One by one, developed countries are drawing up happiness indices. Their governments realise GDP growth figures alone are a poor measure of people’s well-being. Should Singapore do the same? Insight reports.
By ANDREA ONG

LAST year, Ms Jhin Lim, 23, started her first job as a tax associate at an accounting firm.

She quit after seven months, when "writing up prospects of good pay and career progression to become a physical education teacher at a secondary school.

"I didn’t find value or meaning in what I was doing," she says.

She is now much happier. "I like sports. I like interacting with the students and I am meaning in encouraging them to enjoy sports and lead a healthy lifestyle at a young age," says the fitness buff, who ran the Standard Chartered Marathon in March.

Several developed countries are going through a soul-search akin to Ms Lim’s. They are asking their citizens: Are you happy? What makes you happy?

And they are coming up with indices to measure and track people’s happiness levels.

Earlier this week, Janeun unveiled a set of draft indicators. The 132 indices put numbers to areas like women’s satisfaction with men’s participation in child-care, the number of young people who live in isolation, and people’s sense of whether they are living as happily as others in the community, reported The Asahi Shimbun newspaper.

By doing so, Japan has become the latest to join the ranks of countries such as Australia, Britain and France, which have acknowledged the need to look beyond gross domestic product in assessing their people’s well-being.

Two months ago, the topic of happiness came up in Singapore’s Parliament when Workers’ Party MP Sylvia Lim raised the example of Bhutan, which has a Gross National Happiness Index.

She pointed out that Singapore was one of 62 nations to co-sponsor a United Nations resolution in July entitled Happiness: Towards A Holistic Approach To Development.

Ms Lim asked how the Government intended to introduce indicators of happiness, and how these would guide its policies over the next five years.

This sparked a lively debate among MPs about Singaporeans’ well-being and the importance of GDP growth. It also raised two big questions: What is the link between GDP and happiness? Is there a need for Singapore to start measuring its people’s happiness?

The happiness paradox

THERE is a growing body of research which suggests that growth in GDP, which adds up all that is produced and consumed in an economy, does not lead to greater happiness.

The paradox was highlighted in 1974 by American economist Richard Easterlin, who found that happiness levels of societies tend to stagnate after a point, even as national wealth continues to rise.

He found that happiness last year and concluded that the paradox is usually seen when wealth is developed or rapidly developing. For instance, income per capita has doubled over 20 years in Chile, China and South Korea, but happiness levels have not kept pace. The “Easterlin paradox” appears to be at work in Singapore too, according to research by two National University of Singapore (NUS) business school deans.

Based on three surveys in Singapore—conducted over the past seven years, Dr Tammy Van Kooten and Associate Professor Tan Soo Jun found that happiness levels did not vary much even though GDP grew by an average of 7 per cent each year.

Despite the quick rebound from the global financial crisis of 2008 to 2009 and the doubling of growth rates to 14.5 per cent in 2010, Singaporeans are not necessarily happier, says Dr Tammy Van and Prof Tan told Insight.

In fact, the happiness level this year fell by 3.5 per cent from 72.5 in 2009.

One reason behind the Easterlin paradox is that GDP figures do not capture the stresses and strains in society caused by income inequalities and other side-effects of growth.

Dr Tammy Van and Prof Tan note that Singapore’s “nephew economic growth” was accompanied by growing pains, such as a higher cost of living and the strain caused by a booming foreign inflows on housing, transport and social ties.

"Singapore citizens perceived that the spoils of success were not adequately shared with them as they felt slighted in the intense competition for jobs, housing and other opportunities," they add.

A book containing data analyses and findings from this year’s survey of 3,500 Singaporeans will be published next year.

Other areas not reflected in GDP measures include work-life balance and satisfaction with life.

Just ask financial analyst Brian Tan, 26. He earns over $150,000 a year—much more than many others his age.

But there is a price. A typical work day for him starts at 6am and ends late at night, with no time for dinner, because Mr Tan has to handle overseas clients. Even on holiday, he is constantly checking e-mails messages on his BlackBerry.

While he enjoys the intellectual challenge and excitement of his job, the lack of a work-life balance takes its toll.

"Sometimes it’s very hard to find room to be happy when I’m in the office at 6am and I know I have to come back in at 4am," he says. The bachelor adds wryly that his relationship status on Facebook says, simply: “I’m very busy.”

Mr Tan’s high income gives him greater purchasing power, but that does not translate into happiness. “I feel that I’m spending money just to justify why I’m working so hard,” he says.

“I know I subside on much less and still enjoy my life. Tim Maitland Powdrthave of Nanyang Technological University’s INTU has another explanation for the Easterlin paradox.

“Human beings care a lot about status. If many people would rather be the second richest person in a poor area, than to live in a rich area where many are better off than them,” says Mr Powdrthave.

Hence, as incomes rise across the board in advanced countries like Singapore, it becomes increasingly harder to improve one’s status in relation to others.

Mr Powdrthave offers an example: “If you tell someone who earns a lot of money to slow down and work less because it’s bad for his health, chances are he won’t stop unless someone else does. He won’t want to fall behind his peers with the same income and levels of education.”

He adds: “Money only buys you happiness if it buys you rank and status, but there’s not so much rank to go around.”

