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Money can't buy me 'sejahtera'



By [Dzulkifli Abdul Razak](#) - March 16, 2021 @ 12:05am



A family having some fun outdoors at Tasik Putrajaya in Presint 8, Putrajaya, on Sunday. Different cultures have better, more appropriate and nuanced terms for 'happiness'. - Bernama pic

MARCH 20 is International Day of Happiness (IDH). An important day as the pandemic enters the second year.

It is imperative that we spread a message of happiness that promotes solidarity regardless of geopolitical boundaries and ideologies.

Since 2013, the United Nations has celebrated the day as a recognition of the relevance of happiness to the lives of people the world over.

IDH is a good reminder that "happiness" is an essential component in life. I believe education plays a primary role in laying the foundation to learning how to be happy.

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Bhutan is a classic example of this, with its commitment to the Gross National Happiness as a mark of "success" beyond just economics.

Happiness is more often associated with the level of trust and shared values across cultures and identities.

It can strengthen solidarity and reduce inequality and injustice. According to Richard Layard, co-director of the Well-Being Programme at London School of Economic s' Centre for Economic Performance, "happiness inequality significantly reduces average life evaluations. This means people are happier to live in societies without extreme disparity in the quality of life".

But this is easier said than done. The UN General Assembly, in a resolution adopted in 2012, is conscious that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal; the need to be more inclusive, equitable and balanced in promoting "sustainable development, poverty eradication, happiness and the well-being of all peoples".

It is interesting to note that IDH was originally conceptualised as "happytalism" as part of the UN New World Order Project to advance happiness as a fundamental human right, and allegedly a new economic theory to replace an "old" world economic system created 150 to 1,000 years ago.

However, this issue remains unresolved and it comes to the fore time and again. More recently, a report alleging that money and finance are linked to happiness calculated based on salary level in a particular country has made its rounds. Based on what is called "happiness premium", researchers at Purdue University in the US reportedly found that "more money boosted happiness" although only to a point.

Beyond that, the reverse may be the case. Using "happiness premium" as the basis, happiness is linked to an economic price tag, which takes it back full circle to what the global analysis seems to indicate. So it is crucial that the term "happiness" be thoroughly understood within a local context and meaning, from the individual to the societal level.

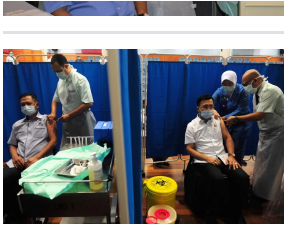
For this, a book entitled The Happiness Dictionary is instructive. According to author Tim Lomas, "the trouble with happiness is not that it means nothing, but that it means too much", that the meaning of happiness is too generic and vague with no specific cultural context, perhaps more in line with the English meaning of the word.

As such, the idea cannot be accurately translated into other languages.

"Apple" in English and "durian" in Malay are objects that can be touched, smelled and tasted with the senses. Not so for "happiness" at it is more experiential. Different cultures, therefore, may have better, more appropriate and nuanced terms for "happiness".

It is something specific to a culture and cannot be generalised, let alone compared in a standardised way based on materialistic constructs. Moreover, some indigenous terms are multi-layered, where no one word can adequately cover all the dimensions and connotations of the indigenous term.

This is why it is better to use the indigenous term sejahtera as a substitute to mark IDH to bring in a deeper meaning of sejahtera, encompassing the 10 dimensions embedded in it.



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More significantly, all 10 dimensions must be well balanced, equitable and inclusive, as envisaged by the UN General Assembly resolution mentioned.

It covers the micro- and macrocosmic aspects in a harmonious way to nurture insan sejahtera (well-balanced and harmonious) to coexist with internal and external environments.

Translating sejahtera into happiness, wellbeing or prosperity reduces it to a very narrow spectrum that hardly conveys its whole meaning beyond the notions of price tags and materialistic implications.

If "money can't buy me love", as The Beatles said, more so for sejahtera. With this in mind, I wish everyone a great International Day of Sejahtera!

The writer, an NST columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector

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