

Kohnert, Dirk

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# Are Africans happy?

## ‘Return to laughter’ in times of war, famine and misery

Dirk Kohnert <sup>1</sup>

Cartoon: "I'se so happy!"



Source: [Watermelon stereotype](#), Wikipedia

**Abstract:** Happiness is a universal state of mind. However, its meaning takes on culture-specific forms, ranging from emotional states of mind to life satisfaction. The definition of 'happiness' is strongly influenced by the respective philosophical background and material living conditions and is shaped by linguistic differences. Even within countries, location and social structure are important in the conceptualization and measurement of wellbeing. Exceptions prove the rule. In Laura Bohannan's classic anthropological study of the Tiv in the Nigerian Middle Belt in the 1950s, the 'return to laughter' signified the laughter of despair, e.g. when people laughed at human misery given omnipresent witchcraft. Another exemption of the rule is related to COVID-19 lockdowns that were associated with a drop in satisfaction, regardless of country-specific characteristics or the type and duration of the lockdown. In Sub-Saharan Africa, both the level of happiness and the level of income have shown increasing tendencies in recent decades. However, trends in inequality between indicators of income and happiness can diverge significantly. In general, happiness does not automatically increase with increasing income but lags behind. As shown by the economy of happiness, this paradox does not appear to occur in countries like South Africa, the most unequal country in the world. The country registered growing equality of happiness despite rising income inequality. Obviously, the absolute impact of income and happiness inequality at the country level is more important than the relative impact. Hence, happiness inequality, in general, can be a useful supplementary measure of inequality, particularly in Africa, which is considered a 'black spot' when it comes to happiness research.

**Keywords:** [Africa](#), [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), [happiness](#), [philosophy of happiness](#), [happiness economics](#), [World Happiness Report](#), [Easterlin paradox](#), [religion](#), [social inequality](#), [income inequality](#), [social structure](#), [African poverty](#), [famine](#), [South Africa](#), [Nigeria](#), [Ghana](#)

**JEL-Code:** D01, D11, D31, D64, D87, E26, F54, I14, I24, I32, J17, N17, N37, O15, O17, O55, Z13

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<sup>1</sup> Dirk Kohnert, associated expert, [GIGA-Institute for African Affairs, Hamburg](#), Germany. *Draft* : 3 May 2022.

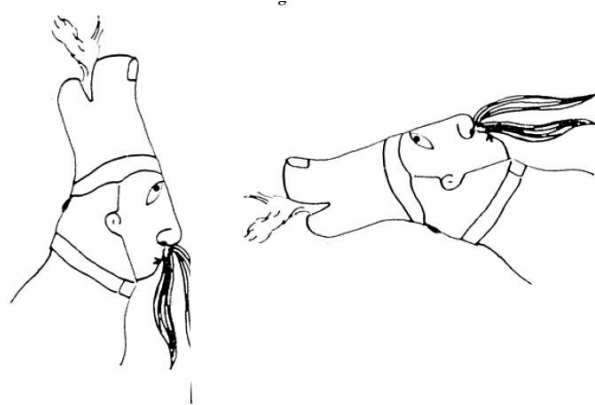
# 1. Introduction

According to a widespread stereotype in Western societies, Africans are happy people who laugh a lot, even under adverse living conditions. Yet, African humour and laughter, as well as its broader history, have been researched so far only to a limited extent. This is all the more regrettable as humour may be a key medium through which ‘African nationhood’ is represented (Crigler, 2018, Swart, 2009).

However, just to be clear, laughter is not necessarily an expression of happiness. In rare cases, it may rather be the contrary, for example when people in distress, living under hostile conditions, laugh at it. Such laughter is anything but funny. Boisterous and mad laughter might conceal situations of life possessing dimensions of a Homeric tragedy where the laughter just masks the tears. This has been analysed by the American cultural anthropologist [Laura Bohannan](#) (1964:320) awesomely in the classical anthropological case study of the [Tiv](#) in the Nigerian [Middle belt](#) of the 1950s, summarizing her experience at the end of her novel with a quotation from Shakespeare’s [King Lear](#): “*The worst returns to laughter*”<sup>2</sup>.

Another salient example of mad laughter was the terrible laughter of the defeated Boers Afrikaners after the [Second Boer War](#) (1899-1902). The laughter was interpreted and even rationalized by mediators of Afrikaner culture in the subsequent decades as representing their struggle for building an [Afrikaner "national culture"](#) (Swart, 2009). This culture was greatly influenced by anti-British sentiment and materialized in secret [Broederbond](#) organisations, e.g. the [Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniging](#) (FAK). The latter still exists, but it developed into a political movement of the extreme right. In the 1990s, for example, it was behind efforts to incite the so-called witchcraft murders in [Limpopo](#), [Venda](#) and [Lebowa](#) (Kohnert, 2003), regions belonging to the former [Boer republics](#).

**Cartoon 2:** “*The Terrible Laughter of the Afrikaner*”  
Cartoon ridiculing British Forces General Buller<sup>3</sup>.



Source: Swart, 2009, © (all rights reserved).

<sup>2</sup> “*To be worst, The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune, Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear. The lamentable change is from the best; The worst returns to laughter.*” (Bohannan, 1954: 297).

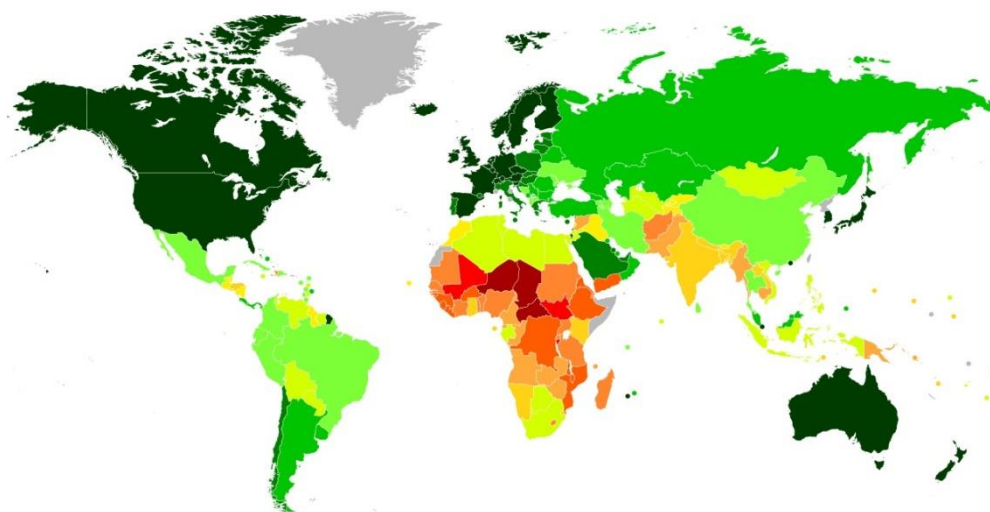
<sup>3</sup> “[Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in South Africa. General Buller](#) as a donkey? Or vice versa?” From the

<sup>3</sup> “[Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in South Africa. General Buller](#) as a donkey? Or vice versa?” From the diary of J.J. Claasse, Boer prisoner of war during the South African War”.