Measuring happiness

DR TAMMY Van believes “the time is ripe” for Singapore to introduce national indicators of happiness and quality of life.

Her firm has tracked its Gross National Happiness since 1972, when King Bhumibol Adulyadej coined the term. The index has 33 indicators, including equality, literacy, poverty, corruption and time spent with family.

Happiness indices have gained ground since 2008, when French Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy tasked a group of economists and social scientists with studying how economic and social progress can be measured in modern economies.

Led by Nobel Prize-winning econo- mists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, the group’s 2009 report called for measures of well-being and sustainability on top of traditional economic indicators.

Mr Sarkozy declared that France would include happiness and well-being in its measures of progress. Other coun- tries have since followed suit, including Britain, which released the results of its first nationwide survey on well-being last week.

Earlier this year, the Organisation for

Happiness is freedom to choose for herself

MS Lee was in the ancient Indian city of Varanasi in January, instead of following her peers into the corporate world after graduating. Ms Lee visited India, Bangladesh and Nepal, among other places, learning Tamil and a master’s degree in South Asian culture and literature.

She has visited India, Bangladesh and Nepal, among other countries. She is learning Tamil to prepare for her master’s degree course in South Asian studies at the National University of Singapore next year.

For her, happiness is the freedom to make choices for herself. Instead of simply doing what is expected of her, she says: “We learn more about ourselves when we take time to decide what we actually enjoy doing and why we are doing it.”

She is also a founder and editor of literary journal Cerigo, which publishes short stories, poems and photography by local writers and photographers every quarter.

While the technical and administrative parts of putting Cerigo together “are not much fun,” she finds joy in discovering new writers and their work.

The people she meets overseas tend to ask about her taking a gap year. But when she comes home, she feels she is “justified for not enlisting directly on my career”, she says. “We learn far more through travelling and learning will never be a setback in life.”

Ms Lee says: “I wish to pursue a career and I want to be able to take my time and learn as much as I can about my field both through an academic institute as well as outside of it.”

Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released an index called Your Better Life. It applies 11 indicators of well-being to the OECD's 34 member countries. These are a mix of subjective and objective factors like health, work-life balance, housing, income and social capital.

In October, OECD secretary-general Angel Gurría said such measures are important, as promoting growth "as usual" is no longer an option in the current climate of slowing growth and a looming financial meltdown.

Introducing a similar index in Singapore would come with its own set of challenges, as well-being is subjective. Still, researchers say Singapore can take a leaf from the 11 OECD indicators and build on existing research.

Psychologist Christie Scollon of the Singapore Management University suggests the Government may be interested in specific areas, such as work satisfaction, finances, leisure time, family and commuting.

"These seem to be hot topics in public debate these days," she notes. Research also shows that these factors might play a "particularly important role in Singaporean conceptions of the good life."

A snapshot of Singapore

ONE old bugbear is why Singapore tends to do badly in global surveys on happiness, such as the Gallup World Poll on life satisfaction and the Happy Planet Index.

Cultural differences could play a part, says Professor Scollon. Asian countries usually score lower than North America and Western Europe in many world surveys, she notes.

In a study she carried out which compared Singaporeans and Americans, she found that Singaporeans emphasise wealth more in their conception of the good life than Americans. "Too much emphasis on wealth has been shown to be detrimental to well-being," she says.

Different cultures also have different norms about what is considered good and desirable. "Americans strongly value feeling good and being happy. In Asian societies, pleasant emotions are also desirable but less so," adds Prof Scollon.

But Dr Powdthavee of NTU cautions that international happiness rankings should be taken in context.

The main purpose of happiness indicators is to track how people within a country fare across time and demographic groups, he argues. The information should also be made publicly available for academics and policymakers to study.

Within Singapore, Dr Tambyah would like to see greater collaboration among academics studying happiness.

"There are many research scholars interested in the study of happiness. If we could pool our resources, along with funding from the government, we might be able to come up with a sustain program of research that we can track over time," she says.

But studies like those she and Prof Tan have conducted already serve to provide a snapshot of Singaporeans' happiness. And with a happiness level which has hovered around 70 per cent for the last seven years, it seems Singaporeans may not be that unhappy after all.

Some factors like satisfaction with family life and national pride also keep cropping up when Singaporeans are asked what makes them happy.

For instance, a survey by Grey Singapore marketing agency, released in October, found that Singaporeans were happy...
What makes you happy?

Headline: What makes you happy?

Publication: The Straits Times, p A28-A29
Date: 9 December 2011

While the Grey Singapore survey’s sample size is not large enough to be statistically representative, its findings on how happiness varies across age groups are interesting. Among Singaporeans aged 18 to 29, reported the greatest unhappiness, while the number of people who said they were not unhappy some time between the age of 30 to 44 years was high. Among Singaporeans aged 45 to 50 were the happiest. Research shows that happiness becomes less as you get older, says Dr Desai. While Singaporeans aged 18 to 29 reported the greatest unhappiness, while the number of people who said they were not unhappy some time between the age of 30 to 44 years was high. Among Singaporeans aged 45 to 50 were the happiest. Research shows that happiness becomes less as you get older, says Dr Desai.

Happiness – a work in progress

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