



The Wellbeing of Nations at a Glance

The Wellbeing of Nations surveys 180 countries and is the first global assessment of sustainability. It is intended to promote high levels of human and ecosystem wellbeing, demonstrate the practicality and potential of the Wellbeing Assessment method, and encourage countries, communities, and corporations to undertake their own wellbeing assessments.

Wellbeing Assessment

Wellbeing Assessment is a method of assessing sustainability that gives people and the ecosystem equal weight and provides a systematic and transparent way of:

- deciding the main features of human and ecosystem wellbeing to be measured;
- choosing the most representative indicators of those features; and
- combining the indicators into a Human Wellbeing Index (HWI), Ecosystem Wellbeing Index (EWI), Wellbeing Index (WI), and Wellbeing/Stress Index (WSI, the ratio of human wellbeing to ecosystem stress). Together, these four indices provide a measurement of sustainable development.

Wellbeing Assessment can be used at any level from municipality to the world. It differs from other approaches to assessing sustainability in its dual focus on human and ecosystem wellbeing and its use of the Barometer of Sustainability to sum a comprehensive set of indicators into the HWI, EWI, WI, and WSI.

The Wellbeing Assessment method was developed and tested with the support of IUCN–The World Conservation Union and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). It began as a synthesis of assessment approaches formulated by Alejandro Imbach, Diana Lee-Smith, and Tony Hodge, and Robert Prescott-Allen’s Barometer of Sustainability method. These approaches were tested and improved by teams in Colombia, Zimbabwe, and India, and IUCN offices in Central America, Southern Africa, and Pakistan, during the first phase (1994-96) of a project on assessing progress toward sustainability, undertaken by IUCN with the support of IDRC. Prescott-Allen further developed the method for the second phase of the IUCN/IDRC project (1997-99) and *The Wellbeing of Nations*. Additional tests of the Barometer of Sustainability and the complete method have been conducted in Canada, India, Nicaragua, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

See pages 4-10 of *The Wellbeing of Nations* for a summary of Wellbeing Assessment and Appendix B (pages 277-295) for a full description.

Equal treatment of people and ecosystem: the Egg of Wellbeing

The Wellbeing of Nations equates sustainable development with the good life, and the good life with high levels of human and ecosystem wellbeing. A high level of human wellbeing is essential because no one wants to sustain a low standard of living. A high level of ecosystem wellbeing is just as essential because the ecosystem supports life and makes possible any standard of living. The necessity of both is illustrated by the metaphor of the Egg of Wellbeing. The ecosystem surrounds and supports people much as the white of an egg surrounds and supports the yolk. Just as an egg is good only if both the yolk and the white are good, so a society can be well and sustainable only if both people and the ecosystem are well.

The Egg of Wellbeing is shown on the right of the heading at the top of this page. See also pages 4-5 of *The Wellbeing of Nations*.

Barometer of Sustainability

The Barometer of Sustainability is the only performance scale designed to measure human and ecosystem wellbeing together without submerging one in the other. Its two axes—one for human wellbeing, the other for ecosystem wellbeing—enable socioeconomic and environmental indicators to be combined independently, keeping them separate to allow analysis of people-ecosystem interactions. It provides clear, rapidly communicated pictures of a society's human and ecosystem wellbeing, how close a society is to the goal of sustainability and how it compares with other societies, the rate and direction of change, and major strengths and weaknesses.

The Barometer is shown on the left of the heading at the top of the previous page. It is introduced on pages 8-9 of *The Wellbeing of Nations* and discussed in detail on pages 281-289. In the regional section of Chapter 4 (pages 115-143), group Barometers show the HWI, EWI, and WI of all 180 countries, grouped into 14 regions. Individual Barometers display the dimensions (major components) of the HWI and EWI of representative countries in each region, revealing the features most in need of improvement for the country to make progress toward sustainability. Examples of group and individual Barometers are given in the accompanying graphics sheet.

Human Wellbeing Index (HWI)

The HWI is a more realistic measure of socioeconomic conditions than narrowly monetary indicators such as the Gross Domestic Product and covers more aspects of human wellbeing than the United Nations' Human Development Index. It is the average of:

Health and population. How long people may expect to live in good health [1 indicator]. The stability of family size [1 indicator].

Wealth. How well needs are met for income, food, safe water, and sanitation [6 indicators]. The size and condition of the national economy, including inflation, unemployment, and the debt burden [8 indicators].

Knowledge and culture. Education (primary, secondary, and tertiary school enrollment rates) and communication (accessibility and reliability of the telephone system and use of the Internet) [6 indicators]. Lack of a suitable indicator prevented coverage of culture.

Community. Freedom and governance (political rights, civil liberties, press freedom, and corruption) [4 indicators]. Peacefulness (military expenditure and deaths from armed conflicts and terrorism) [2 indicators]. Violent crime rates [4 indicators].

Equity. Household equity: the difference in income share between the richest and poorest fifths of the population [1 indicator]. Gender equity: disparities between males and females in income, education, and parliamentary decision-making [3 indicators].

To prevent a high score for equity from offsetting poor human conditions, equity is included in the HWI only when it does not raise the index.

Highlights

- Two-thirds of the world's people live in countries with a poor or bad HWI; less than one-sixth in countries with a fair or good HWI. The disparity between the best and worst off is huge: the median HWI of the top 10% of countries is almost eight times that of the bottom 10%.
- Even the top performers need to do better. Only Norway, Denmark, and Finland have a good HWI. The rest are merely fair, pulled down by flaws (such as debt, unemployment, and crime) and inequities: 10 countries have a standard of living as high as the top three's but not as evenly shared.
- Health, wealth, knowledge, freedom, and governance reinforce each other, good performance in one fostering good performance in the others. Income plays a crucial role in them all—paying for health services and material necessities; for research, education, and communication; and for such ingredients of freedom as free and fair elections and a clean and competent bureaucracy.