Things have changed, and nowadays happiness, notably spontaneous or “genuine” laughter has been presumed to be even a viable prescription of Western lifestyle medicine. On-going research attests that laughter has quantitatively verifiable positive health effects. This has been proved a. o. by practices of laughter yoga and similar self-induced or simulated, forms of laughter, potentially increasing subjective well-being by reducing stress and increasing pain tolerance (Louie & Brook & Frates, 2014).

Subjective wellbeing and happiness depend to a large extent on income and income inequality. According to neoliberal economic theory, the adverse effects of income inequality could be best mitigated by economic growth, i.e. by enlargement of the cake to be distributed. This corresponds to the results of a study on the causal nexus between fiscal policy, economic growth and income inequality in 26 Sub-Saharan African countries between 1995 and 2016, at least in upper-middle-income countries. However, there may be light at the end of the tunnel because the trend of income inequality in the survey period was decreasing (Adeleke Gabriel & Sule 2020). This was confirmed by another empirical study that found a U-shaped relationship between real gross domestic product per capita (GDP per capita) and inequality. Education, e.g. the secondary school enrolment rate (as a measure of human capital), had a statistically significant and negative relationship with income inequality. That is, an increase in educated workers diminished the wage gap and, thereby, decreased income inequality by expanding the size of the economic pie (Molla, 2021).

**Graph 1:** countries by [Human Development Index](#) categories



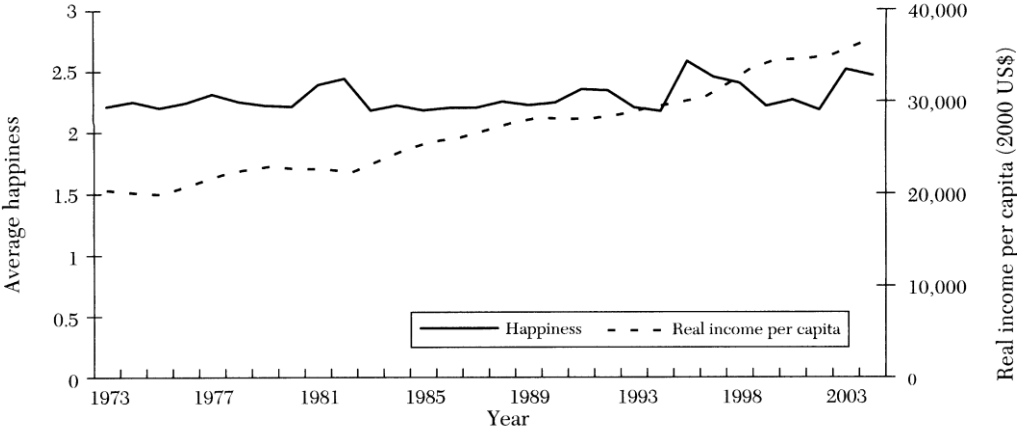
Source: [Human development index](#), Wikipedia, 2 January 2021 <sup>4</sup>

According to a widely held view wealth doesn't necessarily make happy, but poverty mostly makes unhappy. A 2014 survey of people's happiness in 135 countries by [Gallup and Healthways](#) rated five aspects of their lives and their own satisfaction. These included the feeling of leading a meaningful life ("*purpose*"), social life ("*social*"), financial security ("*financial*"), integration into society ("*community*") and physical health ("*physical* "). The scientists summarized the results in a happiness index and on a world map of ‘global well-being’ (see Graph 6). People who scored high in at least three of the categories were considered happy (described as "*thriving*" on the map). Unsurprisingly, the least happy people

<sup>4</sup> World map of countries by Human Development Index categories in increments of 0.050 (based on 2019 data, published in 2020).  $\geq 0.900$  0.850–0.899 0.800–0.849 0.750–0.799 0.700–0.749 0.650–0.699 0.600–0.649 0.550–0.599 0.500–0.549 0.450–0.499 0.400–0.449  $\leq 0.399$  Data unavailable

concentrated in SSA (Möckl, 2014). Also, the global distribution of happiness corresponded largely to the distribution of income inequality. However, beyond some level of inequality, economic growth does not improve well-being in rich countries. In these countries, economic growth counts less than a fair distribution of wealth. This could impact seriously on subjective well-being, happiness and mental health (Bouffard & Dubé, 2017).

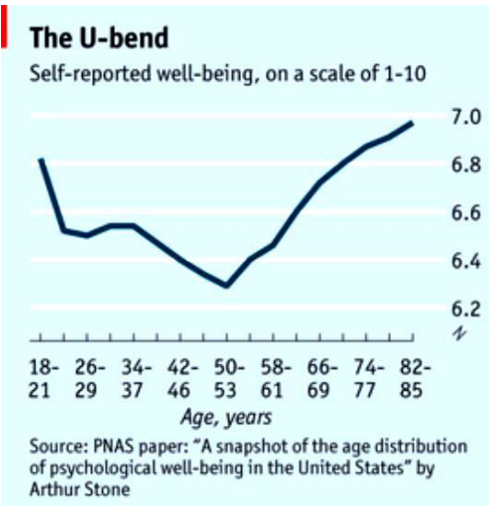
**Graph 2:** Happiness and real income per capita in the US, 1973-2004



Source: Clark & Frijters & Shields, 2008: 96

Happiness is said to vary at a point in time directly with income, both among and within nations. Still, over time, the long-term growth rates of happiness and income (GNP per head) are not significantly related, according to the ‘[Easterlin paradox](#)’, formulated in 1974 by [Richard Easterlin](#). The principal reason for the contradiction is social comparison. At a certain point in time people with higher income are happier because they compare their income to that who are less fortunate, and conversely for those with lower income (Easterlin & O’Connor, 2020; Clark & Frijters & Shields, 2008)). More recent research questioned these postulates (Senik, 2013). Yet, Easterlin and others maintain that critics of the paradox mistakenly present the positive relationship between happiness and income in cross-sectional data or in short-term time variations as contradicting the zero relationship of long-term trends (Easterlin & O’Connor, 2020).

