



How happy were you on 20 March this year? Given Western European statistics, let's assume not overtly happy. Because, let's face it; a grey March day in Europe is not always the most uplifting scenario. In fact, it might very well be that you cannot recall any specific feelings from the 20th of this rather anonymous month at all. However, the UN has named the 20 March the International Day of Happiness.

Now why would the UN make a matter as private and subjective as happiness into a public and global one? And, why on 20 March? As with many a good fairy tale, the whole thing started with a king wanting the best for his country. In 1972 the king of Bhutan, a tiny and poor, yet happy Himalayan kingdom, grew tired of countries being measured by its gross domestic product solely, and coined the term Gross National Happiness (GNH).

Bhutan, a country with a very low GDP per capita, but ranked among the happiest nations in the world, then started efforts to put happiness on the global agenda. Last summer, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the resolution “ [Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development](#) ”, recognizing the pursuit of happiness as a universal aspiration embodying the spirit of the Millennium Development Goals.

The resolution encourages Member States to help counter unsustainable consumption patterns

by elaborating measurements of happiness and economic well-being to better guide public policies. It also envisages a conference on happiness that was held at UN headquarters in New York in early April 2012. Hundreds of representatives from governments, religious organizations, academia and civil society around the world came together with the basic idea that human progress is about more than just a growing economy.

The first ever World Happiness Report was prepared for the conference, showing that, where happiness is measured by how happy people are with their lives, the happiest countries in the world are all Northern European, scoring well both on wealth and political freedom, strong social networks and an absence of corruption. The three latter factors together proved more important than income in explaining well-being differences between the top and bottom countries.

Chairing the conference was Executive Director of the European Environment Agency (EEA) Jacqueline McGlade, concluding that “The economic crisis, accelerating environmental degradation and growing discontent around the world all point to one conclusion – GDP as the sole measure of success has reached the end of the road.” Or as Nic Marks, expert in the field of well-being research, made clear in his interview “the point really is that material goods are inefficient producers of happiness, because they do it very indirectly; requiring much time and effort, as well as sacrifices of relationship. So if you think that is the way to be happier, you are probably being very inefficient, because you could do things in your own life immediately about your relationship that are the key to your own happiness and don’t cost a lot of money.”