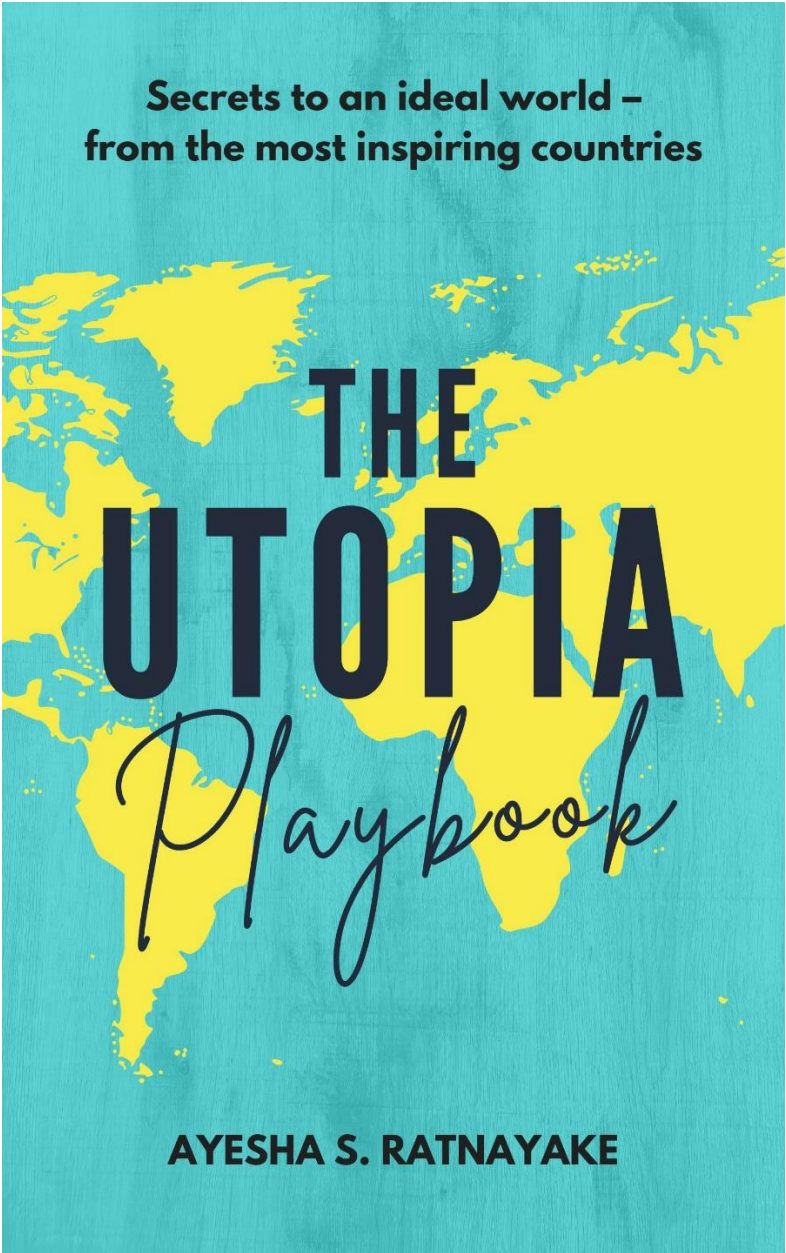


**EXCERPT FROM THE UTOPIA PLAYBOOK**

**Secrets to an ideal world –  
from the most inspiring countries**



**THE  
UTOPIA**  
*Playbook*

**AYESHA S. RATNAYAKE**

*"You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one."  
John Lennon*

## INTRODUCTION

Utopia /ju:ˈtʊpiə/ (noun):

*An imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect.*

I dream of living in Utopia. A world where everybody leads happy, long and healthy lives. Where everyone is free to achieve their fullest potential, bolstered by a society free from discrimination and an education system that inspires and empowers. A world where we can all breathe clean air and take pride in the fact that we aren't destroying our home planet or harming its creatures. A world where the environment is green, beautiful and accommodating of our needs. A world free from poverty, bursting with abundance and generosity, with systems of governance that we can trust.

