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The Effect of Socio-Economic Conditions on the Happiness Index: ASEAN-8 Study 2015-2021

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ABSTRACT

People's well-being is a core goal of national development and can be assessed through the happiness index, which reflects overall quality of life. In the face of increasingly complex development challenges across ASEAN, identifying the determinants of happiness is crucial for shaping effective, targeted policies. This study analyzes the impact of various socio-economic and environmental factors—namely Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, labor force, government budgets for education and health, Consumer Price Index (CPI), Corruption Perception Index (CPI), and greenhouse gas emissions per capita—on the happiness index of eight ASEAN countries during 2015–2021. Using panel data analysis, the Fixed Effect Model (FEM) was identified as the best-fit model. The findings reveal that GDP per capita and Corruption Perception Index have a significant negative effect on the happiness index, while education spending and CPI exert a positive influence. Meanwhile, labor force, health budget, and greenhouse gas emissions show no significant impact. Among the observed countries, Singapore ranks highest in happiness, while Cambodia ranks lowest. These results suggest that beyond traditional economic indicators, governance quality—reflected in effective budget allocation and efforts to manage inflation and corruption—plays a vital role in fostering happiness in the ASEAN region.

Keywords: Economic Variables, Environment, Government Quality, Happiness Index, Social Variables.

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INTRODUCTION

Happiness is the ultimate thing that everyone wants to achieve without exception. It is up to each individual to define the happiness that exists within them (Shipley, 2021). Happiness is personal and contested in many different ways. A calm cognitive state can lead to happiness (Ilham & Farid, 2019).

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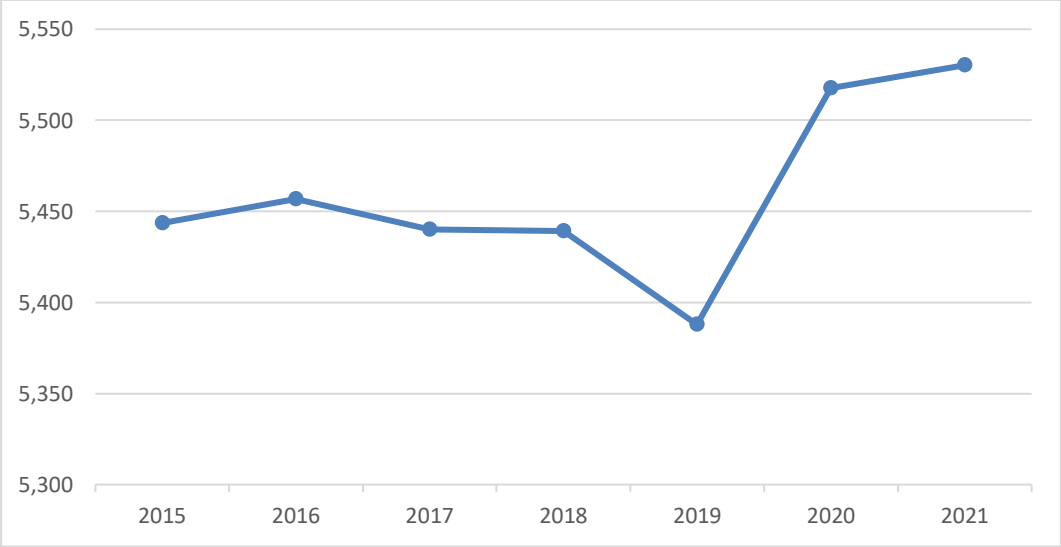
Happiness can be measured by an index called the happiness index. The happiness index is an indicator measuring the level of well-being and satisfaction of people in a country (Kapteyn et al., 2009). International research on happiness indices is growing rapidly. The well-being index was officially launched in 2012. Many countries around the world, especially ASEAN countries, use the happiness index to measure the well-being of their citizens. There are many ways to measure the well-being index, one of which is by analyzing the factors that can affect the happiness index (Yasir et al., 2022).

Calculating the happiness index is important for all countries in the world at different stages of development. The aim of measuring the happiness index is to formulate and evaluate government policies. It can be used to achieve the goal of national development, which is the welfare of society, through government policies. The calculation of the happiness index is also important to measure the assessment of people's living conditions, such as a comfortable, good, and meaningful life (BPS Indonesia, 2021).