**Graph 3:** Subjective wellbeing, depending on age, in the US, 2008



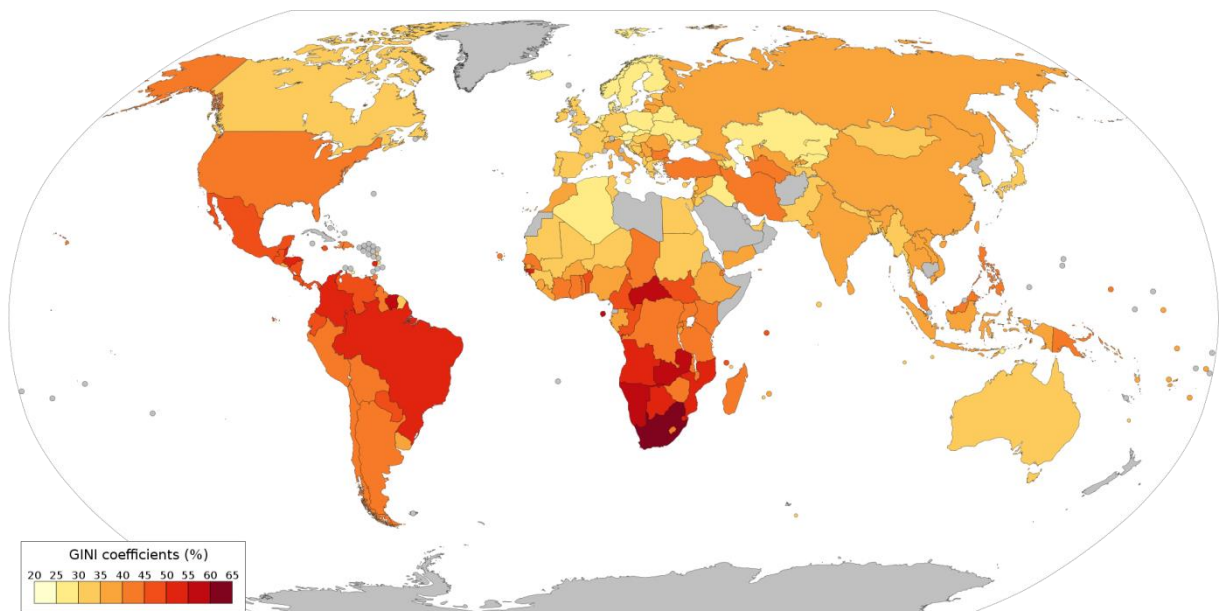
Source: Senik, 2013 <sup>5</sup>

However, individual satisfaction and happiness depend on a great variety of variables besides income and wealth, for example, socio-demographic variables, world regions, countries, gender, age etc.

In the following, I should like to focus on happiness and happiness inequality in Sub-Saharan African cultures. According to current research, happiness inequality may be closely related to income inequality. Therefore, the nexus between both will be investigated. Secondary analyses of relevant literature on societies in South Africa, Ghana and Nigeria serve as examples.

## 2. Happiness and income inequality in Sub Saharan Africa

**Graph 4:** income inequality by country, 2018



Source: World map of the *Gini* coefficients by country <sup>6</sup>

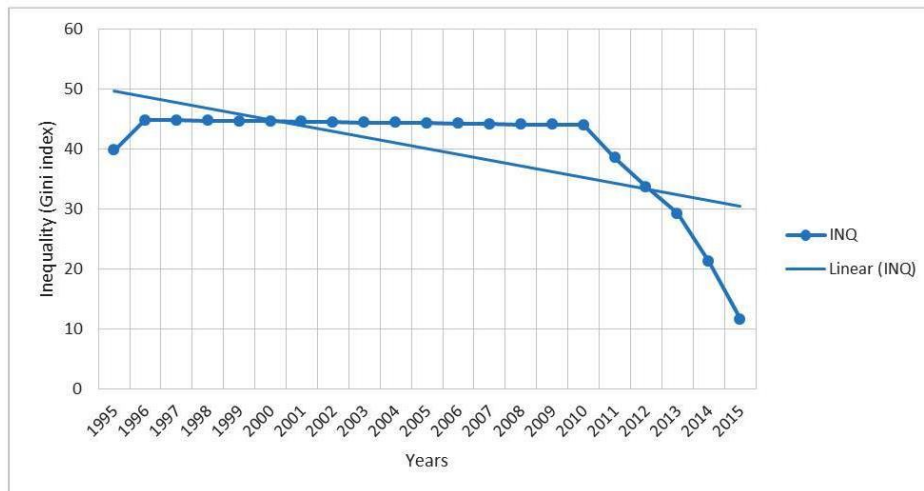
[Income inequality](#) as measured by the [Gini coefficient](#) is especially pronounced in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) (see Graph 4). The gross [income inequality in South Africa](#) with a Gini coefficient of 63 is the highest in the world.

Happiness, on the other hand, is a vague construct with different meanings, like positive emotion, satisfaction with life and lack of negative emotion such as depression. Therefore, it is difficult to measure. Africa has been regarded as a "black spot" concerning research on happiness (Awosola & Sunday, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Stone, Arthur A. & Joseph E. Schwartz & Joan E. Broderick & Angus Deaton (2010): [A snapshot of the age distribution of psychological well-being in the United States](#). PNAS, vol. 107 (22), pp. 9985-9990.

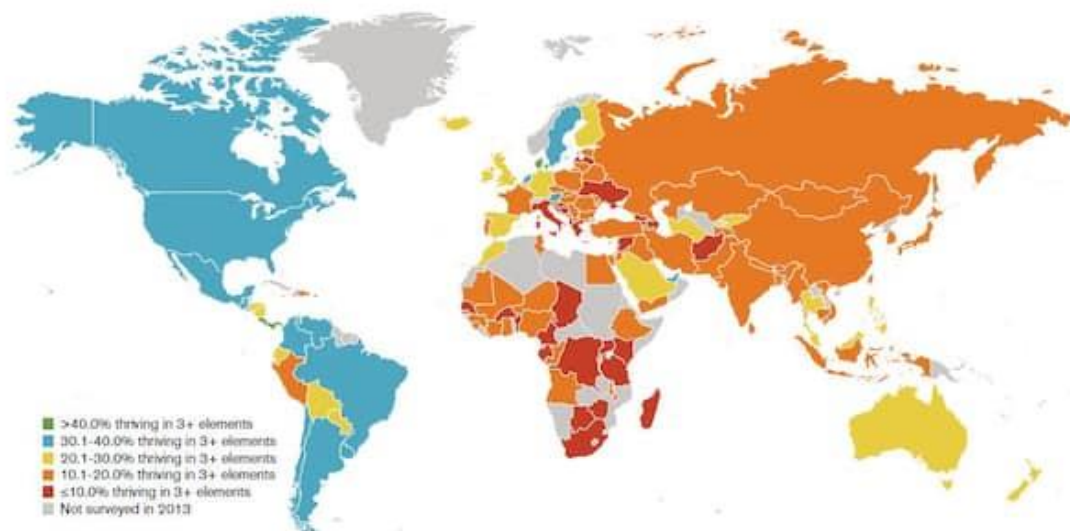
<sup>6</sup> [World map of the Gini coefficients by country](#). Based on World Bank data ranging from 1992 to 2018. Source: [List of countries by income equality](#), Wikipedia; ["GINI index \(World Bank estimate\) | Data"](#). World Bank. Retrieved 2020-07-23.