And I believe such a world is possible. Because I've seen it. I've caught glimpses of it in the classrooms of Finland and the forests of Bhutan. I've spotted it in the busy corridors of Swiss hospitals and the cosy side streets of Colombia. Yes, I've even shadowed it in parliaments, from Denmark to Rwanda to New Zealand.

Trust me. Utopia is out there.

This book will be your guide on a tour of the world's many mini utopias. Read on to discover which country has a Minister for Loneliness and where 40% of commutes are made by bicycle. Learn how one nation used a chessboard approach to design a garden city and what the world's

## THE UTOPIA PLAYBOOK

lowest energy-per-kilometre rail system looks like. Find out why one country has led the world in organ donation for three decades and how 'sharing cities' are transforming communities. And uncover hundreds more insights to envision – and build – an ideal world.

We'll explore the places of peak happiness, health, equality and abundance – and along the way, we'll learn how these places came to be so special. And more importantly, how we might be able to make any place a little bit more utopian.

*The Utopia Playbook* is for everyday citizens who dream of a better world. It is for current and future educators, activists, economists, policymakers, politicians and pressure groups. Because whether you are suffering in a failed country or curious about how much better things could be, you deserve to live in Utopia. And through your actions – whether by smart voting, lobbying for change, becoming an entrepreneur, or running for office – you can create a utopia right where you are.

I'll show you where to look for inspiration.

# Happiness

A recipe for contentment

*“Contentment consists not in adding more fuel,  
but in taking away some fire.”  
Thomas Fuller, British author*

It goes without saying that the inhabitants of Utopia would be happy and content. But what does that even mean? Is it possible to measure happiness?

The creators of the World Happiness Report seem to think so. According to Jeff Sachs, Columbia University professor and co-creator of the World Happiness Report, when researchers talk about “happiness,” what they really mean is “satisfaction with the way one’s life is going”. The measure asks: “Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?”

*“It’s not primarily a measure of whether one laughed or smiled  
yesterday, but how one feels about the course of one’s life.”  
Jeff Sachs, co-creator of the World Happiness Report*

So, based on this measure, which country is the happiest? For five years in a row (as at 2022), **Finland** has been named the happiest country in the world. On a scale of 1 to 10, Finnish citizens evaluate their lives at an average of 7.821. After Finland, **Denmark** comes in at second place, followed by **Iceland**, **Switzerland**, and the **Netherlands**.

But why is a nation from the northern corner of the world, with a cold climate and six months of winter and darkness, the happiest in the world? And what could it be that makes people in happy countries so happy? Let's take a look.

## MEETING CITIZENS' BASIC NEEDS

### *Ensuring a decent quality of life*

Is being rich the reason citizens of these countries are so satisfied with their lives? According to research, wealth does have a role to play. But perhaps, not to the extent you might expect. While the Nordic countries do report high GDP per capita, countries with much higher GDP per capita are not nearly as happy. For example, the average household disposable income in the United States (which ranks 16th on the 2022 World Happiness Index) is about USD 45,000, while in top-ranking **Finland** and **Denmark**, it's around USD 30,000.

It turns out that while *not* having money causes unhappiness, once you are able to meet a decent standard of living, an even higher income doesn't generate as much happiness.

*"The Gross National Product measures everything  
except that which makes life worthwhile."*

*Robert Kennedy, former United States Attorney General*

While life expectancy tends to increase, up to a per capita GDP of about USD 5,000 a year, once there's enough to meet basic living standards, GDP becomes less important. Social issues can continue despite high GDP – including child mortality, obesity, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, teen pregnancies, low literacy, crime, murder, low life expectancy, and social immobility. Indeed, the United States and Portugal rank side by side for social issues although the USA has more than double Portugal's GDP per capita!

So, if getting as rich as possible isn't the key to a country's happiness, what's going on?

It turns out that once citizens have enough to eat, the factor that is a far more effective predictor of citizen welfare is... equality.

