

Study of Indigenous and local communities finds happiness doesn't cost much

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Many Indigenous peoples and local communities around the world are leading very satisfying lives despite having very little money. This is the conclusion of a study by the Institute of Environmental Science and

Technology of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ICTA-UAB), which shows that many societies with very low monetary income have remarkably high levels of life satisfaction, comparable to those in wealthy countries.

Economic growth is often prescribed as a sure way of increasing the well-being of people in low-income countries, and global surveys in recent decades have supported this strategy by showing that people in high-income countries tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction than those in low-income countries. This strong correlation might suggest that only in rich societies can people be happy.

However, a recent study conducted by ICTA-UAB in collaboration with McGill University in Canada suggests that there may be good reasons to question whether this link is universal. While most global polls, such as the World Happiness Report, gather thousands of responses from the citizens of industrialized societies, they tend to overlook people in small-scale societies on the fringes, where the exchange of money plays a minimal role in everyday life and livelihoods depend directly on nature.

The research, published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, consisted of a survey of 2,966 people from Indigenous and local communities in 19 globally distributed sites. Only 64% of surveyed households had any cash income. The results show that "surprisingly, many populations with very low monetary incomes report very high average levels of life satisfaction, with scores similar to those in [wealthy countries](#)," says Eric Galbraith, researcher at ICTA-UAB and McGill University and lead author of the study.

The average life satisfaction score across the studied small-scale societies was 6.8 on a scale of 0–10. Although not all societies reported being highly satisfied—averages were as low as 5.1—four of the sites reported average scores higher than 8, typical of wealthy Scandinavian

countries in other polls, "and this is so, despite many of these societies having suffered histories of marginalization and oppression."

The results are consistent with the notion that human societies can support very satisfactory lives for their members without necessarily requiring high degrees of material wealth, as measured in monetary terms.

"The strong correlation frequently observed between income and life satisfaction is not universal and proves that wealth—as generated by industrialized economies—is not fundamentally required for humans to lead happy lives," says Victoria Reyes-Garcia, ICREA researcher at ICTA-UAB and senior author of the study.

The findings are good news for sustainability and human happiness, as they provide strong evidence that resource-intensive [economic growth](#) is not required to achieve high levels of subjective well-being.

The researchers highlight that, although they now know that people in many Indigenous and [local communities](#) report high levels of life satisfaction, they do not know why.

Prior work would suggest that family and [social support](#) and relationships, spirituality, and connections to nature are among the [important factors](#) on which this happiness is based, "but it is possible that the important factors differ significantly between societies or, conversely, that a small subset of factors dominates everywhere. I would hope that, by learning more about what makes life satisfying in these diverse communities, it might help many others to lead more satisfying lives while addressing the sustainability crisis," Galbraith concludes.

More information: High life satisfaction reported among small-scale societies with low incomes, *Proceedings of the National Academy of*

Sciences (2024). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2311703121](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2311703121).
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