**Graph 5:** Trend of income inequality in 26 Sub-Saharan African countries (1995-2016)



Source: Adeleke & Sule, 2020:12

**Graph 6:** Gallup-Healthways Global Well-Being Index, 2014



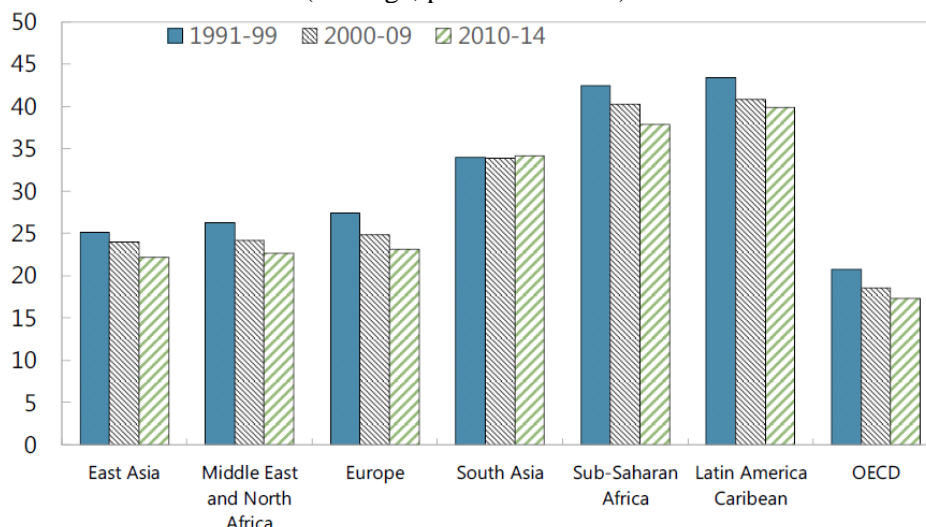
Source: Möckl, 2014

Famines and wars have been among the major root of unhappiness in SSA. Thereby, conflicts are also the major cause of persistent severe hunger. Often famines are portrayed as direct or indirect impact of climate change, for example in the [Sahel zone](#). However, the [Sahel droughts](#) are not just an effect of climate change, though it was without question a major cause, but also man-made famines, caused by transhumance and overgrazing, deforestation, and poor land management (McLaughlin & Purefoy, 2005; Eden Foundation, Sweden, 1994:1). Thus, environmental havoc induced land scarcity which itself increased segmentation between and within social groups. Thereby, the self-regulating forces of civil society, e.g. African traditional chiefs, and other domestic social, political and economic institutions were frequently weakened both in the formal and [informal sectors](#). Altogether,

these dynamics augmented social grievances, [ethnicity](#) and the social exclusion of the ‘other’. They generated breakdowns for individuals and social groups, affected by lack of resources, which drove them to engage in violent conflict, as revealed also by case studies of [South Africa](#) and [Rwanda](#) (Percival, 1995)

In many parts of SSA [informality](#) is nowadays the normality. Notably, in [West Africa](#), the articulation of shadow economy and society dominates social relations and subjective wellbeing (Kohnert, 2000).

**Graph 7: Informal economy by world region**  
(Average, per cent of GDP)



Source: Medina & Jonelis & Cangul, 2017: 31

The share of the informal economic activity in SSA remained among the largest worldwide (see Graph 7). There is considerable heterogeneity in the size of the informal in SSA, ranging from 20% to 25% in South Africa, Namibia to 50% to 65% in West Africa (Medina & Jonelis & Cangul 2017).

Contrary to what many expected, the commercialization of social and political relations in the context of the theory of "[modernization](#)" and globalization did not lead to the slow death of the informal sector (IS) in politics and the economy, but contributed significantly to its expansion, both in terms of the range and scope of its activities. The spread of markets of violence and venality in the SSA is an example. The increasingly unequal regional, sectoral and interpersonal distribution of resources is mostly based on the same factors. Yet, it leads to specific effects such as growing poverty and an ever-widening gap in income distribution in countries such as Nigeria and to increasing pressure on those affected to ensure their survival through class-specific activities in the informal sector (Kohnert, 2000).

In fact, the informal sector is neither “informal” nor unstructured: Many areas of the IS are at least as regulated like those of the "modern" sector, which is mostly based on Western models. Only these rules belong to a different socio-cultural environment. Although they are by definition unwritten laws, they are often much more rigid than those of the formal sector, both in terms of content and form, especially as far as the so-called "traditional" sector is concerned. After all, the informal and formal sectors are by no means isolated from one another as dualistic structures. Both economic systems are inextricably intertwined, both with each other and with the socio-political informal sector. Informal networks in business, society and politics are mutually dependent and cannot survive on their own. Due to its intensive

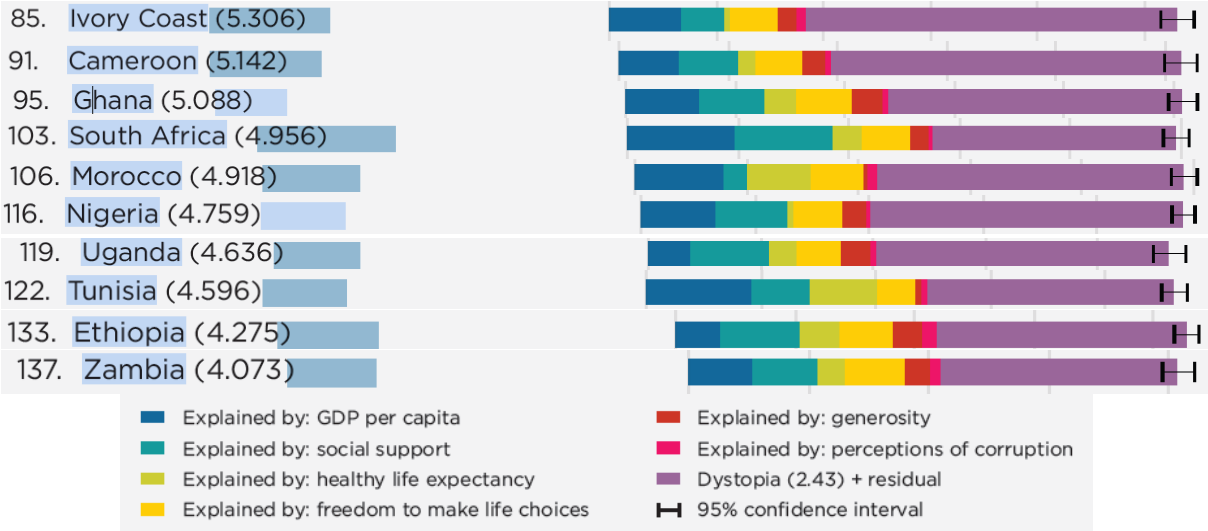


interdependence with the most diverse structures at all levels of business, politics and society, the IS is highly hierarchical and diversified. Its individual strata or classes can even stand in an antagonistic relationship with one another. Both productivity and the income earned in IS vary extremely, depending on social class and structure (Kohnert, 2000).

