

Towards a Sustainable Happiness Model for UAE: Lessons from Latin America

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally studies on Happiness have been using income as a proxy for wellbeing and quality of life using GDP to measure progress of nations. We need to understand here that while income is an objective measure, Happiness is a subjective measure. One of the key criticisms leveled against GDP is that it does not take into account sustainability. Sometimes growth may be there but not achieved through sustainable means, thereby risking the future. On the flip side economic growth itself may not be sustainable in some cases. So can we depend on economic factors alone to be happy? In the past decade or so more and more countries are looking at the “Beyond GDP” agenda. In 2011 the OECD developed a framework for measuring wellbeing that can reflect and support development of measurement frameworks on a national level. There are a sizeable number of Latin American countries scoring consistently high on the Happiness index despite a number of socio economic issues. The recently published World Happiness report (2018) suggests that this is not a mere coincidence. It is based on the fact that Happiness in Latin America has social foundations. UAE lists in the top 20 countries with a happiness index of 6.774. (Source: World Happiness ranking 2015-17). This is the first ever attempt to superimpose the Latin American happiness model on the UAE local community to arrive at a sustainable happiness model for the UAE.

Keywords: Sustainable happiness; Non Economic factors; UAE Happiness Index; Latin American model of Happiness, Interpersonal relations.

Introduction

UAE lists in the top 20 countries with a happiness index of 6.774. (Source: World Happiness ranking 2015-17). For the same period Finland is ranked number 1 with a score of 7.632. Traditionally studies on Happiness have been using income as a proxy for wellbeing and quality of life using GDP to measure progress of nations. We need to understand here that while income is an objective measure, Happiness is a subjective measure. One of the key criticisms leveled against GDP is that it does not take into account sustainability. The Happiness Report -2018, talks of a 4 point happiness gap between the happiest and unhappiest countries and three points out of these four (which is 75%) is explained by the following 6 factors: Togetherness (sense of community) ; money; health; freedom; trust and kindness. (Wiking Mike, 2017) The same

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author says that when he asked people across the world to think of their good times, it was almost always about memories of being with other people, be it their family or with their friends. Whilst evidence says that the more often people meet, the happier they are, it is also about the quality of their relationships. The author says the important thing is not just about seeing and meeting people but of connecting with them. “Humans are essentially social animals. We live together in romantic relationships, family groups, neighborhoods and communities. Our relationships can be a source of support, a source of identity and a source of fun.”(Source Global Happiness Policy Report-2018, released during the Global Happiness Summit at UAE; Pg. 131).The report explains this phenomenon through the Warmth of interpersonal relationships, Centrality of the family structure and relative disregard for Materialism in these countries. These countries score high on several measures like life evaluation scores and positive effect scores (Source: Gallup World Poll, 2006-16). In the past decade or so more and more countries are looking at the “Beyond GDP “agenda. in 2011 the OECD developed a framework for measuring wellbeing that can reflect and support development of measurement frameworks on a national level. The Latin American case definitely shows that there is more to life than income. Since UAE already ranks high in Happiness, it now needs to focus on the “soft factors” to be able to sustain the high levels and improve its current position to the top 10 countries in coming times. UAE is already working on multiple fronts using both people and technology power to scale new heights.

The researcher’s interest in UAE stems from her long stint in the UAE combined with the fact that UAE is working earnestly to develop a more sustainable model of happiness. It is the firm conviction of the researcher that focusing on non-economic factors can create substantial impact to the current Happiness model being pursued in UAE.

The study uses secondary data present in the World Happiness Report, 2018 along with a initial exploratory research using personal interviews with a restricted group of 30 individuals of the Emirati community. The study is intended only as an initial study that will give greater insights for further research in this area culminating in the realignment of the UAE Happiness strategy based on non-economic measures.

Brief Literature Review

S no	Year	Authors	Research	Finding
1	2002	Diener and Seligman	Researched the qualities that differentiated happiest from less happy people	It was not gender or socio economic status but close friends that distinguished these 2 groups
2	2017	Helliwell, Huang and Wang	They researched the influence of societal social strengths on societal life expectancy	Influence of societal social effects exceeds the influence of combined effects of societal life expectancy.
3	2013	Aknin and Dunn	Can giving support boost wellbeing to the giver	A study on quarter million people from 136 countries showed that giving money to others pays rich dividends on happiness scores
4	1995	Baumister and Leary	They researched the innate human need to form bonds	Absence of strong social bonds can have deleterious consequences for health and wellbeing of individuals