Through its World Happiness Report (2012), the happiness index can be measured using nine domains, namely health, education, living standards, psychological well-being, use of time, effective governance, community spirit, ecological diversity and adaptability, and crime. The happiness and satisfaction index was measured on a 0-10 scale. This scale refers to two concepts, on a scale where 0 signifies extreme unhappiness or dissatisfaction, and 10 signifies great happiness or high satisfaction (Helliwell et al., 2012). Graph 1 shows the development of the happiness index for the eight ASEAN countries from 2015 to 2021.



Graph 1. Happiness index values in ASEAN countries from 2015 to 2021 (points)
Source: World Happiness Report, from 2015 to 2021, processed

Graph 1 shows that the happiness index in ASEAN countries from 2015 to 2021 generally decreased. From 2015 to 2016 and 2020 to 2021 the happiness index increased, but from 2016 to 2020 the happiness index decreased. In 2019 there was a significant decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the ASEAN region. This was caused by a decrease in income, more people with health problems, and increased unemployment (Helliwell et al., 2022).

In 1974 Easterlin proposed the Easterlin Paradox theory. This theory states that a country's income will affect the happiness index in the short term. In the long term, this theory states that the country's income will no longer affect the happiness index. This is because, in the long run, the happiness index will also be influenced by many social factors (Easterlin & O'Connor, 2020).

Abraham Maslow in his book "Towards a Psychology of Being" revealed the hierarchy of needs theory. This theory states that happiness can be created through the fulfillment of basic human needs. Basic needs include social, physiological, humanitarian, security, and esteem needs. Physiological needs are the most basic needs and come from biological conditions which include air and oxygen. The excessive greenhouse gas effect will result in extreme weather and an increase in the earth's temperature, which can affect human happiness (Wanti & Fafurida, 2023).

In the book "Lessons from a New Science" Richard Layard explains that the quality of government in a country will affect the happiness index. A quality government will have a high happiness index, but an unqualified government will have a low happiness index. The quality of this government can be seen through the corruption perception index, accountability, stabilization, and efficiency of the regulatory system (Layard & Cooper, 2005).

Hedonism theory explains that the main goal of individuals is to avoid pain and achieve pleasure or satisfaction. Through this hedonism theory, the happiness index can be influenced by the level of individual quality of life which can be seen through health factors, social relationships, employment levels, and environmental conditions (Abdullah & Zulkifli, 2016).

The human capital theory is based on the development of human resources from the education and health sectors that can affect the happiness index. The education sector through government financing in the education sector such as providing scholarships with the aim of many people being highly educated. While the health sector through government financing in the health sectors such as improving health facilities with the aim of more secure public health (Chen et al., 2020).

Based on the World Happiness Report 2020, the happiness index can be influenced by social-environmental factors that are directly related to the level of public trust in the government, such as low corruption cases in a country (Helliwel et al., 2020). In addition, the happiness index can also be influenced by micro factors related to individual personal characteristics and macro factors related to the social and financial conditions of each individual (Ribeiro & Marinho, 2017).

(Suparta & Malia, 2020) found that the Gross Domestic Product per capita variable hurts the happiness index, while (Sapriyadi et al., 2022) and (Roka, 2020) found that the Gross Domestic Product per capita variable is positively influenced by the happiness index. (Roka, 2020) and (Aditia & Dewi, 2018) found that the government budget for health variables has a positive impact on the happiness index. (Aditia & Dewi, 2018) and (Yasir et al., 2022) found that the government budget for education is positively influenced by the happiness index. (Sapriyadi et al., 2022) found that the carbon dioxide emission variable hurts the happiness index. (Chen et al., 2022) found that the labor force variable hurts the happiness index. (Kumalasari & Yasa, 2020) found that the corruption variable is positively influenced by the happiness index.

This study examines together the direction of the impact of factors related to both societal and economic aspects on overall well-being on the happiness index. This study is different from previous studies because it combines social and economic variables including Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDPP), labor force (LF), government budget for education (GBE), government budget for health (GBH), Consumer Price Index (CPI), Corruption Perception Index (CRPI), and greenhouse gases effect per capita (GGEP) as independent variables. This study is expected to provide more complete and broader information related to the determinants of the happiness index in eight ASEAN countries so that the competent authorities can use it to make policies with more comprehensive considerations related to public welfare, especially as seen through the happiness index.