As it happens, the Nordic countries, which rank at the pinnacle for global happiness, also tend to have cultures designed around the belief in human equality. These countries strive to ensure that citizens at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder are able to lead lives of dignity and meet their basic needs. For example, **Denmark's** rate of child poverty is about a quarter of that of the United States. And another leader in happiness, **Iceland**, has the region's lowest poverty rate (9%). **Finland** too has very little poverty and there's no need for anyone to be homeless. Finnish citizens enjoy free healthcare and a free education system that is world-renowned and has been deemed one of the fairest in Europe.

Over in **Costa Rica**, the Latin American leader for happiness, citizens enjoy more happiness per GDP dollar than just about any other place. Some of the reasons include universal healthcare and education. Most villages have free primary care clinics and, since 1869, primary school has been free and compulsory for every child.

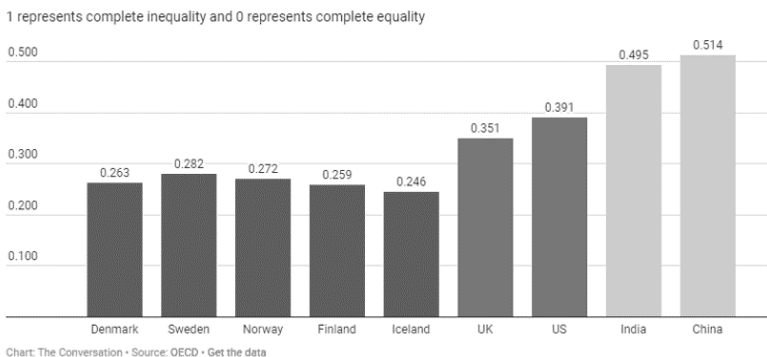
Beyond this, in happy countries, those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder seem to avoid showing off their wealth. The richest people in **Finland** might choose to drive an old Volvo or (at most) a Mercedes, rather than splurging on a Lamborghini. This attitude of modesty prevails in

**Denmark** too. It is sometimes referred to as the 'Law of Jante' based on the code of conduct in a work of fiction by a Danish-Norwegian author which demands 'You are not to believe you are more valuable than anyone else'.

*"In Denmark, few have too much, and even fewer have too little."  
Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, 1820 Danish thinker and priest*

Such a culture of humility supports social equality and community spirit – two factors that the World Happiness Report states are closely linked to happiness.

The following chart shows how the level of income inequality in the Nordic countries compares with that of less happy nations. As you can see, the happier Nordic countries are also significantly more equal.



*Relative levels of income inequality; Source: The Conversation, OECD*

But isn't taking care of everyone expensive?



In Nordic countries, high living standards across the socioeconomic spectrum are achieved through a high rate of taxation. Indeed, Danish citizens pay some of the highest income taxes in the world, starting at 41%, with the richest individuals paying 56% of their income in tax. Besides paying taxes on their income, people in **Denmark** also pay a 25% value-added tax on most items. This rate can go much higher, with new cars requiring a tax payment of up to 150%.

But wait, doesn't paying high taxes reduce happiness?

It turns out that high taxes aren't a problem when it means great living standards. Most Danish citizens are glad to pay taxes as the benefits are plainly visible. They see it as an investment in quality of life.

These are just some of the ways Danes reap the returns of high taxes:

- Attending university tuition-free
- Receiving a grant to help manage expenses when studying
- Being able to access free healthcare
- Enjoying subsidised childcare
- Receiving pensions after retirement
- Having care helpers visit their home to take care of them when they are elderly

Danish citizens appreciate that if everyone contributes, a social safety net can be provided to support the very old, the very young, and the sick. They believe in supporting the common good and accepting the responsibility to work if able. Indeed, none of Denmark's nine major political parties seriously support changing Denmark's system of taxation and social welfare provision.

Around the world, institutions offering universal social welfare tend to persist over time, even if the government subsequently changes. This can be seen in the Nordic countries, as well as in the United Kingdom (where no party has eliminated the National Health Service), Canada (where all governments have retained the single-payer healthcare system) and the United States (where Social Security has never been dismantled).

## *Absorbing risks to empower citizens*

The Nordic countries boast high rates of employment, and this itself contributes to happiness. The World Happiness Report found that being unable to work during the COVID-19 pandemic reduced wellbeing, with unemployment connected to a 12% drop in life satisfaction.