5	2018	World Happiness Report	Roughly three quarters of the difference in happiness between countries is accounted for by 6 factors and one of them is social Support	This is somewhat measured by asking people whether they have somebody they can rely on in times of need.
6	2017	Wiking Meik	When you ask people across the globe about their good times it is always with other people in their memories	However it is not just about quantity. It is also about quality of relationships.
7	2018	Diener, Ed	Over last few decades the research on wellbeing has grown exponentially. One of the questions often asked is about the factors contributing to happiness.	In all researches , one factor emerges time and again as a particularly strong influence and it is High quality social relationships
8	2015	Ricard, Matthieu	Happiness rises with social involvement in volunteer organizations, practice of sports or music and membership in leisure clubs. It is closely tied to the maintenance and quality of private relationships	
9	2014	Dolan, Paul	People around you can influence you more than you think. Humans have the tendency to unconsciously mimic and absorb the emotions of those around us. There is believed to be a close connection between our moods and that of those around us.	We are very much affected by the people that we move with both at work and in your personal life. The role of people cannot be therefore overlooked
10	2015	Diener, Biswas; Ricard Matthieu	Psychologists are trying to analyze about the so called " Happy poor" who are more cheerful than many rich but stressed people.	We are getting more and more evidence based on research that wealth and happiness are probably not positively co related
11	2015	Ricard, Matthieu	The rise in depression and suicide rate among teenagers in US and Sweden according to a recent study is due to a decreased sense of trust among people, the breaking up of families and portrayal of violence through TV and the fact that people increasingly live alone. And fewer persons are involved in sports or culture or in serving their elders unlike the past	Loneliness and it's attendant issues are being cited as one of the many reasons for increase in depression among teenagers and rise in suicidal tendencies

To summarize the findings from literature review:

- Social bonding seemed to have visible positive effects on the overall health of individuals and society
- Absence of close relationships seemed to have deleterious effect on the health of certain individuals in western world.
- Most of the research studies emphasized the positive effect of high quality social relationships.

These findings led the researcher to do more study of the world happiness report findings especially w.r.t Latin America and thus led to the idea for this study.

Research Design

Latin America is beset with a number of problems both social, economic and some political. The economic indicators for Latin American countries does not sufficiently explain the consistently high happiness levels in Latin American countries on multiple areas as seen from the research presented in the above (Source: Chapter 6 of the *“World Happiness Report-2018”*; edited by John.F.Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs.) As a result the researchers in the above report concluded that there must be some other factors contributing to happiness in those countries and they came upon the concept of Interpersonal relationships in the context of Latin America.

Specific research findings that are of interest are as below:

- Evaluation of life in Latin American countries is high w.r.t what social and income indicators would predict
- The affective state shows very high figures for almost all Latin American even though some of them have low income, corruption and serious social issues.

As a result the researchers concluded that there must be some other factors contributing to the happiness in those countries and they came upon the concept of interpersonal relationships in the context of Latin America.

(Source: pg 120, Chapter 6 of the *“World Happiness Report-2018”*; edited by John.F.Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs.)

Research instrument

The researchers in the above report believe that Latin Americans give more importance to the relational realm as compared to materialistic pursuits. Many Latin Americans have “Making my parents proud” as one of the main goals of their life. A large proportion of them also believe that elderly people should be supported by their family members and not by external institutions as is common in the western world. In a world where success and happiness are viewed solely on materialistic terms, Latin America stands out as a rare and strange example. The below diagram best represents the Latin American Social model. A questionnaire that was intended to serve as an interview guide was developed consisting of a total of 21 statements which were tested for both Quantitative as well as Qualitative responses. The quantitative responses used a 5 point Likert scale while the qualitative responses were intended to test the depth / intensity of the feelings portrayed in the selected viewpoints. Questions were designed to cover all elements of the below depicted model covering nuclear, extended family, friends and intensity of the relationships.

The study used random sampling method to locate Emirati candidates based on their willingness to participate in the survey. Considering that they are a closed community the kind of positive response received by the survey was a very positive aspect of this study. Many of the respondents not only proactively participated in the interview and gave suggestions to enhance the study in future as well were willing to contributing to the survey by referring their friends as well as showed enthusiasm to participate in future studies of this research. The in depth interview lasted for 30 -40 minutes in each case. During the interview they shared many intricate facets and brought valuable insights in enhancing the quality of the study. As a researcher there are several hurdles in getting responses which was contrary in this case despite the busy schedules of some of the respondents.