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METHODS

This study uses panel data regression analysis tools. Panel data regression analysis is a combination of time series (period 2015-2021) and cross-section (eight ASEAN countries). The analysis in this study was carried out with the following econometric models:

$$HI_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 LogGDPP_{it} + \beta_2 LF_{it} + \beta_3 GBE_{it} + \beta_4 GBH_{it} + \beta_5 CPI_{it} + \beta_6 CRPI_{it} + \beta_7 GGEP_{it}$$

Information:

HI	= Happiness Index (points)
LogGDPP	= Gross Domestic Product per capita (US Dollar)
LF	= Labor Force (percent)
GBE	= Government Budget for Education (percent)
GBH	= Government Budget for Health (percent)
CPI	= Consumer Price Index (points)
CRPI	= Corruption Perception Index (points)
GGEP	= Greenhouse Gas Effect per capita (metric tonnes per capita)
ε	= Error term
β	= Constants
$\beta_1 ... \beta_7$	= Independent variable
i	= Eight ASEAN countries
t	= Period 2015-2021

This study uses an econometric model combined with the research (Aditia & Dewi, 2018) which takes the variables of the government budget for education and the government budget for health but eliminates the variable of the government budget for the economy. Then to modify it from the (Suparta & Malia, 2020) econometric model, the GDP per capita variable was taken, (Sapriyadi et al., 2022) took the variable greenhouse gas effect per capita, the Chen et al. (2022) took the labor force variable, from the (Shipley, 2021) took the consumer price index variable, while the (Wanti & Fafurida, 2023) took the corruption perception index variable.

The government budget for education (GBE), government budget for health (GBH), and Corruption Perception Index (CRPI) are expected to have a positive impact on the happiness index, while Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDPP), labor force (LF), greenhouse gases effect per capita are expected to hurt the happiness index, but the Consumer Price Index (CPI) does not affect the happiness index.

The analysis utilizes panel data regression, integrating time series (period 2015-2021) and cross-section (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos). Data sources are obtained from the World Happiness Report, Transparency International, The Global Economy, World Bank, and Emission Database for Global Atmospheric Research.

The estimation phase of panel data regression analysis involves estimating the parameters of an econometric model using various methods such as Pooled Least Square (PLS), Fixed Effect Model (FEM), and Random Effect Model (REM). This process also includes the selection of the most appropriate model to be estimated using the Chow test and Hausman test, and where appropriate the Lagrange multiplier test. In addition, the assessment of the suitability of the selected estimation model and the examination of the impact of the independent variables influence the selected model are important stages in the analysis.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The outcomes of the econometric model's estimation, conducted in advance using Pooled Least Squares (PLS), Fixed Effect Model (FEM), and Random Effect Model (REM) methodologies, are succinctly outlined in Table 1, together with the outcomes of the test for model selection:

Table 1. Estimation Result PLS, FEM, and REM

Variable	Regressions Coefficient		
	PLS	FEM	REM
C	-17,79512	16,22056	-17,79512
LogGDPP	1,110350	-0,913362	1,110350
LF	0,135224	-0,052512	0,135224
GEE	0,071052	0,053263	0,071052
GEH	0,014336	-0,011621	0,014336
CPI	0,001580	0,034821	0,001580
CRPI	-0,017195	-0,074291	-0,017195
GGEP	-0,129675	0,065629	-0,129675
R^2	0,875614	0,926554	0,875614
Adjusted R^2	0,857475	0,901475	0,857475
Statistic F	48,27091	36,94532	48,27091
Prob. Statistic F	0,000000	0,000000	0,000000

Best model selection test

(1) Chow
Cross-Section *F* (4,41) = 4,062342; Probability *F* (7,41)=0,0018

(2) Hausman
Cross-Section random χ^2 (7) =28,436395; Probability χ^2 (7)=0,0002

Source: World Happiness Report, Transparency International, The Global Economy, World Bank, Emission Database for Global Atmospheric Research, processed

The results of the Chow test show the probability or empirical significance of the F statistic worth 0,0020 (< 0,01) and the results of the Hausman test show the probability or empirical significance of the statistic χ^2 of 0,0002 (< 0,01). From these results, it can be concluded that FEM was selected as the best-estimated model. Table 2 and Table 3 show the results of the FEM estimation model.