But the Nordic countries also recognise that life doesn't always follow a neat trajectory and support citizens who need to make a change. In **Denmark**, the social safety net that comes from high taxes also supports people who lose their jobs for up to two years while they look for new jobs, with a system in place to make sure they are actively looking for work. For example, a Danish citizen Christina received about USD 2000 a month from the Danish government while she was unemployed. This safety net empowers people with the freedom to pursue work that will make them feel fulfilled and happy, instead of clinging to a miserable job simply to make ends meet.

*"Danes feel empowered to change things in their lives.*

*What is special about Danish society is that it allows people to choose the kind of life they want to live."*

*Christian Bjørnskov, Professor of Economics, Aarhus University*

Efforts are made to support individuals experiencing all types of difficulty. In fact, the Danish municipality of Aarhus has created an online portal ([socialkompasset.dk](http://socialkompasset.dk)) collating the free services available from the municipality and volunteer organisations to support individuals in need, including abuse victims, individuals struggling with addiction, refugees, immigrants and others. The portal, now being transformed into a nationwide project, provides access to a wide range of services, from free legal support to homework assistance.

Other countries are also taking measures to support citizens in getting back on their feet. In 2022, the **French** government began covering the cost of

therapy sessions for youth and adults with mental health concerns. The government covers the cost of an initial consultation at about USD 40 and seven additional sessions of around USD 30, with the ability to renew.

## **APPROACHING HAPPINESS SIDWAYS**

### *Prioritising contentment*

And yet, the citizens of the happiest countries are not necessarily bubbly and jubilant. Instead, they seem to be living examples of John Stuart Mill's quote "Happiness should be approached sideways, like a crab".

**Denmark's** happiness is "not happiness, it is contentment. The Danes take their time doing things. They're not stressed," states a Danish citizen, Crispin Avon of Copenhagen. "Contrary to popular belief, you don't see Danes smiling or getting overexcited very often. Happiness here is more to do with the practicalities of living," affirms Andy Keefe of Horsens, Denmark.

In fact, the Danes have two words for happiness – "lykke" which suggests elusiveness, and "glad" which expresses regular contentment. The Danish language embraces the idea that moments of peak glee are elusive, while regular satisfaction with life is normal. This sets realistic expectations for what a good life looks like.

Helsinki Times reports that, compared to much of the Western world, **Finland** is more laidback, warm, cooperative and at peace with itself. Finnish citizens feel comfortable and avoid stressing about the outside world, giving them the resilience to manage life's stressors.

Going one step further, The New York Times reports that Finns embrace depictions of themselves as melancholic and reserved. Indeed, a popular Finnish joke goes "An introverted Finn looks at his shoes when talking to you; an extroverted Finn looks at your shoes". People in Finland tend to have realistic expectations for their lives and to be content to be what they are. Sari Poyhonen, a linguistics professor at the University of Jyväskylä,

describes how when something in life does exceed expectations, Finns will often act with humility, preferring a self-deprecating joke over bragging.

*“Finns are pros at keeping their happiness a secret.”*

*Sari Poyhonen, Linguistics Professor, University of Jyvaskyla*

### *Valuing relaxation and downtime*

Relaxation is a priority in countries that rank at the top of the World Happiness Index. **Danes** even have a word for cosy relaxation: “hygge” (pronounced ‘hoo-guh’). The concept roughly translates to taking a break from the daily hubbub to enjoy life’s simple pleasures, and it can be enjoyed either with family and friends or alone. The experience of “hygge” can range from cosy game nights with loved ones and fireside chats over hot drinks to nature walks over long winter months or settling down with a good book or TV show.

In **Finland**, saunas are the name of the game. These steamy environments stimulate muscle relaxation and prompt the release of endorphins. They are also a critical part of the Finnish culture – in 2018, there were around 2.3 million saunas in Finland for a population of 5.5 million! Many workplaces offer both sauna and gym facilities. This isn’t pure indulgence – according to Matleena Livson from the Finnish Sports Confederation, research supports that investing in employee wellbeing can generate a 6X return.