Latin America is much more than a mere collection of countries that are in the same geographical area or those that share a similar language. It is quite possible to think of Latin American culture as one that is based on close and warm interpersonal relationships and where enjoyment of positive affective state predominates. Latin American culture seems to have emerged from certain historical processes that were common to all countries in this category. Coexistence with rather than dominance of nature was the central value of many groups that came to reside in Latin America through various conquests. These people mixed sometimes with the original inhabitants to produce a mixed breed with common values. The values that they imbibed helped create a society that was not as much interested in changing the social and natural context as it was in living within it. The extended family values of the conquerors blended well with the communitarian values of the indigenous groups, thus generating societies where interpersonal relations centered in the family and relatives were dominant with a corresponding disinterest or lack of involvement in society or civic life.

There are many things common between the Latin American and Emirati culture w.r.t relationships and family ties. Emiratis trace their origins to Bedouins or tribes who believe in community living and close family ties. Extended family networks exist even today among Emiratis. The study has used in depth interviews with a focused group of Emiratis of both gender of mixed age group to explore how much of the above mentioned values still have meaning in the current day context.

This study was conducted in the form of in depth interviews of 30 Emiratis covering both genders and mixed age groups ranging from 25 to 60 yrs. The interview had 2 sections with 21 statements drawn right out of the Latin American Social model. These were tested using a 5 point Likert scale as well as probed further for more detailed responses. There seemed to be a high willingness among participants to take part in the survey coupled with curiosity about the reasons for the study. Many enjoyed the experience thus giving the researcher the feeling that the topic was something they cared about. Many of the surveyed respondents agreed to be available for further research if and when needed. The survey mainly focused on superimposing the Latin American social model on the Emirati culture and check for

similarities and dissimilarities between the 2 cultures. This was intended to serve as a guide for the direction of future research in this area for developing a sustainable Happiness model for UAE based on non-economic criteria.

Findings

Table 1: Comparison of Latin American Social model with Emirati responses.

Features of Latin American Countries social model	Questions in the survey that relay the same sentiment	Emirati scores to the statement	Justifying remarks from the survey
Latin Americans spend much time and resources in nurturing personal relations	We need to invest time and resources in building long term relationships	85%	1) This is what life is about. One day when you are gone you need people who can help the future generations 2) We already have it in our culture , but it is not as strong as before. We need to regain lost ground.
Close and warm relations in Latin America also extends to friends, neighbors and colleagues	1) Close Friends are like family. They are present in our good and bad times 2) We need to help and support our less able friends	69% 79%	1) Sometimes they are more important than family as they can influence me more than my family. 2) Of course. It is karmic. 3) Once I was very sick and my friend was there for me.
The family both nuclear and extended is a central institution in Latin America and an important source of positive affect and purpose in life	1) Staying with parents provides guidance and support to the individual 2)	80%	1)Because you will get support and your spouse will blend well with your family values 2)If you are starting your career or married life they are a huge support
Latin American people tend to live longer with their families and do not necessarily leave them when they become adults	It is all right to live with your parents even as an adult	82%	1) In Emirati houses we live with our parents and grandparents. This is normal. 2) It gives you a pure family feeling. 4 generations together in a house- a great feeling
It is common in Latin America for elder parents to live with their adult children and their grandchildren	1)family members need to take care of their elderly family persons	92%	1)They are a blessing to us and the nation.. We need to return their services to the family and society.

			2)The way you take care of your elders sets an example for your children
Family members play an important role in child rearing	Grandparents have a right to spend time with their grandchildren	85%	It is highly recommended as children will learn the right values and preserve the culture as well
Both Brazil and Chile (both latin American nations) believe that we must take care of ourselves and our family before taking care of others	You should take care of yourself and your family before taking care of other people	60%	1) Family is first always. 2) This is in our religion too. We need to take care of our family, extended family , then neighbors and friends
Latin Americans strongly believe that family must play a central role in raising kids as well as taking care of elders	1) Underage kids need the care of their family members	90%	1) To raise a generation with values, compassion and faith, family members must play a huge role. 2) We were raised that once a family, is always a family and we have a great responsibility to take care of our parents in that sense.
Latin Americans believe that making parents proud and watching children grow gives them great joy.	1) One of my goals is to make my parents proud 2) Watching children grow is the greatest joy	91% 91%	1) Whatever I do should be in proportion to their vision. what I do should in pride and happiness for them 2) Children are our true assets and capital. We should help them to find their future.
Involvement and interaction with extended family is quite high in both Brazil and Chile	1) When there is a celebration it is normal to include extended family 2) If the family is passing through troubles, the extended family is there to help	88% 77%	1) We are a large family almost 400. When thee is marriage or graduation or Eid we all meet 2) it is common for us to meet every Friday at our grandparents home .
In Brazil and Chile they visit their friends as often as every day.	I visit my closest friend several times a month	72%	1) We meet every Friday in cafes. We support each other with ideas and network 2) We try to meet on weekends and other special holidays.