The HWI and the performance of the 180 countries on the 36 indicators that comprise it are described and mapped in Chapter 2 (pages 13-57) of *The Wellbeing of Nations*.

Ecosystem Wellbeing Index (EWI)

The EWI is an equally broad measure of the state of the environment, with a fuller and more systematic treatment of national environmental conditions than other global indices such as the Ecological Footprint and the Environmental Sustainability Index. It is the average of:

Land. How well a country conserves the diversity of its natural land ecosystems [4 indicators] and maintains the quality of the ecosystems that it develops [1 indicator].

Water. River conversion by dams [2 indicators]. The water quality of drainage basins [17 indicators]. Water withdrawal as a percentage of the national supply from precipitation [1 indicator]. Inadequate data prevented coverage of the sea.

Air. Emissions of greenhouse gases and ozone depleting substances to the global atmosphere [2 indicators]. The quality of city air [9 indicators].

Species and genes. How well a country conserves its wild species of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and higher plants [2 indicators], and the variety of its domesticated livestock breeds [2 indicators].

Resource use. How much energy a country consumes [2 indicators]. The demands its agriculture, fishing, and timber sectors place on resources [9 indicators].

To prevent a high score for resource use from offsetting a poor state of the environment, resource use is included in the EWI only when it does not raise the index.

Highlights

- Environmental degradation is widespread. Countries with a poor or bad EWI cover almost half (48%) of the planet's land and inland water surface; those with a medium EWI, 43%. Countries with a fair EWI occupy a mere 9%. No country has a good EWI.
- Many countries with a fair or medium EWI would probably have lower ratings if their environments were better monitored. Air quality, water quality, and the state of aquatic ecosystems are especially neglected.
- The elements of ecosystem wellbeing are much less closely correlated with each other or with income than are the components of human wellbeing. The way for most countries to raise their EWI is to restore and maintain habitats, expand protected areas, conserve agricultural diversity, and improve water quality. Industrialized countries also need to cut greenhouse gases.

The EWI and the performance of the 180 countries on the 51 indicators that comprise it are described and mapped in Chapter 3 (pages 59-106) of *The Wellbeing of Nations*.

Wellbeing Index (WI) and Wellbeing/Stress Index (WSI)

The WI and WSI break new ground in measuring people and the ecosystem together to compare their status, show the impact of one on the other, and focus national and community energies on the improvement of both.

The WI is the point on the Barometer of Sustainability where the HWI and EWI intersect. It shows how well societies combine human and ecosystem wellbeing and hence how close they are to sustainability.

The WSI is the ratio of human wellbeing to ecosystem stress (the opposite of ecosystem wellbeing). It shows how much harm a society does to the environment for its level of development.

Highlights

- No country is sustainable or even close to sustainability. The leaders (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Austria) and 32 other *ecosystem deficit* countries (largely in Europe and North America) have high standards of living but excessive impacts on the global environment.
- Some 27 *human deficit* countries (chiefly in Africa) have fairly low demands on the ecosystem but are desperately poor.
- The remaining 116 are *double deficit* countries, combining weak environmental performance and inadequate development.
- In 141 countries, ecosystem stress is higher than human wellbeing—a clear sign that most people’s efforts to improve their lot are inefficient and overexploit the environment.
- Northern Europe is the strongest region, with 12 countries in the top 40, including the five leaders. West Asia is the weakest, with 9 countries in the bottom 40 and the most with high or extreme double deficits.

The WI and WSI and the performance of the 180 countries on both are described and mapped in Chapter 4 (pages 107-112) of *The Wellbeing of Nations*.

Main conclusions

Conflicts between human and ecosystem wellbeing can be reduced, and a high quality of life obtained for a low environmental price. Large differences in ecosystem stress occur between countries with similar standards of living, due in part to different degrees of consumption dependency (the amount of energy and materials required to maintain the economy) and ecological vulnerability (the numbers of people and wild species competing for the same space).

But the environmental price of development is not fixed, and much of the relationship between human wellbeing and ecosystem stress is a matter of choice. Ecosystem stress is a product not so much of the *level* of human wellbeing but of the *way* human wellbeing is pursued. Significantly, a high Wellbeing/Stress Index is strongly correlated with a combination of freedom, good governance, and education. The opportunity and capacity to make sound decisions about goals and how to achieve them is crucial.

The main reasons why no country combines high levels of human and ecosystem wellbeing are that it is inherently difficult to do and—more importantly—no country is committed to doing it. Six initiatives are needed for countries to achieve ways of living that are desirable, equitable, and sustainable:

- > Commitment to human and ecosystem wellbeing as a national goal.
- > Regular wellbeing assessments to build support for the goal, analyze how to achieve it, and track progress.
- > National information systems on human and ecosystem wellbeing, and coverage of all aspects of wellbeing by the news media.
- > Replacement of most, if not all, existing taxes with taxes on energy and materials.
- > Wellbeing areas (Slow Zones) to maintain cultural heritage, wild and domesticated biodiversity, and a high quality of life in mixed built-cultivated-wild landscapes.
- > Regional wellbeing alliances so that groups of nations (such as the European Union, NAFTA, and ASEAN) can harmonize their efforts to achieve sustainability.
- > Partnerships between rich *ecosystem deficit* and poor *human deficit* countries to exchange development support for ecosystem capacity.

Implications and responses are discussed in Chapter 4 (pages 112-114 and 144-148) of *The Wellbeing of Nations*.