

From the Third World to the First World - Is it the right path?

by Asoka Abeygunawardana

The ambition of the people living in the Third World is to develop and reach the level of the First World. In Sri Lanka after successfully defeating the terrorism, enthusiasm for becoming a First World country has built up. The classification of the different worlds arose during the Cold War to broadly categorize the nations of the Earth into three groups based on social, political, and economic divisions. The First World represented the capitalist countries, NATO and its allies. The Second World was the communist countries lead by the Soviet Union. The Third World included countries which remained non-aligned or not moving with either the capitalist or socialist blocks. Although the term Third World continues to be used colloquially to describe the poorest countries in the world, the term no longer holds any validity after the fall of the Soviet Union which denounce the terms First World and Second World. Since then only two phrases are used: the First World and the Third World.

There was another definition for the First, Second and Third worlds. This definition took a completely different view point and was based on the human development index. This definition was proposed by Mao Zedong, the Chairman of China Communist Party, in 1974 where the United States and the Soviet Union was named as the First World. Japan, Europe, Australia, Canada were the Second World and the rest of the countries were the Third World.

The common alternative used for the Third World is 'developing world'. The other term used is the 'Global South'. The Global North represents wealthy developed countries whereas the Global South represents poorer developing countries. Although most nations except Australia and New Zealand comprising the "North" are located in the Northern Hemisphere the divide is not wholly defined by geography. The North is home to four out of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and all members of the G8. "The North" mostly covers the West and the First World, with much of the Second World.

This classification of different worlds is based on the concept of economic development. The GNP per Capita and the economic growth rate are two of the main tools used to measure economic development. It is important to note that this concept of economic development was the dominant concept of the fossil fuel era. This currently dominant economic framework is unable to simultaneously achieve the three goals of high life satisfaction, high life expectancy and one-planet living. Never ending economic development is a mirage and this vicious path is leading human civilization towards a catastrophe.

As human civilization has reached the end of the fossil fuel era it is necessary to review the concept of development to establish the path, the targets and goals for the new era - the Post Fossil Fuel era. The Happy Planet Index (HPI) a newly introduced tool to measure the progress of human society can be used to get a better understanding of the present situation. The HPI ranking is done using data sets for 143 countries, covering 99 per cent of the world's population. Scores range from 0 to 100 – with high scores only achievable by meeting all three targets embodied in the index – high life expectancy, high life satisfaction, and a low ecological footprint.

According to this indicator the level of development can be measured on two independent fronts. Firstly, the level of well-being at present and secondly, the level of sustainability of lifestyles. The well-being is measured using two main indicators: Life satisfaction and Life expectancy. The Life satisfaction indicator has a range of 0-10. Life Expectancy is a well known index used for the Human Development Index (HDI).

The sustainability of the lifestyles is measured using the index: Ecological Footprint. The Ecological Footprint which is expressed in units of 'global hectares' (gha) is a measure of the amount of land required to provide all human requisites. This is the land required for cropping, grazing, forestry, fishing, buildings and carbon sequestration. A person using up to 2.1 gha is, in these terms at least, using their fair share of the world's resources for one-planet living.

The HPI report has introduced a new happy planet charter. They believe that a new narrative of progress is required for the twenty-first century and it is possible to have a good life without it costing the Earth. Governments should strive to identify economic models that do not rely on constantly growing consumption to achieve stability and prosperity. The report suggest a HPI target of 89 which means reducing the per capita footprint to 1.7 gha, increasing mean life satisfaction to eight and continuing to increase mean life expectancy to reach 87 years.

The HPI ranking shows a totally different portrait of the world. I wish to introduce a new world classification based on the HPI ranking. Here benchmarks will be introduced to the HPI ranking to classify the world. The goal is to achieve high well-being status with an acceptable ecological footprint. The countries having a HPI over 61.8 are considered satisfactory and can be tagged as the First World under the new classification. The second HPI benchmark is 38.0. Countries that place between 38.0 and 61.8 can be considered the Second World. Countries can come under this grouping due to two reasons. Firstly the countries which are having a high well-being but a high footprint; Secondly countries having a low footprint but a low level of well-being. Countries that come under the Third World are those having a HPI lower than 38.0. These countries either have a very high ecological footprint together with a high level of well-being or a low ecological footprint together a very low level of well-being.

According to this classification for the new era the First World countries are Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Guatemala, Vietnam, Colombia, and Cuba. The Second World countries include certain conventional First World countries such as Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Germany. Further the Second World includes developing countries such as Sri Lanka, China and India. The new Third World is a mix of conventional developed countries and very poor countries. This includes countries like USA, Australia, Russia, Sudan and the Congo.

Is the shift from the Third World to the First World the right direction? Yes, not under the conventional classification as it leads to disaster but under the new classification mentioned above. Sri Lanka is ranked at the 22nd position under the HPI and therefore we should not think of reaching the level of America which is ranked far below us at 114th place. Sri Lanka may have improved its HPI ranking further after eradication of terrorism from the country as it may have lifted the satisfaction level of the people.

The country level averages do not give a clear picture regarding its true status. There is a North within the Global South and a South within the Global North due to prevailing inequality within each country. The Ecological Footprint of about 80 percent of the population living in our country is very much within the recommended levels. Hence it is important to manage the consumption pattern of the balance 20 percent of the population (the affluent) to reduce the ecological footprint of the nation. Furthermore, the emphasis should be on improving the quality of life of the poor and unprivileged communities living in the country without compromising the needs of future generations. This is the path to a development paradigm which will improve the average HPI ranking of the country.

Table - Classification of the new world with new yardsticks

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| <p>First World High well-being and acceptable Footprint HPI (61.8<) Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Guatemala, Vietnam, Colombia, Cuba</p> |
| <p>Second World High well-being and High Footprint or Low well-being and Low Footprint HPI (38.0< < 61.8) Iceland, Canada, Norway, Ireland, Spain, Hong Kong, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, France, Japan, Israel, Italy, Cyprus, Slovenia, Netherlands, Singapore, Germany, Poland, Malta, Korea, Hungary, Mexico, Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Panama, Paraguay, Croatia, Lithuania, Chile, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Venezuela, Iran, Bulgaria, Turkey, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, Belize, Serbia, Guyana, Argentina, Brazil, Malaysia, Ecuador, Albania, Azerbaijan, China, Trinidad and Tobago, Syria, Thailand, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Mauritania, Honduras, Tunisia, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, El Salvador, Peru, Palestine, Djibouti, Armenia, Senegal, Iraq, Moldova, Laos, Morocco, Burma, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia, India, Yemen, Cambodia, Pakistan, Nepal, Tajikistan, Bangladesh, Haiti</p> |
| <p>Third World (Very High foot print or Very Low well-being) HPI (< 38.0) Luxembourg, United Arab Emirates, United States of America, Kuwait, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand, Estonia, Greece, Uruguay, Macedonia, Portugal, Belarus, Russia, Namibia, Botswana, Latvia, Mongolia, Lebanon, Sudan, South Africa, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Mali, Central African Republic, Ghana, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Guinea, Cameroon, Madagascar, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Benin, Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda, Zambia, Togo, Congo, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Rep. of the Congo, Malawi</p> |

Conventional outdated classification of the First World and the Third World

