

Happiness index not a true reflection

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Believe it or not, Taiwan's first national happiness index shows the country rating close to the middle among the 37 countries assessed, ranking higher than Japan and South Korea in Asia. However, upon reflection, one might ponder if the index reflects the true experience of people living here.

President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) told officials in February last year to gauge the nation's living conditions. On Friday, the Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics (DGBAS) released the results of more than a year of research on people's degree of satisfaction with their wellbeing, with Taiwan taking 19th place among 34 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), plus Russia and Brazil.

The government's national happiness index gauges satisfaction with healthcare, safety, housing, income, jobs, education, environment, governance and work-life balance. DGBAS officials said the results showed that Taiwanese enjoy a "moderate level" of happiness as measured against their peers in other countries. In addition, Taiwan's overall happiness score of 6.64 points is higher than that of most of the Asian areas assessed, except Hong Kong and Singapore, which are not OECD nations, the DGBAS said.

The government claims the launch of a national happiness index is part of its efforts to go beyond using only GDP growth to perceive public happiness and move closer to people's daily lives. However, the DGBAS' research has left many people shaking their heads, considering their persistent concerns about stubbornly stagnant salaries, rising housing prices, falling spending power, pension worries and fear of jobs being lost to companies abroad.

Moreover, regardless of how hard the DGBAS worked to get an idea of people's subjective perceptions and their happiness, and regardless what elements the agency took into consideration in designing the index, it is a fact that the public sense of wellbeing is closely linked to the government's performance and, in this case, that government inefficiency and lack of direction has created more anxiety about the future, not less.

Perhaps, at a time when the nation's wealth gap is widening, youth unemployment remains high and the once robust economy has stalled, the government does not want the public to know how deep despair runs in this nation. Rather, it seems the government aims to tell the public through the release of the "happiness" data that their lives are not too bad in that Japan

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ranks 22nd and South Korea 28th in the index.

This is not a good response to the public's expectations about the future and will not help eliminate anxiety, because some results of the research — like Taiwan ranking fourth in the income category and placing third for safety — deviate from people's day-to-day experience.

People work more and earn less, but feel happier? How can it be? Unless Taiwanese are exceptionally good at finding happiness during hard times and are capable of enduring what others cannot, the government has a responsibility to tell the public how it came up with data that seem inaccurate and hence risks credibility. Yet, as dubious as the research may be, the more important question of what the government will do next remains. There has been no clarity on how the government will move forward to deliver better policies to improve people's wellbeing, based on the research results.

Whether government officials like it or not, public service involves public scrutiny and so does the compilation of the national happiness index, even if the research turns out to not have been statistically invalid. The point is that the government needs to be closely in touch with the public's true experiences.

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