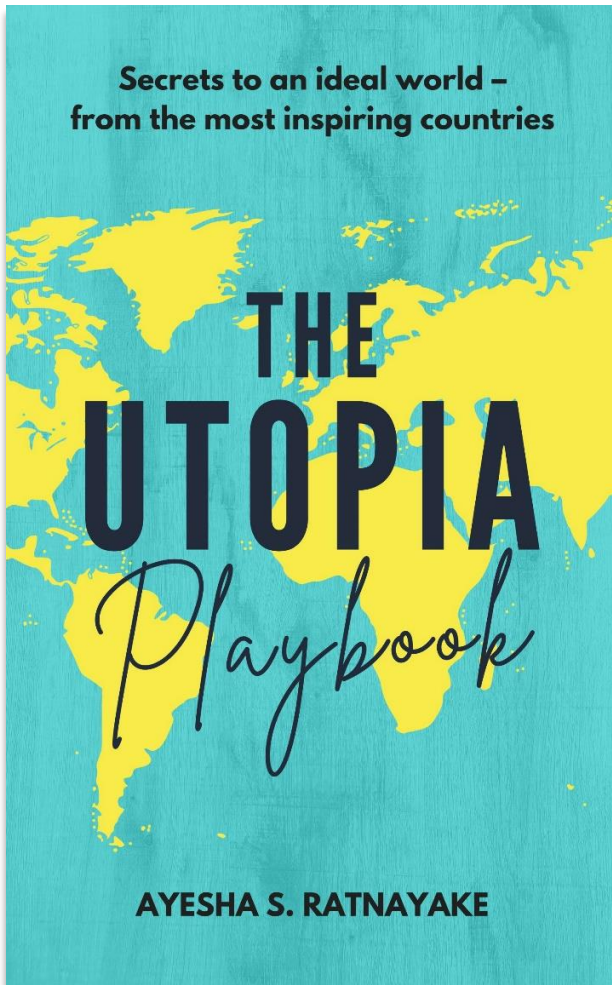
Another way in which the Nordic countries prioritise downtime is by valuing vacations. European Union labour laws guarantee workers a minimum of four weeks of paid annual vacation, apart from holidays, sick days and parental leave. In Finland, after working with a company for one year, employees are typically entitled to four weeks of vacation in the summer and one week of vacation in the winter.

Employees in happy countries tend to spend less time at work. While the average OECD country sees 10% of its employees working long hours (50 or more hours a week), in **Denmark**, that percentage drops to just 1%. Compared with employees in the United States, the typical Danish worker enjoys about 150 additional hours of annual leisure time. According to Tom Gibson of Copenhagen, an everyday reflection of Denmark's happiness is that streets are crowded with bikes at 8:30 am instead of being crowded with cars at 7:30 am, and grocery stores are crowded at 5:00 pm instead of 6:30 pm. **Iceland**, found in a study to be the least stressed European nation, also has the shortest commutes (only 15 minutes on average).

Other countries are also taking steps to promote a relaxed workforce. In the **United Kingdom**, a law entitles any employee to request flexible working hours or the chance to work from home – and employers can be taken to an employment tribunal if they refuse a request without good reason.

Meanwhile, in **Portugal**, it is now illegal for bosses to contact employees after working hours – with penalties if they do. The country has also joined nations like **Spain, Scotland, Japan** and **Belgium** in experimenting with a four-day workweek. But it is **Iceland** that is the pioneer in this space. A trial conducted from 2015 to 2019 was a major success, dramatically boosting employee wellbeing and reducing stress and burnout while retaining or improving productivity. As a result, nearly 90% of Icelandic workers now enjoy reduced working hours.

**READ THE REST OF THE UTOPIA PLAYBOOK**



If you enjoyed this excerpt from *The Utopia Playbook* and are curious to tap more insights from the world's most inspiring countries, get the book as a Kindle e-book, paperback or hardcover book by scanning the following QR code or visiting [www.amazon.com/3kXFKIN](http://www.amazon.com/3kXFKIN).

