary duty, after all, is to serve the citizens the best it can.

For a nationwide and systematic happiness survey, Thailand's National Statistical Office should include the four personal well-being questions in its various annual surveys. For example, the Socio-Economic Surveys, Labour Force Survey, Children and Youths Survey, Health and Welfare Survey, Elderly Population Survey, People with Disabilities Survey, as well as Society and Culture.

Including these questions in national surveys will shed light on how people feel about their lives which are closely linked to the government's policies on economics, public health, the environment, and culture.

The annual monitoring on how people assess their happiness — or lack of it — will also urge policymakers to pay attention to other aspects in life other than the economy that influence the populace's physical and mental well-being.

"Returning Happiness to the People" was the government's political slogan after the coup d'etat in 2014. This begs the question: Why is the perceived happiness of the Thai people steadily sinking?

If the government wants to achieve its goal, it must know first and foremost how happy or miserable people feel, and what it must do to increase their life satisfaction.

Confronting reality is the first step the government must make. National well-being surveys are necessary because statistics don't lie.

With the coronavirus pandemic, the global

economic slowdown, and domestic political tumult, if the government refuses to be responsive to people's feelings, our famous Thai smiles won't be able to return anytime soon.

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