GDP Per Capita As a Deception of Living Standards Across Countries

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Abstract

GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita has historically been a standard metric by economists when gauging a country's living standards. However, not every country's posted statistics validly attest to the prosperity of civilians, which is largely influenced by government policy. This paper provides several examples of synthesizing literature regarding economic developments with information about GDP per capita primarily from the World Bank database. Some additional statistics regard the poverty rate, unemployment rate, and the percent of funds held by a subset of the population. By categorizing the issues surrounding six selected countries into themes of income inequality, tax havens, political instability and resource misallocation, human rights violations, and lack of access to healthcare, we argue that GDP per capita is a misleading statistic for determining the wellbeing of a country's population. In our paper, we ultimately aim to highlight the significance of viewing aggregate measurements about a country with caution, using real-world examples to refute overly generalized associations related to GDP per capita.

Introduction

For decades, economic growth, prosperity, and living standards of a country have been determined by its gross domestic product, abbreviated as GDP. This measure of all goods and services produced within a country is calculated through either an income or expenditure approach, the latter of which for instance involves individual, corporate, and government transactions, investments, and net exports (Anielski, 2002). GDP per capita, which divides this macroeconomic aggregate by a country's total population (Maddison, 1983), is a combination of many socioeconomic variables. For instance, GDP per capita positively correlates with the transparency of a country's government as well as the quality of education offered for the people, and the distribution of such a state's funds can be indicated by measures like the poverty rate, or the percentage of people who fall below a determined minimum threshold for individual self-sufficiency (Ilter, 2016).

Before continuing onto its application across countries, we briefly compare GDP per capita with other potential measurements of prosperity and provide some insight on why the former is chosen to be examined in this paper instead, although the other metrics are still analyzed as if they are complementary to GDP per capita. For instance, the Human Development Index (HDI) is more restricted in scope since an index between 0 and 1 does not necessarily account for whether a country is a democratic or not (Kelley, 1991). With gross national income (GNI) per capita, there are some shared limitations with GDP per capita when it comes to measuring income inequality, as demonstrated later in the paper (Sterck et al., 2018). To grasp an idea of wealth within a country's borders rather than accounting for confounding factors associated with citizens abroad, as measured by GNI per capita (The Investopedia Team, 2024), we stick with GDP per capita as our central point. Finally, although less niche and more all-encompassing, GDP per capita does not strongly encompass income inequality as the Gini coefficient, where a measurement of 0 indicates a perfectly equal share of funds among all people and 1 indicates the extremity of a single individual's control over all funds (Farris, 2010). In this paper, we argue that GDP per capita is misleading through counterexamples spanning various economic, social, and political situations unique to each country, constituting a multifaceted approach.

Methodology

The crux of our research is a synthesis of scholarly literature and global databases on GDP per capita and other related measures like the Human Development Index. In order to best compare GDP per capita across the world, we primarily focus on *multiple case studies*, honing in on select countries which deviate from positive inferences made from a high GDP per capita. In the following section, we elaborate on the economic, social, and political themes used to classify each country in question.

Results

Our case study methodology is split into five categories: income disparities among socioeconomic classes, tax havens affecting public resources, political corruption leading to poorly managed resources, infringements on human rights, and how the lack of access to healthcare hinders a fundamental living standard. Each category examines one or two countries, citing historical developments to contextualize unique situations and citing statistics indicating measures like poverty, inequality, and industry output.

Income Disparities - South Africa

One key issue with the GDP per capita measure is it can mask the issue of income inequality in a country. An uneven distribution of income can occur in a country that has unequal access to jobs and education due to racial, regional, or gender disparities. South Africa is a prime example of this as the country has the highest income inequality globally based on a Gini index of 0.63 points (Cuevas, 2023). The country had a GDP per capita of 6,022 USD in 2023 and is considered an upper middle-income country (World Bank). Still, its poverty rates are comparable to much poorer countries as 20.5% of the population live below the international poverty line of less than $2.15 USD per day (Cuevas, 2023). While South Africa's GDP per capita is one of the highest in Africa, the income distribution is significantly skewed with the top 20% of the population holding 68% of income and the bottom 40% holding 7% of income (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

Understanding how income inequality can be so jarring in countries like South Africa requires a closer examination of a country's history and persisting legacies of inequality. In 1948, a formal system of racial segregation known as apartheid became enforced after the National Party came to power with the election of Prime Minister D.F. Malan. The National Party passed laws segregating public facilities and forcing Black South Africans to relocate to separated ethnic homelands or Bantustans. Even after the apartheid ended in 1994 with a new constitution and the first democratic election, its impact continues to shape the economic and social systems in the country. The majority of Black South Africans live in townships and informal housing still and have less access to quality jobs, education, and healthcare (University of Washington, 2019). A sharp racial wealth gap persists as the median wealth in a White household is 1,364,900 South African Rands (R) while the median wealth in a Black household is 70,000 Rands. This means that the median Black household has 5% of the wealth of the median White household. When looking at the same educational group, the racial wealth gap remains strong likely due to greater inherited wealth in White households. In the tertiary education group, the median wealth in a White household is R1,844,345 while the median wealth in a Black household is R117,250 (Chelwa et al., 2024).