For the analysis of subjective wellbeing and happiness it is imperative to take into account of the threefold stratification of the IS: For the African poor, the disenfranchised and marginalized (women, children, old, sick, unemployed etc.) survival is the main aim. The lower middle class, however, is mainly interested in the preservation of vested rights, whereas the rich and influential are mainly orientated at often extra-legal profit maximization and risk diversification. The affected political, military, traditional and religious leaders, typically use to expand or consolidate their power (examples: smuggling, arms, drug, diamond or human trafficking; warlords) (Medina & Jonelis & Cangul 2017; Kohnert, 2000).

This having said, we return to an overview of the statistics on the distribution of subjective wellbeing and happiness in Africa. The [World Happiness Report, 2021](#), produced the following ranking of Sub-Saharan African countries:

**Graph 8:** Ranking of happiness, 10 of 37 African countries, 2018-2020



Source: [World Happiness Report 2021, ranking position](#) (149 countries surveyed in total)

**Graph 9:** Ranking of happiness in Africa (average life evaluations), 2020 and 2017-2019  
 1<sup>st</sup> value: rank by 2020 score, 2<sup>nd</sup> value: rank by 2017-2019 score

1. Nigeria: 59, 80
2. Ghana: 65, 67
3. Ivory Coast: 70, 64
4. Cameroon: 71, 72
5. South Africa: 76, 78
6. Zambia: 79, 92
7. Morocco: 80, 71
8. Tunisia: 82, 88
9. Uganda: 83, 87
10. Ethiopia: 85, 90
11. Kenya: 86, 84
12. Egypt: 87, 91

Source: WHR-2021 <sup>7</sup>

**Graph 10: Wellbeing in Africa, sorted by percentage thriving (2010)**

	Thriving	Struggling	Suffering	Daily Experience		Thriving	Struggling	Suffering	Daily Experience
	%	%	%			%	%	%	
Malawi	25	64	10	8.0	Sudan	7	81	12	7.4
Libya*	24	68	8	6.0	Djibouti	7	86	8	7.5
Botswana	24	65	11	7.3	Madagascar	7	84	10	7.0
South Africa	21	71	8	7.3	Uganda	6	71	23	6.8
Somaliland	18	77	5	7.1	Tanzania	6	70	24	7.5
Algeria	18	77	6	6.7	Senegal	6	88	6	7.3
Nigeria	18	78	4	7.3	Chad	5	88	7	7.1
Cameroon	14	77	9	7.0	Liberia	5	90	5	6.7
Tunisia	14	77	9	6.8	Mali	5	77	18	8.0
Zambia	14	78	8	7.6	Ivory Coast	4	84	12	7.2
Central African Republic	12	75	13	6.4	Congo (Kinshasa)	4	85	11	6.4
Ethiopia	12	67	21	6.4	Benin	4	80	16	6.7
Namibia	11	79	10	8.1	Niger	3	86	11	7.9
Angola	11	81	8	6.8	Rwanda	3	75	22	7.8
Mozambique	10	78	11	7.2	Burkina Faso	3	71	26	6.5
Egypt	10	71	19	6.1	Sierra Leone	3	74	23	6.3
Mauritania	10	83	7	7.2	Comoros	2	75	23	7.7
Zimbabwe	10	73	17	7.3	Burundi	2	58	40	7.5
Morocco	10	80	10	7.0	Togo	1	67	31	5.0
Kenya	9	78	13	7.5					
Ghana	9	83	8	7.5					
Congo (Brazzaville)	8	73	20	6.9					
Guinea	8	89	3	7.1					

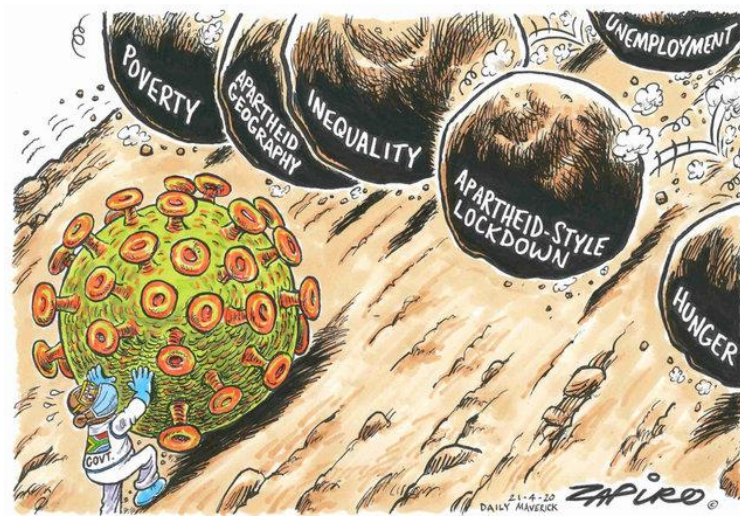
Gallup World Poll, 2005-2009  
 \*Limited urban samples only.  
 Due to rounding, thriving, struggling, and suffering percentages may not equal 100%.

Source: [Gallup@ Global Wellbeing, the behavioural economics of GDP growth](#), Gallup. Washington D.C., 2010

<sup>7</sup> WHR-2021, Table 2.1: [Ranking of happiness \(average life evaluations\)](#) based on the 2020 surveys compared to those in 2017-2019. Selection of 12 African countries out of a total of 95 surveyed countries.

### 3. Happiness and income inequality in South Africa

**Cartoon 3: "Rumblings"**



Source: Zapiro, *Daily Maverick*, 21 April 2020. © 2020 Zapiro (all rights reserved).  
Republished in: Joubert & Wasserman (2020)

**Cartoon 4: 'Change takes time ...'**<sup>8</sup>



Source: Cartoon, © [Zapiro](#), (all rights reserved), 2008,  
republished in Olukotun, 2011

Income inequality in South Africa is the most severe worldwide with a Gini coefficient of 63 as shown by the GINI index (World Bank estimate; World Bank. Retrieved 30 March 2020; [List of countries by income equality](#), Wikipedia). South Africa's income and wealth gap

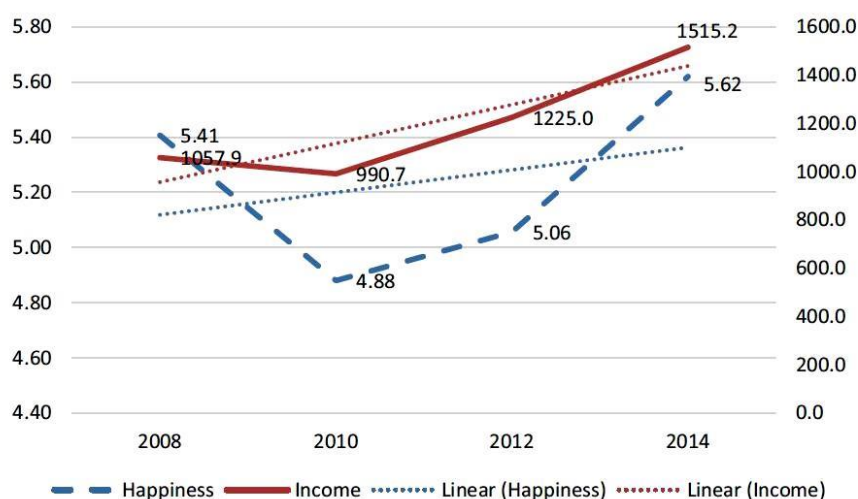
<sup>8</sup> Cartoon ridiculing President [Thabo Mbeki](#), who succeeded [Nelson Mandela](#), the first President of democratic SA. "Mbeki came into power promising that he would deliver vitally needed services and opportunities for South Africans, leading the internationally renowned South African cartoonist Zapiro to coin him 'Mr. Delivery.' When Mbeki's promises did not materialize he was viewed as aloof, especially because of his frequent international travel. Mbeki resigned in 2008 after African National Congress party leadership announced that it would no longer support him." (Olukotun, Deji (2011).

remained unchanged since Apartheid according to a report by the 2021 World Inequality Lab<sup>9</sup> at the [Paris School of Economics](#) (Sguazzin, 2021).

