USA (108th of 140)
The USA is a wealthy country, with the eighth highest GDP per capita of all countries included in the HPI rankings. Its economy is based on trade, fossil fuel production and the world's second largest manufacturing industry. Despite the USA's financial wealth, it has a problem with economic inequality. Poverty has increased as a result of the recession in 2008; in 2010, 1 in 6 Americans lived below the poverty line. Inequality also results in wellbeing and life expectancy being only high for some. However, the most significant factor in the USA's low HPI score is its astonishingly large Ecological Footprint - the fourth largest of all countries included in the rankings.

Norway (12th of 140)
Universal healthcare and free education might be one reason that Norway's wellbeing and life expectancy scores are both high and some of the most equal in the world. But while Norway's Ecological Footprint is small for Europe, it's still almost three times bigger than the Earth can sustain.

Vanuatu (4th of 140)
Vanuatu has no military and a GDP per capita that's over 20 times smaller than Australia. Vanuatu has been consistently democratic and peaceful despite its immense cultural diversity (over 100 languages are spoken). Its population has higher wellbeing than that of Japan, while Vanuatu's Ecological Footprint is just a quarter of the size of Japan's.

Costa Rica (1st of 140)
Strong social networks, investment in health and education and a deep connection to nature may help explain why Costa Ricans are happier and live longer than the residents of most rich nations. A national commitment to environmental protection and use of renewable energy also keeps Costa Rica's Ecological Footprint small.

Chad (140th of 140)
Africa's fifth-largest nation suffers from inadequate infrastructure, and internal conflict. Poverty and inequality are widespread, and health and social conditions are among the worst in the region.

Bangladesh (8th of 140)
Bangladesh has the second smallest Ecological Footprint in the world - bringing it in at eighth place in the Happy Planet Index. Bangladesh's wellbeing and life expectancy scores are fairly low, yet they are significantly higher than those of countries with similar levels of GDP per capita. In fact, life expectancy in Bangladesh is almost 20 years higher than in Zimbabwe - despite having a similar GDP per capita. This is a country that's achieving a lot with limited resources.

Reference Map

Happy Planet Index Score
LOWEST — HIGHEST

Data Source: Jeffrey K. Wheatley H, Abdallah S (2016) The Happy Planet Index 2016
A global index of sustainable well-being. London: New Economics Foundation.

...no country successfully achieved a score in the highest category.

(UN)HAPPY PLANET

BY BENJAMIN HENNIG

Bhutan is credited as the first country to have implemented the concept of 'Gross National Happiness' as an official measure for the state of a nation, introduced in 1972. After the global financial crash in 2008, ideas about giving the 'spiritual, physical, social and environmental health of [people] and natural environment' more prominence over mere economic development are reflected more and more in international efforts towards a sustainable future.

The Happy Planet Index (HPI), developed by the New Economics Foundation, takes a rather radical approach on this issue. It aims to measure well-being and happiness by taking a universal and long-term approach to understanding, how efficiently people in a country are using their environmental resources to live long and happy lives.

This month's cartogram shows the results of the most recent Happy Planet Index 2016 from the perspective of people. This gridded population cartogram, shows the world resized according to the number of people living in each area, combined with the national HPI score.

The indicators that are used for calculating the HPI score cover life-satisfaction, life expectancy, inequality of outcomes and the ecological footprint. As argued in the report, 'GDP growth on its own does not mean a better life for everyone, particularly in countries that are already wealthy. It does not reflect inequalities in material conditions between people in a country.' This explains why consumption patterns are seen as more important for well-being than production. It also acknowledges that inequalities in well-being and life expectancy are important factors in the overall happiness of the population in a country.

When taking these notions into account, the rich industrialised countries score much worse in achieving sustainable well-being for all. Of the 140 countries included in the HPI, Luxembourg is the most extreme example for a wealthy nation scoring very badly – it does well on life expectancy and well-being, and also has low inequality, but sustains this lifestyle with the largest ecological footprint per capita of any country in the world. It would require more than nine planets to sustain this way of life if every person on Earth lived the same way, showing that the standard of living comes at a high cost to the environment.

Among the positive stories is Costa Rica, which is also highlighted on the map. The country has persistently scored highest in all HPI releases (the 2016 edition is the third, after 2009 and 2012). More of a surprise might be the high score for Mexico (second), which is credited to massive efforts at improving health and environmental sustainability. Despite challenges with tackling inequality, well-being is perceived higher than in the wealthier northern neighbour, the United States. Quite a few Central and South American nations, as well as some Asian and Pacific countries do better than many wealthy nations. However, the African continent

shows that at the bottom end extreme poverty can be a limiting factor in achieving sustainable well-being.

This change in perspective explains why in the public perception of wealthier societies the world has stopped becoming an ever better place. The indicators used in the Happy Planet Index acknowledge some of the most pressing global issues in recent years, such as unstable economic developments, rising inequalities, and environmental change. These have become an important element in the well-being of societies. As a consequence, other parts of the world are doing remarkably better in the combination of these indicators. This might lead to the conclusion that there are valuable lessons to be learned from the best scoring countries about how to better achieve sustainable well-being for everyone on this planet, beyond the aim for material wealth.

Benjamin Hennig (@geoviews) is Assistant Professor in Geography at the University of Iceland and Honorary Research Associate in the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. He is involved in the Worldmapper project and is author of www.viewsoftheworld.net.