

Life does not consist..... The Happy Planet Index

In June 2006, the New Economics Foundation, a UK based independent think-tank, produced the Happy Planet Index.

The Happy Planet Index (HPI) is an innovative new measure that shows the ecological efficiency with which human well-being is delivered. It differs markedly from the central indicator of national income usually referred to by commentators, and relied on by governments to measure their success – Gross Domestic Product (GDP). And it also has a different rationale to the various alternative indicators that begin with GDP, and then subtract social and environmental costs to create a more accurate measure of economic success.

We are accustomed to comparing countries in terms of crude riches or what they trade. Some countries earn, or are given, reputations for music, sporting excellence, food, or as holiday destinations. We all know of Australia's reputation for sporting excellence, and just last week, Melbourne was again voted Australia's most liveable city (and didn't we let the Sydneysiders know it!). This report introduces a measure of something more fundamental. It addresses the relative success or failure of countries in supporting a good life for their citizens, whilst respecting the environmental resource limits upon which all our lives depend.

Countries classified by the United Nations as medium-based human development fare better than both low and high development countries. When ranked by HPI, the top 25 per cent of nations include 35 medium development nations compared to only 9 high development ones and only one low development. It seems that countries with high development suffer from diminishing returns. Beyond a certain level, vastly increasing consumption fails to lead to greater well-being. In fact, the report goes on to say, greater materialism, diminished community, and destruction of natural capital are probably reducing our well-being.

The value of strong social, cultural and political structures also comes out of the report. Margaret Thatcher famously once said that there is no such thing as a society. This cult of individualism has been alive and well for many years and we are paying the price. This report shows that higher levels of life satisfaction were found in countries where more people belong to community groups (for example, voluntary organisations, sports or religious groups); where they value concepts such as adventure, creativity and loyalty over material wealth and possessions; and where government is open and democratic.

Interestingly, G8 countries generally score badly in the index. Following are the rankings of the G8 countries (keeping mind that 178 countries were included in the research for the report):

Italy	66 th
Germany	81 st
Japan	95 th
UK comes	108 th
Canada	111 th
France	129 th
United States	150 th
Russia	172 nd

It is important to note that the HPI is not just a measure of the happiest country on the planet, or the best place to live. Nor does it indicate the most developed country in the traditional sense, or the most environmentally friendly. Instead, it combines these notions, providing a method of comparing countries' progress towards the goal of providing long-term well-being for all without exceeding the limits of equitable resource consumption.

In addition to showing well-being, the HPI also estimates the ecological efficiency with which nations deliver happy and

long lives for their populations. It reveals that the wealthiest nations on the planet are grossly inefficient.

Some interesting things that the report reveals is that firstly, high levels of resource consumption do not reliably produce high levels of well-being and, secondly, that it is possible to produce high levels of well-being without excessive consumption.

So who comes top of the Happy Planet Index? Vanuatu is 1st, with Colombia 2nd, and Costa Rica 3rd. The bottom 3 are Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Burundi.

So it seems we don't need more money after all. If anyone ever had any doubt, here we have proof in what Jesus said 2,000 years ago, that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Oh, by the way, Australia comes 139th.

Download the report for free at <http://www.happyplanetindex.org>

*by Nils von Kalm
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