Gathering with relatives in Mexico is as much as 77% as against 54% in America	1) I visited my uncle/aunt more than twice in last 4 weeks	63%	1) During Eid and Ramadhan as well as during celebrations or sad times. 2) Some close relatives we meet often and others only during occasions due to paucity of time.
	2) I visited my cousins more than twice in last 4 weeks	51%	

1) The very high scores by Emiratis for majority of the statements clearly show that the Latin American model can be superimposed on the Emirati social fabric, and this will form the basis for further research.

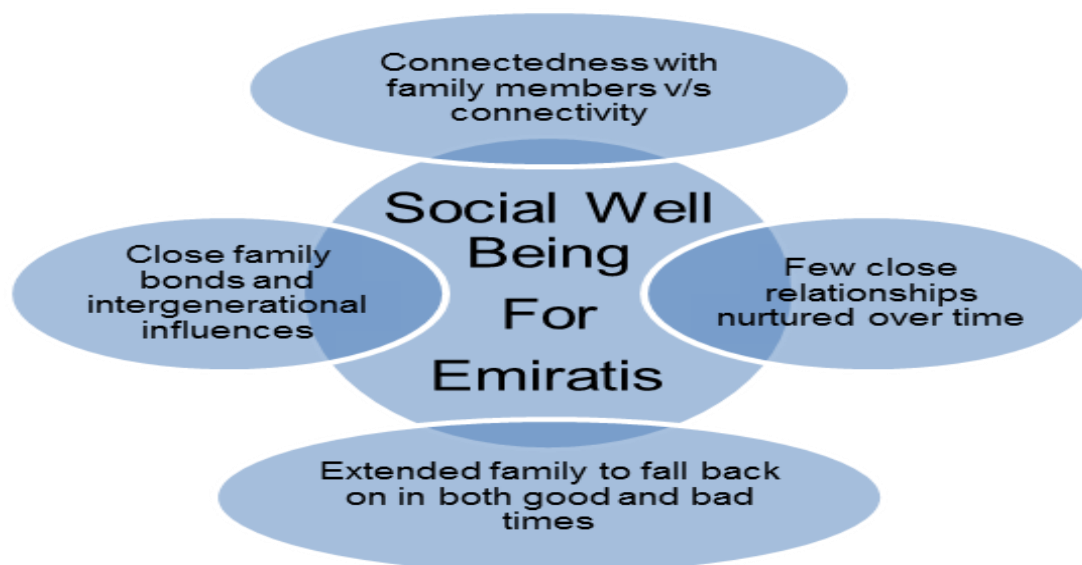
2) The results clearly show that very similar strong family ties as in Latin America exist in UAE too. However they seem to be under threat from current challenges owing to the superfast and accelerated growth and future ambitions of this nation. There is a predominant group among the surveyed ones that are still sticking to their old beliefs and culture of staying together and bonding. There is a small percentage of these who are a little more ambitious and want to move ahead and need the space to be individual while enjoying the benefits of living together. They want a healthy mix of the traditional beliefs and modernity.

3) Whilst close bonding between family members, including extended family do exist, individuals are being increasingly pressured by too many things to juggle at work and home. The invasion of social media into personal space is posing a serious threat to the quality of relationships. Emiratis do try to make time for their immediate and extended family members and they feel that this is a strong support system for them which the expats do not have. Intergenerational dependence is quite common. However Emiratis also have the affordability to have maids and domestic help to take care of their kids and/ parents and they feel that this is making them lose out on the bonding.

4) The social framework for the Emirati society based on the researcher’s survey is comprised of three distinct circles:

The **core inner circle** consists of the immediate family which includes self, my children and my parents. The **second slightly wider circle** comprises of close cousins and aunts and uncles and friends. The third and **last outer circle** consists of Extended family essentially made up of distant cousins, aunts and uncles. Time and energy invested in relationships strictly follows this pattern with utmost concern for own parents, children and grandparents, followed by close friends and lastly extended family.

So we can represent the Social model as three concentric circles if we were to put it in a very simplistic. However for purposes of like to like comparison, the researcher has developed a model for Emiratis on similar lines of the Latin American model as depicted below.