Over centuries, the legacy of colonial rule and the Apartheid regime cemented the rift between the White minority and Black Africans who were largely denied justice and economic as well as political opportunities. Although, after the end of Apartheid and more than 25 years of democratic rule, a Black middle class, including a Black business and political elite grew up, the richest 10% of the population own more than 85% of household wealth. On the other hand, over half the population have more obligations than resources, according to the World Inequality Lab report. For eight years, Black Africans have outnumbered Whites in the richest 10% of the population. Nevertheless, the inequality gap did not narrow. The increase in ‘racial equality’ has been driven almost entirely by a surge in the top Black incomes rather than increased wealth for the poorest (Sguazzin, 2021).

Physical well-being (e.g. as measured by the [Human Development Index](#), HDI), income- and happiness levels increased substantially in the past decades. In general, the development of income inequality differs from that of happiness, happiness inequality lags behind.

**Graph 11: Trend in happiness and income relationship**  
Income and happiness in South Africa, 2008-2014



Source: Kollamparambil, 2020

However, there are exceptions. South Africa registered growing happiness equality despite decreasing income equality. The remarkable decrease in income- and happiness from 2008 to 2010 shown in graph 11 is related to the [great recession in Africa](#), notably in South Africa, in the late 2000s as the aftermath of the 2007-2008 [global financial crisis](#). Later on, happiness levels even exceeded the pre-crisis levels because of the improvement of poverty- and unemployment levels that were closely related to the economic recovery (Kollamparambil, 2020). The arc of suspense between collectivism and individualism in South Africa’s society had a visible influence on its well-being. The majority of South Africans preferred calm and a balanced state of mind such as satisfaction and peace of mind as well as freedom. Also, they

<sup>9</sup> The report was based on data collected from 1993 to 2017. It was authored by Amory Gethin of the World Inequality Lab, together with Aroop Chatterjee of Johannesburg’s University, of The Witwatersrand’s Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, and Leo Czajka of the Universite Catholique de Louvain in Belgium (Sguazzin, 2021).

associated happiness with a close social relationship and a stable social environment in which everybody strives, whereby family relationships were emphasized (Pflug, 2009).

Understandably, the end of Apartheid 1994 brought a great improvement in happiness among the majority of South Africans who became internationally known by the [euphemism 'rainbow people'](#). National pride, the sense of belonging and unity among the [diverse ethnic groups in South Africa](#) brought a greater feeling of subjective well-being that probably triggered also growing happiness (Møller & Dickow & Harris, 1999). Furthermore, a case study on happiness in [Durban](#), the third biggest South African city after Johannesburg and Cape Town, revealed that unemployed associated an analogous relationship between happiness and household income, relative household income, and living in a formal place of residence. Unlike conditions in highly industrialized countries, being self-employed, negatively affected happiness. Age and marital status, however, did not appear to play a significant role in the likelihood to be happy (Hinks & Gruen, 2007).

Differences in self-assessment of health (SRH) between socio-economic strata also impacted on happiness according to the [World Value Survey](#) (2010-2014). Self-rated health among African poor ranged from approximately 9% bad [health in Nigeria](#), 16.2% in [South Africa](#) to 20% in [Zimbabwe](#). South Africa had the highest degree of unhappiness (23.3%). Generally, poor SRH and unhappiness were disproportionately concentrated among the poorest socioeconomic strata (most respondents were young married females). Thus, self-assessments of health and happiness could serve as proxy estimates for understanding the distribution of health care access and economic resources needed for wellbeing (Adesanya et al., 2017).

Quite naturally, the South African poor would have enjoyed access to better infrastructure and public goods that subsequently led to improved subjective wellbeing. Apparently, income mattered less. This was probably derived from the fact that small additions to income impacted insignificantly to alleviate the primary constraints of happiness. This, the more so, because relative differences in income matter most, sometimes even just the perception of the respondent's relative standing had a significant impact. Wealthier, largely White South Africans, found happiness in different things like rising income, more consumption, better housing and higher levels of education (Bookwalter, 2012). In 2010, the share of all South Africans expressing satisfaction, happiness and optimism was among the highest since the end of Apartheid. Just over half of the informants stated they were satisfied, close to two-thirds were happy, and half felt life was getting better (Møller, 2013). The strict [lockdown policy](#) of the government in [Pretoria](#) because of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) in 2020 resulted in a negative relationship between the lockdown regulations and happiness. South Africa suffered the largest negative effect compared to the other investigated countries (Greyling & Rossouw & Adhikari, 2021; Kohnert, 2020).

Nevertheless, increasing happiness levels and decreasing happiness inequality despite increasing income inequality, indicate that the absolute rather than the relative effect of income dominates happiness and happiness inequality at the country level in South Africa. Therefore, it has been suggested that happiness inequality may be generally a useful supplementary measure of inequality in society (Kollamparambil, 2020).

#### 4. Happiness and income inequality in Ghana

**Cartoon 5:** ‘Happy Workers Day, the laborer deserves his wages’



Source: TV3 Ghana, by (©) Tilapia\_GH, 1 May 2019 (all rights reserved).

Ghana has been categorized by the IMF as having one of the fastest increasing inequality levels in Africa although the country does not yet range among SSA countries with the highest level of inequality. In 2013, the wealthiest decile consumed 6.8 times the amount as the poorest 10%, up from 6.4 times in 2006. Average consumption of this wealthiest group increased by 27% between 2006 and 2013, whereas for the poorest it only increased by 19%. The wealthiest 10% consumed around one-third of all national consumption, compared to 1.72% among the poorest 10% (Cooke & Hague & McKay, 2016). Factors associated with happiness differ significantly according to belonging to different social strata. Therefore, the analysis of happiness should focus on specific groups of people for proper interpretation of results (Ayerakwa & Osei & Osei-Akoto, 2015). Also, the moderating role of [psychological capital](#) on the relation between poverty and happiness should be considered (Lotfi & Hossein, 2016).

