

Why do we feel so bad? – Marie Briguglio

If we are doing so well economically, why are we so stressed and worried?


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Living in grime is correlated with higher nervousness, local research suggests. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

The [2022 report](#) recently issued by Gallup revealed the Maltese people to be more worried, stressed and in pain than the average person around the world. Is this data reliable? What does it mean? If we're doing so well economically, then why do we feel so bad?

On the question of reliability of results, Gallup is a global analytics private entity which conducts multiple surveys on well-being – drawn from representative samples. Its data is used in many highly cited reports that compare well-being globally. It asks the same questions consistently across countries and over time.

Yet, there is room for caution. For instance, people from different countries may have different interpretations of what 'stress', 'anger' or 'respect' mean and cross-country comparisons may be difficult.

Still, findings here are consistent with others. In a pan-European survey (EU-SILC) where Malta data was collected by the National Statistics Office in 2018 (and annually thereafter), a total of 9,555 Maltese people were interviewed.

They reported having lower levels of satisfaction with their time use and feeling nervous more often than their European counterparts, even though overall satisfaction with life was high.

In the last [World Happiness Report](#) (2022) issued by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Malta ranked 33rd in the world for life evaluation, 27th on GDP, 28th on social support and a stunning 13th on healthy life expectancy.

Yet, we ranked only 99th in the world on positive emotions and 30th in the world for negative emotions. Why?

Different indices measure well-being in different ways. Some (like the Human Development Index, the EU SDG dashboard) use indicators of the country's progress; others (like the EU-SILC well-being module and this last Gallup survey) ask people themselves to report how they feel, while some (like the OECD Better Life Index or the EU Quality of Life dashboard) use both types of measures.

Two out of three experience a lot of worry; half of the Maltese feel stressed; we experience less enjoyment than the rest of the world.

So, what did we ourselves report in this last Gallup survey? The most striking result is that two out of three of us said they experienced a lot of worry – 64% in contrast with 42% on average in the rest of the world. These worry levels are at par with Lebanon's and far from those in a similar small island economy, Mauritius (20%).

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We also experienced less enjoyment than the rest of the world (Malta 59%, world 70%) and far less than Iceland (89%) and Ireland (86%). Many experienced a lot of physical pain (Malta 37%, world 31%), a finding worth investigating further given that Malta scores very well on objective health indicators.

Half of the Maltese felt stressed for a lot of the day (Malta 49%, world 41%), one in four felt angry (Malta 24%, world 23%) and one in four felt sad (Malta 25%, world 28%). This despite regular instances of smiling/laughter (Malta 75%, world 72%), respect (Malta 92%, world 86%), learning new things (Malta learned 55%, world 50%) and being generally well-rested (Malta 78%, world 69%).

The key question is: how can we be doing so well on the material front but still be feeling so bad? Part of the answer lies in the other things we experience (or lack), besides money.

For instance, it is well-researched that people feel good when they engage with nature and with art and culture and feel bad when exposed to pollution, crime, negative social interactions, stressful working conditions, when they lack time to be with friends and family and feel institutional mistrust.

Furthermore, while we may be doing well materially on average, there are many individuals who experience misery in Malta.

Analysis of data from the Well-being INDEX project, a collaborative research project between the Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society and the University of Malta, digs deeper on which social groups feel negative emotions in Malta.

For instance, nervousness is more prevalent among the very poor and the unemployed but also among people working long hours and the self-employed.

Single parents and people in very poor health also experience such negative emotions more frequently. In contrast with the average in Malta, people in Gozo report feeling nervous less often, while those living in pollution, grime or other environmental problems as well as areas of crime, vandalism or violence feel nervous more often.

The prevalence of negative emotions is worrying as it tells us that we are not doing as well as we may have thought by material standards. Negative emotions can be amplified on social media, can cause civil unrest, can influence decisions, can result in behaviours that are more demanding on the public purse and can suppress productivity and healthy life years.

On the other hand, the fact that they are measured now presents us with an opportunity to understand where we can do better.

Marie Briguglio is the principal investigator of the Well-being INDEX project.