

Happiness in Nordic Countries

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A recent study found Norwegians to be the happiest people in the world. The *World Happiness Report 2017*, conducted under the aegis of the United Nations (UN), showed that neither the country's relative geographical remoteness, cold climate nor the solitary nature attributed to its people could prevent it from getting top scores on the wellbeing index.

When the evaluation was done, the Scandinavian countries – Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden – were all placed in the top ten, on a worldwide level, along with Iceland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Among the Latin American nations classified, Mexico is at number 25, behind Costa Rica, Chile, Brazil and Argentina, which represents a significant change and a gradual and consistent decline against the measures taken into account by this interesting United Nations scale, given that in 2015 we were in 14th place rather than our current significantly low position.

The main things analysed for the report's measures are safety, freedom, honesty, generosity, health and education levels, household income and trust in government. When nations like ours suffer from serious problems of insecurity, inequality, corruption and impunity, incompetence and mistrust in government and many corporations, then our situation and image slip into a downward spiral of social decline that will always, as long as there are no significant changes, threaten peace and tranquillity.

The case of the Nordic countries is impressive and an example to others, because over the course of 40 to 50 years they went from being poor, isolated countries, to becoming involved in global trade, technology, growth in investments, new and better job creation opportunities, productive efficiency and reducing corruption to the world's current lowest levels. At the same time, the unionisation of workers rose to between 80 and 90 per cent of all those employed in any sector.

Norway, a country with a population of only around 5 million people, has the world's largest pension fund, with \$850 billion, which is truly remarkable. Its social policy was devised with a humanist focus, intended to grant a decent quality of life to all on retirement, so they can live peacefully, in relative personal and familial ease. They also have very advanced free health and education programmes, funded through higher taxes, which care for and support every



member of the population, from children and young people up to the elderly and those with disabilities including mental health problems.

Scandinavian countries are very egalitarian, nationalist and sovereign, but with real openness to economic, trade and political integration with the rest of the world. In 1980, the distinguished economist Robert H. Heilbroner wrote the following in the *New York Review of Books*, referring to the historical analysis of the miraculous transformation in Sweden's circumstances: iron ore mines, paper production for newsprint, the automotive industry, furniture production and shipbuilding for marine transport, among many other activities, propelled Sweden's emergence as a rich industrial nation. The efficient and honest use of the surpluses generated through export built up this impressive state of wellbeing.

Analysing the development of these countries is particularly interesting because their transition from poor to wealthy nations was a swift one, taking place over a few decades, such that displaying wealth in Nordic nations is still seen as a sign of poor taste. There is even an anecdote worth mentioning, that their estate agents will have two kinds of car, a Mercedes Benz, Porsche or BMW and a Volkswagen or similar. The first is for private or family use, whereas the second is for meeting clients or attending business meetings.

This sits in stark contrast with what goes on in our countries, where showing off wealth translates to a symbol of power, purpose and often impulsiveness. This leads me to recall an experience I had towards the end of 2005, when then President Vicente Fox and his wife Marta Sahagún invited four trade union leaders and our partners to dinner at his Los Pinos home, along with his cabinet Minister for Labour and the Economy. I recount this story in my new book: *Before the Next Revolution*.

At the end of the dinner, Fox asked us for our suggestions that might help Mexico to find its way out of the current crisis, stagnation and growing poverty. Faced with the other guests' silence, I spoke up to propose that the government should take a closer look at the example set by the Nordic countries, in order to understand how they made changes to their economic strategies, came from behind and became developed nations that enjoy great respect and standing worldwide.

I explained, as I have often articulated, that when they all decided to change their development strategy, they improved productive efficiency, increased levels of consumption and investment through better wages and loans, created a free health and education system paid for by properly administered taxes, increased trade union engagement and radically tackled corruption.



In conclusion, I told Fox and all present, that by studying such great examples there was much we could draw on to adapt the same measures and make them feasible in Mexico. The response was not what I might have expected, and I was met with surprised faces until Marta Sahagún broke the silence and said, candidly, if I can put it that way: “Well, Napoleón, those countries are really rather far away” to which I replied, “with all due respect, I’m not talking about geographical distance, but just some successful models to follow or adapt”, to which no one had any reply.