Table 2. FEM Estimation Model

$$\widehat{\mathrm{HI}}_{it} = 16{,}22056 - 0{,}913362 LogGDPP_{it} - 0{,}052512 LF_{it} + 0{,}053263 GEE_{it} - 0{,}011621 GEH_{it} + 0{,}034821 CPI_{it} - 0{,}074291 CRPI_{it} + 0{,}065629 GGEP_{it}$$

(0,0876)*** (0,5886) (0,0222)** (0,4233) (0,0006)* (0,0057)* (0,6816)

R^2=0,926554; DW=1,159169; F=36,94532; Prob.F=0,000000

Source: Table 1

Information:

* Significance at α = 0,01

** Significance at α = 0,05

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*** Significance at α = 0,1
The number in parentheses is the probability value of the t-statistic

Table 3.Effects and Territorial Constants

No	Countries	Countries Effects	Constant
1.	Indonesia	-1,281809	14,93875
2.	Malaysia	1,392008	17,61257
3.	Singapore	6,723296	22,94386
4.	Thailand	1,632006	17,85257
5.	Philippines	-0,630099	15,59046
6.	Vietnam	-2,015143	14,20542
7.	Cambodia	-3,739138	12,48142
8.	Laos	-2,081121	14,13944

Source: Table 1, processed

Table 2 indicates that the FEM model has estimated with an empirical statistical significance level F of 0,000000 (< 0,01), while the coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0,926554, which indicates that the estimated FEM model has high predictive strength. Of the seven variables in the econometric model, four variables namely GDP per capita, government budget for education, Consumer Price Index, and Corruption Perception Index with each probability of t statistic of 0,0876 (< 0,1), 0,0222 (< 0,05), 0,0006 (< 0,01), and 0,0057 (< 0,01).

The regression coefficient of the Gross Domestic Product per capita variables is -0,913362, indicating a linear-logarithmic relationship pattern. With a 1 US Dollar increase in Gross Domestic Product per capita, the happiness index will decrease by 0,00914 points. Conversely, a 1 US Dollar decrease in Gross Domestic Product per capita will lead to a 0,00914-point increase in the happiness index.

The regression coefficient of the government budget for education variable is 0,053263, indicating a linear-linear relationship pattern. With a 1 percent increase in the government budget for education, the happiness index will increase by 0,053263 points. Conversely, a 1 percent decrease in the government budget for education will lead to a 0,053263-point decrease in the happiness index.

The regression coefficient of the Consumer Price Index variable is 0,034821, indicating a linear-linear relationship pattern. With a 1 percent increase Consumer Price Index, the happiness index will increase by 0,034821 points. Conversely, a 1 percent decrease in the Consumer Price Index will lead to a 0,034821-point decrease in the happiness index.

The regression coefficient of the Corruption Perception Index variable is -0,074291, indicating a linear-linear relationship pattern. With a 1 percent increase Corruption Perception Index, the happiness index will decrease by 0,074291 points. Conversely, a 1 percent decrease in the Corruption Perception Index will lead to a 0,074291-point increase in the happiness index.

Table 3 presents the constant values for eight ASEAN countries. Singapore is a country that has a constant value higher than other countries at 22,94386. That means something about the influence of the variables of Gross Domestic Product per capita, labor force, government budget for education, government budget for health, Consumer Price Index, Corruption Perception Index, and greenhouse gas effect per capita on the happiness index, Singapore tends to have a higher happiness index than other countries. After Singapore, the two countries with the highest constants are Thailand and Malaysia.

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The lowest constant value belongs to Cambodia, which is 12,48142. Regarding the influence of variables Gross Domestic Product per capita, labor force, government budget for education, government budget for health, Consumer Price Index, Corruption Perception Index, and greenhouse gas effect per capita on the happiness index, Cambodia tends to have a lower happiness index compared to other countries. After Singapore, the two countries with the lowest constants are Laos and Vietnam.