CONCLUSIONS

There are many lessons to learn from the Latin American Example:

- 1) There is a strong need to go beyond objective measures when you are trying to assess people's situation. In this sense the WHR -2018 believes that subjective wellbeing indices help us in understanding the values that people hold dear in a certain group or nation. Since values vary from one group to another, it helps to have subjective measures to take care of variances when making cross cultural assessments
- 2) Latin American example clearly shows that there is more to life than income. It also tells us that genuine, warm and person based relations substantially contribute to happiness.
- 3) In the study the respondents who were Emiratis (local citizens of UAE) gave valuable suggestions on how they can increase their interpersonal bonding with close family, extended family and friends. This will form the subject matter for yet another study in future.
- 4) Both Latin America and UAE should focus on strengthening the rich culture of the past that they have and use that to get sustainable happiness.

Implications for Future Research

If explored in depth, such research studies can help the top leadership of Dubai and UAE to review and reorient their Happiness model and policies based on these findings. This would then lead us to a more sustainable model of happiness that is here to stay and not depending on economic factors. It will also help create a more tolerant society built on trust, respect and family values. In view of the low population level of the Emiratis such a model will also help in preserving and protecting their community from external influences in light of High tech initiatives happening in UAE. There is definitely a lot of synergy in values between Emirati thinking and the Latin American example. The researcher is of the opinion that further research could be carried out in future as below:

- Intergenerational views on economic v/s non-economic factors .r.t happiness in any one group or both groups
- A comparative study of the values of Expats v/s Emiratis w.r.t the Latin American example.
- A more focused research on any one community (Either Emiratis or Expats).....The possibilities are numerous and exciting.

Limitations

The current study clearly omitted expats as the researcher would like to isolate the responses of Emiratis first and deal with the expat population separately on the same issue if the need arises. UAE has the most diverse expat community in terms of nationalities, age group and income group and the sampling plan needs to be done meticulously in this case. Also there is more likelihood that the Family model applies more to locals as they have extended families present while most expats live in nuclear families or even as bachelors with their families continuing to live in their home countries and hence the above study may not be relevant to such groups.

Beyond GDP

“The GNP measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile” - Robert F Kennedy.

The beyond GDP agenda has progressed significantly in the past decade or so with a certain amount of push by the OECD. In 2011, it pursued the development of a framework that measured wellbeing that both reflected and supported the development of frameworks at a national level by interested countries.

The Global Happiness Policy Report, 2018 has an entire chapter (Chapter: 8) devoted to measurement of well-being and case studies depicting measurement of social well-being being done currently in several countries. Some of them are Ecuador, Germany, Australia, Austria, Finland etc. A small sample of the major initiatives is presented here.

Table 2: Wellbeing Measurement Initiatives around the world that can be emulated:

Country	Agency	Description of study	Wellbeing measures
Austria	Statistics Austria	The agency publishes an annual report since 2012 on 30 key indicators categorized into 3 dimensions, material wealth, quality of life and environmental sustainability	Subjective wellbeing measure included in this study was life satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10.
Slovenia	IMAD, SURS, ARSO, and NIJZ	Indicators of wellbeing have been developed as part of National Development Strategy of Slovenian government. The indicators are in 3 categories: material, social and environmental wellbeing.	The framework includes both life satisfaction and happiness
Italy	National Council for Economy and Labour	The Equitable and sustainable wellbeing project led to the development of a wellbeing framework	This includes life satisfaction, Leisure time satisfaction, p[positive and negative judgements of future perspective as some of the indicators of subjective wellbeing

Source: Global Happiness Policy Report 2018; table 2.1: Selected National Wellbeing Measurement initiatives and Indicator sets; pg :205-206.

A common feature of these national initiatives is that while they all recognize people wellbeing as being a multi-dimensional construct, they often include measures of people's subjective wellbeing (or happiness) as one of the key components. One more point to be noted is that many of these frameworks were developed by a government agency or by a combination of policy making bodies in yet other countries , thereby suggesting that the underlying motive is to provide additional information beyond GDP, without necessarily wanting to embed this into an explicit policy framework. However we need to understand that measuring wellbeing is not an end in itself. It should be used in conjunction with other data for more meaningful policy making as well as by the general public.

The researcher would like to emphasize that this initial study can pave the way for more research on how Emiratis can capitalize and strengthen their relational sphere to develop sustainable happiness as individuals and on the other hand how can policy makers of the UAE happiness model incorporate sufficient and necessary wellbeing measures in the model to create sustainable happiness for UAE.

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