**Cartoon 6:** ‘Happy Independence Day Ghana!’  
6 March 1957



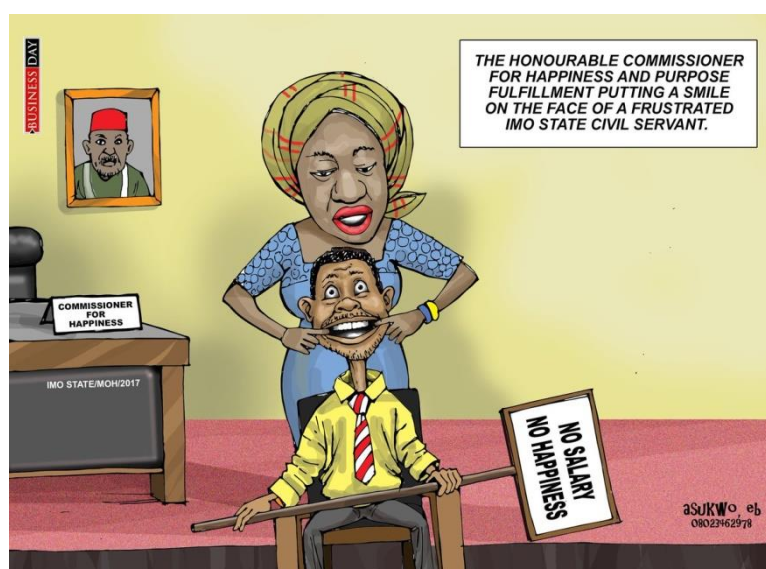
Source: Adamu Waziri, © [Bino & Fino](#), 6 March 2013 (all rights reserved).

The growing income inequality reflected itself in Ghanaian's well-being. However, self-assessment of wellbeing was complex, socially and context-dependent, and encompassing the embodiment of both material and immaterial circumstances (Kangmennaang & Elliott, 2019).

The location of residence was of particular importance for the self-concept of well-being. It enabled to appreciate how particular social relations, structures, and social norms affected the respondent's sense of a good life. Although participants articulated the need to have cultural values and norms appreciated, they were also concerned about the leaning of culture towards hierarchy and recognition of hierarchal social structures as normal and necessary. This significantly reinforced inequality (Kangmennaang & Elliott, 2019). Inequalities may also affect wellbeing, for example, by constraining access to basic amenities like water, food, and housing and also through community social capital and cohesion (Kangmennaanga & Smale & Elliott, 2019).

## 5. Happiness and income inequality in Nigeria

**Cartoon 7:** 'We all need to be happy. It is our democratic right to be'  
(Ministry of Health (MOH), [Imo State](#), Nigeria, 2017)



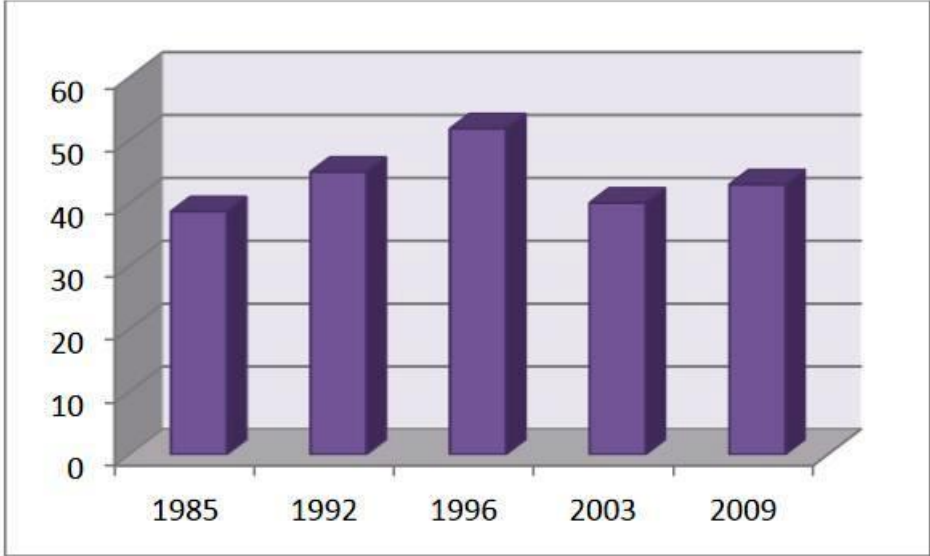
Source: [Olajide Abiola](#), 2017; [asukwo, eb](#), © [Business Day](#), Lagos, 2017

[Nigeria](#) is the most populous African country and among the largest and fastest-growing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa beside South Africa. Because of the colonial heritage of pronounced class division, ethnic and political rivalry and widespread corruption the society is deeply divided. More than half of the population still struggles with extreme poverty, while a small elite ostentatiously enjoys ever-growing wealth. While more than 112 million Nigerians were living in poverty in 2010, the amount of money that the richest Nigerian man may earn annually would be sufficient to lift 2 million people out of poverty for one year. Lifting all Nigerian people living below the extreme poverty line of \$1.90 out of poverty for one year will cost about US\$24 billion. This amount of money is just lower than the total wealth owned overall by the five richest Nigerians in 2016, which was equal to \$29.9 billion (Mayah & Chiara & Mere & Odo, 2017). Poverty in Nigeria is all the more outrageous because Nigeria's political (mostly military) governors never orientated their economic policy towards inclusive growth, despite the IMF and WB pleading for it for decades.

Income inequality in Nigeria was considerable, with a [Gini coefficient](#) ranging between 45 and 60 between 1985 and 2009 (Babatunde, 2018). Economic growth impacted only insignificant positive on income inequality in Nigeria. Therefore, a more equitable distribution of economic gains among the poor citizens was imperative to improve the welfare

of the majority of the population (Nwosa, 2019). Nigeria's recent policy towards encouraging the inflow of foreign direct investment caused dramatic changes in macroeconomics policies from stringent controls to deregulation and privatization (Adigun & Sadibo, 2019).

**Graph 12:** Income inequality in Nigeria, 1985-2009 (Gini index)



Source: WB, World Dev. Indicator (2018); Babatunde, 2019

Financial globalisation was considered a significant determinant of inequality because by increasing the likelihood of a financial crisis, it may hurt the poor, thereby escalating the inequality in the country or region. Thereby, trade and financial globalisation influenced income inequality differently. Trade globalisation was negatively and significantly associated with income inequality, while financial globalisation was positively and significantly associated with income inequality in Nigeria. Thus, globalisation and economic growth were identified as significant determinants of inequality in Nigeria (Nwosa, 2020). Furthermore, there existed a direct line of causality between poverty and inequality as well as indirect paths of impacting inequality through unemployment and low life expectancy which exacerbated poverty in Nigeria (Ogbeide & Agu 2015).

