

The path to happiness is not gold

Written by Wu Hui-lin 吳輝麟

Tuesday, 02 June 2015 07:40

In late April, the presidential office instructed the Cabinet to promote the idea that Taiwan has become a happier place over the past seven years. As this caused a flurry of debate, this year's UN World Happiness Report indicated that Switzerland was the happiest of the 158 countries on the list, while Taiwan was ranked 38th, far surpassing Hong Kong at No. 72 and China at No. 84.

The big name primarily responsible for the report was the founder of the economic concept of shock therapy, Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs.

Sachs said the report proves that not only money, but also equality, sincerity, trust and health are necessary in creating a happy society.

The report found that social cohesion is extremely important to social well-being and high levels of public trust allowed Icelanders to remain happy while going through a severe financial crisis.

National income is also important and the top 10 happiest countries all enjoy a national income 25 times that of the 10 least happy. However, income is not the only factor that constitutes happiness. The US was ranked No. 15, below Mexico at No. 14, and Costa Rica at No. 12. Costa Rica's income per capita is one-fifth of US per capita income. The country with the highest GDP per capita, Qatar, is ranked 28th on the list. The report is a reminder that when countries focus disproportionately on economic growth and forget social and environmental targets, the result is harmful to human happiness.

Among the 158 countries, Taiwan at No. 38 must be seen as among the top of the class and in a good position. Happiness is difficult to objectively measure and these numbers are the total figures after individual factors were added together. Whether an individual is happy is a purely subjective feeling and each person's values differ, making objective comparisons even more difficult. Therefore, the results of every happiness survey is only one form of insight into happiness. They are only a reference and should not be used as a basis for public policy.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that since the 2008 financial crisis, almost everyone is wishing

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for an economic recovery and praying that the storm has passed as the governments of many countries resort to quantitative easing to bolster the economy as they continue to pursue high economic growth rates. Aside from low growth rates, high unemployment rates, stagnant wages and the high income of the top 1 percent versus the lower incomes of the remaining 99 percent in the M-shaped society is placing a lot of pressure on the public. In addition, natural and disasters of human origin also weigh on society to the point of suffocation.

The questions that really need to be asked are why growth stagnates and if economic growth makes people happy. Ultimately, there is no sole indicator that can reflect human advancement, be it GDP or “happiness.”

This is why it is inappropriate for governments to use policy measures to force GDP growth or happiness. The legislature should not force legislation or enforce implementation based on such factors, because doing so would likely lead to adverse effects. In other words, “the road to hell is often paved with good intentions.” After all, the public must realize for themselves, spontaneously, that the willingness to restrain one’s desires, helping oneself and others, mutual trust, division of labor and cooperation are needed to create a harmonious society.

A philosopher once said that, “man without virtue leads to natural and man-made disasters; in a land without virtue, all things wither; a dysfunctional world will cause the earth to crack and the sky to fall.”

Our troubled planet now suffers from ravaging natural disasters and climate change, and the fear of frequent financial crises and looming economic recession is ever-present. These problems are all closely related to every country pursuing high economic growth for the past several decades. A society guided by unbounded desire breeds greed and selfishness. Furthermore, the motto “be selfish or be doomed” has become ingrained in peoples’ minds, creating an immoral society and leading to the destruction of humankind.

Unless people soon retrieve basic virtues such as “frugality,” “enough is enough,” “small is beautiful,” “wealth with virtue and manners,” and “sincerity,” it would not be an exaggeration to say that humanity will bring destruction on itself and make happiness unattainable.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2015/06/02](#)