

8 September 2010 Last updated at 09:02 GMT

Australia and New Zealand top World Giving Index'

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The happier people are, the more likely they are to give time or money to charity, the largest ever study into global charitable behaviour suggests.

The survey - conducted by the UK's Charities Aid Foundation - suggests that well-being is a more reliable indicator of philanthropy than wealth.

The survey took place in 153 countries, covering 95% of the world's population.

The "World Giving Index" placed Australia and New Zealand joint top, with the US in fifth and the UK eighth.

The index aims to analyse global generosity in giving money, time as a volunteer or helping a stranger.

Researchers from Gallup found that predictably some of the richer countries with strong histories of philanthropy come out top, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Republic of Ireland.

Bucking the trend

What was more surprising was that near the top too are poorer countries like Sri Lanka, Guyana and Turkmenistan, but they also registered high levels of contentment.

The people of Turkmenistan are apparently the most generous in the world with their

time, while Liberia tops the list for helping a stranger.

Sierra Leone is also high on the overall giving index, but contradicts the trend, with its people registering the lowest well-being score in the world.

The authors of the report acknowledge that there are exceptions which are not always easy to explain.

They are also keen not to offend and make a point of saying all countries give to charity in different ways.

The countries near the bottom of the list include Greece, India and China.

Richard Harrison, the charity's director of research, says one reason may be to do with the proportion of the population who give.

"An important factor is whether the culture of giving has reached the man in the street, in some fast-developing countries it may be just rich individuals who are the main charitable donors. So they register a low score when a cross-section of the population is surveyed," he says.

The Charitable Aid Foundation, which was set up to foster a culture of giving, argues that the research will help governments around the world do more to encourage all of their population to be more philanthropic - whether through tax incentives or closer community cohesion.

The idea is to promote giving and create a positive cycle in which society improves, people become happier and are therefore willing to give more.

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