In a survey of five SSA countries, including Nigeria, based on data from the world value survey (WVS) 2010-2014, the latter ranked lowest concerning self-rated health (9%) and second-lowest in lack of happiness (15 % unhappy) but unusual high concerning self-rated happiness (85 %) (Adesanya et al., 2017). Yet, there exists another interpretation of these happiness surveys in Nigeria. For instance, combined data from the 1995 to 2007 World Value Survey showed that the mean happiness for Nigeria was 2.82 (29th) which would have been quite above France with 2.50, Japan with 2.24, Israel with 2.08, and Italy with 2.06. Given Nigeria's economic and social realities, it has to be questioned whether Nigeria's ranking as one of the happiest nations on earth reflects the reality. As an alternative explanation, it has been forwarded that Nigerians may self-report feelings of happiness as a way to counter the negative effects of harsh conditions that the majority of the population frequently experience. Implications of this conclusion for further research on happiness and life satisfaction were suggested (Agbo & Nzeadibe & Ajaero, 2012).

The three-quarter of self-rated happy people in Nigeria seems to be a paradox, regarding the harsh socio-economic conditions in which most of them live. It has been argued that they may



compensate themselves with consolatory feelings of happiness to counteract the lingering negative effect of those conditions (Agbo & Nzeadibe & Ajaero, 2012). Insofar, these people may reflect the ‘return to laughter’ which had been observed already by Laura Bohannan among the Tiv five decades before (s. above).

Also, religion may contribute to their happiness, notably since the spread of African churches and Pentecostalism, mushrooming in West Africa, especially in Nigeria which has the largest population of Pentecostals in Africa. A study from 2006 revealed that three out of ten Nigerians recognized to belong either to Pentecostal or other Charismatic churches ([African Pentecostalism](#), Wikipedia).

## 6. Conclusion

In Sub-Saharan Africa, both the level of happiness and the level of income have shown increasing tendencies in recent decades. However, trends in inequality between indicators of income and happiness may diverge significantly. In general, happiness does not automatically increase with increasing income but lags behind. Moreover, in the long-run, growth rates of happiness and income (GNP per head) are not significantly related according to the ‘Easterlin paradox’, because over time subjective wellbeing is mainly a function of social comparison.

The fundamental weaknesses and shortcomings of the conventional utilitarian economics of happiness have been castigated already by Amartya Sen (2008). By contrast, Sen argued that the capabilities approach did not suffer from these weaknesses because it considered individuals' objectives and specific conditions. Moreover, it employed a multidimensional informational space, which could be enlarged and evaluated in public informed and reasoned debates (Sen, A., 2008). Also, religious behaviour is a crucial predictor, even within the economic modelling of happiness. It could show how individuals may derive utility from religion (Steiner & Leinert & Frey, 2020). Whether the economics of happiness take into account sufficiently the possibility of the ‘laughter of despair’ as described above, is open to question.

Last, but not least, childhood well-being as an outcome in its own right is to consider. Firstly, because childhood is part of overall subjective well-being, and secondly because childhood well-being is a strong predictor of well-being throughout adulthood. Finally, the interdependence of happiness and brain activity is an under-researched subject. It possibly could avoid systematic bias in well-being scores due to individual reporting. These well-being measures would come straight from the horse's mouth (Clark, 2018).

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**Résumé :** Le bonheur est un état d'esprit universel. Cependant, sa signification prend des formes spécifiques à la culture, allant des états d'esprit émotionnels à la satisfaction générale de la vie. La définition du « bonheur » est fortement influencée par le contexte philosophique et les conditions de vie matérielles respectives et est façonnée par les différences linguistiques. Même au sein des pays, la localisation et la structure sociale sont importantes dans la conceptualisation et la mesure du bien-être. Les exceptions confirment la règle. Dans l'étude anthropologique classique de Laura Bohannan sur les Tiv du Middle Belt nigériane dans les années 1950, le « retour au rire » signifiait le rire du désespoir, p. ex. quand les gens se moquaient de la misère humaine face à la sorcellerie omniprésente. Une autre exemption de la règle est liée aux confinements liés au COVID-19 qui ont été associés à une baisse de la satisfaction, indépendamment des caractéristiques spécifiques au pays ou du type et de la durée du confinement. En Afrique subsaharienne, tant le niveau de bonheur que le niveau de revenu ont montré des tendances à la hausse au cours des dernières décennies. Cependant, les tendances de l'évolution de l'inégalité entre les indicateurs de revenu et de bonheur peuvent diverger considérablement. En général, le bonheur n'augmente pas automatiquement avec l'augmentation des revenus, mais reste à la traîne. Ce paradoxe, comme le montre l'économie du bonheur, ne semble pas se produire dans des pays comme l'Afrique du Sud, l'un des pays les plus inégalitaires au monde. Le pays a enregistré une égalité croissante de bonheur malgré la hausse des inégalités de revenus. De toute évidence, l'impact absolu des inégalités de revenu et de bonheur au niveau national est plus important que l'impact relatif. Par conséquent, l'inégalité du bonheur en général peut être une mesure supplémentaire utile de l'inégalité, en particulier en Afrique, qui est considérée comme une « tache noire » en matière de recherche sur le bonheur.

**Zusammenfassung:** Glück ist eine universelle Geistesverfassung. Ihre Bedeutung nimmt jedoch kulturspezifische Formen an und reicht von emotionalen Gemütszuständen bis hin zur allgemeinen Lebenszufriedenheit. Die Definition von ‚Glück‘ ist stark von jeweiligen philosophischen Hintergründen sowie materiellen Lebensumständen beeinflusst und von sprachlichen Unterschieden geprägt. Selbst innerhalb von Ländern sind der Standort und die soziale Struktur wichtig für die Konzeptualisierung und Messung des Wohlbefindens. Ausnahmen bestätigen die Regel. In Laura Bohannans klassischer anthropologischer Studie über die Tiv im nigerianischen Mittelgürtel in den 1950er Jahren bedeutete die „Rückkehr zum Lachen“ das Lachen der Verzweiflung, z.B. wenn Menschen angesichts der allgegenwärtigen Hexerei über menschliches Elend lachten. Eine weitere Ausnahme von der Regel betrifft COVID-19-Lockdowns, die mit einem Rückgang der Zufriedenheit verbunden waren, unabhängig von länderspezifischen Besonderheiten oder der Art und Dauer des Lockdowns. In Subsahara-Afrika zeigten sowohl das Glücks- als auch das Einkommensniveau in den letzten Jahrzehnten steigende Tendenzen. Allerdings können die Entwicklungstrends der Ungleichheit zwischen Einkommens- und Glücksindikatoren erheblich auseinanderklaffen. Generell wächst das Glück nicht automatisch mit steigendem Einkommen, sondern hinkt hinterher. Dieses Paradoxon, tritt so, wie es die Glücksökonomie aufzeigt, jedoch in Ländern wie Südafrika, einem der ungleichsten Länder der Welt, offenbar nicht ein. Das Land registrierte eine wachsende Glücksgleichheit trotz zunehmender Einkommensungleichheit. Offensichtlich ist die absolute Auswirkung von Einkommens- und Glücksungleichheit auf Länderebene wichtiger als die relative Auswirkung. Daher kann die Glücksungleichheit im Allgemeinen ein nützliches ergänzendes Maß für Ungleichheit sein, insbesondere in Afrika, das in Bezug auf die Glücksforschung als „schwarzer Fleck“ gilt.