DISCUSSION

The happiness index in eight ASEAN countries during the period 2015 to 2021 was found to be influenced by the variables of Gross Domestic Product per capita, government expenditure on education, Consumer Price Index, and Corruption Perception Index. Meanwhile, the variable of the labor force, government expenditure on health, and greenhouse gas effect per capita do not influence the happiness index in ASEAN.

Effect of Gross Domestic Product per capita on Happiness Index

Gross Domestic Product per capita hurts the happiness index according to the Easterlin Paradox theory. In the long run, national income no longer has a positive impact on happiness because it is influenced by social factors, including aspects of social interaction and environmental influences. These environmental influences include education and health status (Easterlin & O'Connor, 2020). This phenomenon shows that per capita income does not necessarily contribute positively to happiness. Monetary resources have the potential to generate joy even at low-income levels, especially to fulfill basic needs. However, once basic needs are met, happiness can also come from other factors that cannot be measured by high or low per capita income alone (Suparta & Malia, 2020).

This finding has important real-world implications. In rapidly developing ASEAN countries, where economic growth is often the primary development target, policymakers should not rely solely on GDP growth as an indicator of societal progress. Instead, they should also invest in social infrastructure—such as accessible healthcare, inclusive education, environmental sustainability, and corruption control—that contributes more directly to life satisfaction once basic economic needs are met.

For instance, urban areas with high per capita income may still report low happiness levels if plagued by inequality, pollution, or weak community cohesion. Thus, governments should prioritize policies that enhance quality of life holistically, recognizing that material prosperity must be complemented by social and emotional well-being to achieve true development.

Effect of Labor Force on Happiness Index

The size of the labor force does not significantly affect the happiness index. A larger labor force does not automatically lead to higher levels of job satisfaction or equitable access to decent employment opportunities. Many individuals still face challenges in securing jobs that align with their competencies, values, and personal aspirations. This mismatch between labor supply and job quality highlights that economic participation alone is not a sufficient driver of well-being.

In practice, this finding implies that quantitative labor indicators—such as labor force size or employment rate—must be complemented by qualitative dimensions, such as job stability, income security, work-life balance, and opportunities for career development. A country may exhibit strong labor force participation yet still experience low happiness levels if its workers are overworked, underpaid, or lack meaningful professional engagement.

This has significant implications for labor policy. Governments should not only focus on expanding employment but also ensure the creation of decent work environments that promote both productivity and psychological well-being. Policies that support skills matching, flexible

work arrangements, employee mental health, and inclusive labor markets can foster a more satisfied and resilient workforce—ultimately contributing more effectively to national happiness.

Effect of Government Budget for Education on the Happiness Index

Investing in education through public budget aligns with the principles of human capital theory, leading to increased happiness. Public budget allocation for education can be used to build human capital that has a positive impact on happiness. This can be done by providing scholarships, building and providing adequate educational infrastructure, and training to improve the quality of teaching staff (N. Chen et al., 2020). Human resource development is also an investment in education to develop a skilled and qualified workforce that can increase income and productivity by improving the quality of human resources. Thus, education can pave the way to progress and the achievement of socio-economic welfare so that it can have a positive impact on happiness (Aditia & Dewi, 2018).

This finding has significant real-world implications. In many ASEAN countries, disparities in educational access and quality still persist, particularly in rural and low-income areas. Increased and well-targeted public spending on education can help reduce inequality and improve intergenerational social mobility. It also contributes to the development of a more resilient and innovative workforce, which supports long-term economic and social development.

Moreover, education fosters critical thinking, civic participation, and personal fulfillment—factors that contribute to subjective well-being beyond material gains. Therefore, policymakers should view education not only as a tool for economic growth but also as a strategic investment in national happiness, ensuring that education systems are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of future generations.

Effect of Government Budget for Health on the Happiness Index

Government expenditure in the health sector does not affect the happiness index. This is due to the low efficiency of the government in implementing budget allocations in the health sector. Although the government budget allocation is quite high, there are inequalities in access to health services felt by the community because the budget spent is not proportional to the improvement in the quality of health services. In addition, it takes a long time to feel the impact of investment in health, and the benefits of the government budget are not fully realized due to the lack of health education for the public. Therefore, careful implementation is required to ensure the happiness of the population.

