A Yardstick for the New World - Happy Planet Index

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Having emerged from a thirty-year war, Sri Lanka is about to launch a massive development drive. Development is often measured only in economic terms; by rate of change of gross domestic product (GDP). Sri Lanka’s 'Mahinda Thinthanaya' sets the target of an 8% growth in GDP per annum over the next 6 years. Amidst the global financial crisis however there is a worldwide dialog on whether the GDP is an adequate tool to measure the progress of a country or not.

Economic development goes hand in hand with decreased physical activity; increased fat and calorie intake; increased use of fossil fuels; driving larger vehicles on larger roads; villages giving way to towns and cities, and independent local businesses being forced out of the market by superstores and chains; losing the traditional family and community values.

Is this the right track? With increasing economic growth, we will see an increasingly affluent world in the twenty first century; but ecological constraints i.e. scarcity of resources and environmental pollution, threaten to stop growth. The age of cheap oil is ending. Global warming has already begun and could cause substantial damage by the end of the century.

We need to re-examine the modern development paradigm and seek out ways to avoid the collapse of modern civilization and to ensure smooth transition from Fossil Fuel Era to Epoch of Frugality. We are not beyond redemption. Emerging economies are in a position to choose a balanced approach to modes of production. Hyper-industrial nations will soon have no option but to follow suit. Can Sri Lanka be one of the pioneers in this new path?

Endlessly pursuing growth in GDP alone will not improve the nation’s well being. The United Nations uses GDP in conjunction with average life expectancy at birth and educational attainment to assess a nation’s overall development. This combination of indicators constitutes the Human Development Index (HDI).

In recent years, the validity of both the HDI and the %GDP growth as markers of national development has been called into question. Researchers around the world are working on the formulation of new indices to give a more realistic picture of human wellbeing.

One of the major outcomes of this research is the ‘Happy Planet Index’ (HPI). The New Economies Foundation (NEF) which conducted the research is an independent ‘think-and-do tank’. Recently 'NEF' published its latest report on the Happy Planet Index. The HPI has two main components: ‘Happy Life Years’ and ‘Ecological Footprint’. 'Happy Life Years' are different from 'life expectancy at birth'; they take into account *quality* of life, not just quantity; assessing aspects such as health, freedom and availability of leisure time.

The ‘Ecological Footprint’ of an individual is a measure of the amount of land required to provide for all their resource requirements plus the amount of vegetated land required to sequester (absorb) all their CO_2 emissions, including those of the products they consume. This figure is expressed in units of ‘global hectares’ (GHa). A person using up to 2.1 GHa is, in these terms at least, using their fair share of the world’s resources – ‘one-planet living’. This number however leaves nothing behind for non-humans.

Academics have suggested that we should be leaving 20–30% of our ecosystems 'fallow' to allow them to function healthily. In 2005, the per capita footprint for the rich OECD nations was 6.0 GHa, with a global mean footprint of 2.4 GHa. Such large footprints of the developed world are possible by relying on developing countries to provide developed world with raw materials – they represent the ecological debt owed by rich countries to poor ones.

The Happy Planet Index Report uses data for 143 countries around the world, to determine which countries are closest to achieving sustainable well-being. The report turns our standard notions of 'the developed world' upside-down. The most affluent countries, such as the UK, USA, Japan, Norway & Luxemburg, ranked highly according to the HDI, are in a poor position according to the HPI. Many of the highest ranking countries according to the HPI are those 'third world' countries with low GDPs; Sri Lanka, Vietnam, The Dominican Republic and Costa Rica, for example. Some poor countries such as Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe remain at the bottom of the HPI ranking, with ongoing conflicts, malnutrition and a high disease burden.

	Happy Planet Index ranking	**Human Development index ranking**	**GDP per capita ranking**
Costa Rica	01	48	61
Dominican Republic	02	79	69
Viet Nam	05	105	123
Sri Lanka	22	99	106
UK	74	16	11
Japan	75	08	17
Norway	88	02	03
Iceland	94	01	05
United States	114	12	02
Luxembourg	122	18	01
Sierra Leone	136	177	172
Zimbabwe	143	151	142

Table: Performance of 12 selected countries

Of course it is very difficult to measure the happiness of a nation. However one must accept that HPI challenges the old paradigm and provides an indication of the *real* developmental situation around the world. HPI 2005 data puts Sri Lanka in 23rd place. However in July 2009 we may be in a much better position as the government managed to wipe out terrorism which was the key obstacle to the nation's happiness.

British economist John Maynard Keynes anticipated that by the end of the twentieth century, people would be working two days a week thanks to the great productivity increases he was seeing; however what we are witnessing today is the complete opposite. It is pointless for poorer countries to aspire to be 'more like the West' – it is simply impossible for everyone on the planet to live as Westerners do today. We would indeed need three planets to do so. We still only have one. A new narrative of progress is required for the twenty-first century. It is possible to have a good life without costing the Earth. It is an urgent need for the policy planers of Sri Lanka to understand these new global trends and come up with a realist plan for a better future for the country.