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# It may be impossible to live comfortably without trashing Earth



**The high quality of life in the US is paid for by plundering nature**  
People crossing street

Yeong-Ung Yang/The New York Times/Redux/Eyevine

By **Andy Coghlan**

NO COUNTRIES manage to live well. Of 151 nations that have just been rated, not one achieves the Goldilocks feat of doing it just right: creating a good life for its inhabitants without overusing natural resources.

“We didn’t really find a good role model of any country doing things sustainably,” says Daniel O’Neill at the University of Leeds, UK. “We need to do things in a radically different way if we are to have any hope of achieving a good life for all people on the planet.”

Unsurprisingly, the worst plunderers of nature are rich nations. Countries like the US offer their citizens good lives, but break environmental limits.

Meanwhile, poorer countries like Vietnam overuse fewer resources, but don't meet all the well-being targets for their people.

O'Neill and his colleagues rated each country's sustainability by totting up how it used, produced or affected seven things. These were water, phosphorus, nitrogen, carbon dioxide emissions, land-use change, ecological footprint and material consumption.

The team also used 11 measures to assess whether citizens had good lives. Some were basic needs or expectations like nutrition, sanitation, access to energy and long life expectancy. The others reflected social stability: income, education, equality, social support, employment prospects, quality of democracy and overall life satisfaction.

An ideal country would score zero for resource overshoot and 11 for citizen well-being: everyone's needs would be met and no natural resources destroyed.

Rich countries like the US, UK and Australia overshoot their limits to feed their lifestyles.

"The USA transgresses all seven planetary boundary indicators, but... scores relatively highly on the social thresholds, achieving nine out of 11," says team member Julia Steinberger at the University of Leeds. The UK did similarly, breaking five boundaries, but reaching eight social targets. "They could be described as 'well-off over-consumers'," she says.

## **"We can no longer pretend that simply letting the market decide will lead to anything but disaster"**

However, South Africa breaches the same natural boundaries as the UK, but achieves only one social target: nutrition. It is a "dysfunctional over-consumer", says Steinberger, "because its consumption doesn't seem to result in a better life".

Some poor countries, like Malawi and Senegal, keep within planetary boundaries, but reach none of the social thresholds.

A few countries are better at balancing well-being and sustainability. They include Sri Lanka – which breaches no natural limits – Vietnam and Moldova. However, none meets all the well-being targets (*Nature Sustainability*, doi.org/cj8t).

"The analysis provides a critical reminder of the tremendous challenge facing humanity," says Johan Rockström of Stockholm University in Sweden.

"We can no longer pretend that simply letting the market decide what is best for us will lead to anything but disaster," says Steinberger.

O'Neill's team says poorer countries should prioritise basic needs, which can be met without overshooting limits. Citizens of rich countries should rethink what they need. "Life satisfaction" scores improved only marginally for every ecological limit broken, so scaling back on luxuries could have big environmental benefits.

“Some of the strongest determinants of life satisfaction are good health; strong family and community relationships; economic security in the form of employment or higher incomes; and relative rather than absolute wealth with respect to the rest of one’s society,” says Steinberger. “There’s a lot we can learn about how to move to lower material forms of life satisfaction.”

One step may be to stop judging progress by economic measures like gross domestic product. We should “abandon GDP as our main measure of national progress”, says O’Neill. Instead, we should target “things that genuinely matter to people, like health, happiness, meaningful employment and equality”.

“We would argue that material de-growth of the richest nations is imperative for medium and long-term planetary stability,” says Steinberger. “However, in poorer countries, with a lack of basic goods like food and sanitation, some level of growth is essential for social progress.”

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