Effect of the Consumer Price Index on the Happiness Index

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) shows a positive influence on the happiness index, indicating that a low and stable inflation rate contributes to a favorable economic environment. When inflation is kept under control, the cost of living becomes more predictable, allowing households to better manage their finances and fulfill basic needs without excessive financial strain. This stability enhances purchasing power and reduces economic anxiety, both of which are important contributors to individual and collective well-being.

The implications of this finding are highly relevant for economic policy. In real-world contexts, especially in developing economies, rising prices for essentials such as food, fuel, and housing can quickly erode public satisfaction and lead to social unrest. Thus, maintaining price stability should be a central focus of macroeconomic management, not only to sustain growth but also to promote happiness.

Governments and central banks must ensure sound inflation-targeting policies, along with social safety nets to protect vulnerable groups from economic shocks. Additionally, clear communication and public trust in economic institutions can enhance people's sense of security and optimism

about the future. In this way, economic stability becomes not just a financial objective, but a foundation for broader societal well-being.

Effect of Corruption Perception Index on Happiness Index

The happiness index is adversely affected by the corruption perception index. Richard Layerd's theory states that poor government quality can negatively affect the happiness index (Layard & Cooper, 2005). An increase in corruption cases in Indonesia can create economic uncertainty, which negatively impacts the investment climate and economic growth. Economic uncertainty also affects employment and people's welfare. Communities with high levels of welfare also have a high happiness index. However, people with low welfare levels have a low happiness index. Furthermore, through the corruption perception index policies can be formulated to reduce corruption and influence a high corruption perception index (Wanti & Fafurida, 2023). However, with a high corruption perception index that has an impact on the low happiness index, it can be said that the country has not been able to create appropriate corruption control. Thus, it is necessary to handle corruption properly to achieve a prosperous society.

Effect of Greenhouse Gases Emission per capita on the Happiness Index

The effect of greenhouse gas emissions per capita does not affect the happiness index. This is because greenhouse gas emissions only affect climate and environmental conditions without directly affecting psychological conditions or individual satisfaction which can have a direct impact on the happiness index. In addition, the greenhouse gas effect occurs due to a long-term increase in global temperature and is not directly felt by people in their daily lives. Thus, the short-term effect of the greenhouse gas effect on the happiness index does not affect people directly.

CONCLUSION

The Fixed Effect Model (FEM) was chosen as the most suitable model based on the estimation result. The estimated model is robust with an R^2 of 0,926554. Partially, Gross Domestic Product per capita, government expenditure on education, Consumer Price Index, and Corruption Perception Index affect the happiness index. Meanwhile, labor force, government expenditure on health, and greenhouse gas effect per capita do not influence the happiness index. The equation for the maximum happiness index is identified in Singapore, while the minimum happiness index belongs to Cambodia.

Gross Domestic Product per capita is one of the determinants of people's happiness. In the short term, the Gross Domestic Product per capita has a positive impact on the happiness index. However, in the long run, it hurts the happiness index due to social interaction factors and environmental influences. One of the factors of social interaction is education, the proper allocation of government funds in the education sector has a positive impact on the happiness index. Budget on education facilities can improve the quality of people's education. This is an investment in education that can produce competent and qualified personnel and increase individual income and productivity. Another factor that affects the happiness index is the consumer price index. The consumer price index has a positive impact on the welfare index. The inflation rate is connected to the consumer price index, if the inflation rate is low then the consumer price index will also be low and can increase people's purchasing power so that people can fulfill their needs. This can create welfare for the community so that the happiness index is also created. Furthermore, the corruption perception index hurts the welfare index. An increase in corruption cases in a country can lead to economic uncertainty which can hurt the investment climate and people's happiness.

The government is expected to use the results of this study to review incentives to increase happiness. The government is expected to take policies to increase happiness by increasing Gross Domestic Product per capita every year. This increase is expected to ensure that Gross Domestic

Product per capita has a sustainable positive impact on happiness in the long run. Furthermore, to achieve high happiness through government expenditure on education and health, the budget should be allocated evenly across the country. In addition, the government can create happiness by implementing appropriate policies regarding the suppression of the inflation rate and level of corruption. In terms of the environment, the government can do this through environmental conservation. In future research, it is expected that the number of independent variables can be added and the period can be extended to produce better results. In addition, references to theories of information that can solve problems in research can be further developed to provide a more effective solution.

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