The severity of income inequality in South Africa is likely to persist if there are no significant improvements in the labor market. The overall unemployment rate as of Q1 2024 is 32.9%, and the youth unemployment rate (ages 15-34) is 45.5%. There is a lack of skilled labor for formal work due to a poor education system, and 35.5% of youth (ages 15-24) are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) (Maluleke, 2024). There are also regional differences in income across the nine provinces as there are lower formal employment rates in rural provinces. The main economic province, Gauteng, has double the income per capita of the most rural regions like the Eastern Cape (International Monetary Fund, 2020). To bridge the regional disparities in wealth, there is a need for more low-skilled jobs, affordable transportation, and better education in the rural provinces.

One current government solution to address poverty in the nation is social grants, with the main ones being for old age or disability. Since over 30% of households do not have working adults, many rely on non-labor market sources like grants (Shah, 2022). Around one-third of South Africans are direct beneficiaries, so they may be prompted to stop seeking employment. Indirect recipients of the grant also have a disincentive for job search. Studies have shown that the youth especially are disincentivized from seeking employment given the cost to search for jobs and low skill levels (Miyajima, 2023). So while social grants and fiscal policy have alleviated some poverty in the country, it is not a sustainable tool to reduce inequality since it doesn’t address the root issues in the labor market and education system. The nation needs more permanent solutions for long-term job creation to reduce the amount of debt created by grant programs.

By having a deeper look into the income disparities in South Africa, there is a clearer picture of the living standards of the majority that is not reflected in the GDP per capita measure.

The metric does not show the full severity of income inequality due to the history of racial and regional disparities in the country. When considering how income distribution varies by age group, region, and race, the issues of labor market access and education are brought into light as key factors in shaping the living standards of South Africa.

Tax Havens - Ireland

A tax haven is a country or jurisdiction that offers low or no taxes and favorable regulations to attract foreign capital and individuals seeking to minimize their tax liabilities, often with strong privacy protections and limited financial disclosure requirements. While tax havens can boost GDP per capita through foreign capital inflows, these gains often don't reflect improved living standards for the local population. The benefits are usually concentrated among a few, and the broader economic impact may be limited. Ireland has become a notable tax haven, particularly attractive for multinational corporations seeking to reduce their tax burdens. The country offers a low corporate tax rate of 12.5%, which is among the lowest in the European Union, encouraging major tech and pharmaceutical companies to set up operations there. Ireland’s tax system includes provisions that allow for profit-shifting strategies, such as the now-phased-out “Double Irish” arrangement, where companies route profits through Irish subsidiaries to avoid high taxes in other jurisdictions. Ireland’s favorable tax policies, combined with its EU membership, enable companies to benefit from both low taxes and access to the European market. While these tax practices have brought economic growth and employment to Ireland, they have also sparked criticism from other countries and international organizations, which argue that such arrangements contribute to global tax inequality. An example of one of these was when Apple went for years paying taxes on only 0.005% of its annual profit in taxes (Oxfam, 2024).

The presence of tax havens in Ireland means that the economy relies heavily on the multinational sector. Shocks to a few key international companies have disproportionately high impacts on Ireland's economy which has serious implications when it comes to exports and employment in Ireland. Due to the presence of large multinational companies, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) face labor shortages and struggle to grow. Additionally, there is less investment in these SMEs due to the competitiveness of the large multinationals. Not only does the tax haven impact the labor market, it also impacts the housing market. There are persistent housing shortages, with housing supply being low and rental prices have gone up by a third in the last four years. (European Commission, 2024) These factors make up the disparity between the HDI and the GDP in Ireland and it goes to show that GDP does not necessarily equate to the quality of life of its citizens.

Not only does Ireland's HDI not match up with its GDP, its Gross National Income does not either. For most countries, GNI and GDP are almost interchangeable, but in Ireland there are huge gaps between these figures. The GNI measures the total income of a country's residents (Maverick, 2025). In Ireland, the GDP figures suggest that the average worker in Ireland is worth €190,000 in 2022 and every person worth €95,000. In reality, the number in the Irish domestic economy never exceeded €97,000 until 2021, and it remains significantly lower in domestic agriculture (€42,000) and domestic services (€70,000).

Political Corruption and Resource Misallocation - Equatorial Guinea and Nauru

The aforementioned countries discussed in this section are respectively classified as "upper-middle-income" and "high-income" by the World Bank. However, a single superficial glance at the GDP per capita measurement masks the inability of certain countries to equitably allocate and invest the profits of resources, albeit non-renewable, in order to foster economic growth. Such countries strongly highlight examples of a "resource curse," where they are each blessed with the abundance of a specific natural mineral or fossil fuel but mismanagement at the governmental level of such resources leads to economic underachievement. Both countries discussed below explain how poor handling of a primary industry has resulted in ill outcomes for the people and the system as a whole.

A country can have a high GDP per capita relative to its region, which leads to the face value assumption that their living standards are also consistently uniform. However, as is the case with Equatorial Guinea, GDP per capita has dropped from 22,128 USD to 7,343 USD over the course of a decade. This is a function of great dependence on petroleum abundant in the Gulf of Guinea (African Development Bank Group, 2024). The one-party, absolutist policies of President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo conceals the reality that most Equatoguineans still live in poverty while oil revenue fuels the police state and cunning corporate communications (Yates, 2012). This is indicated by a poverty rate of 76.8% and a Gini coefficient of 0.502 (African Development Bank Group, 2024) as well as a ranking of 145 out of 191 on the Human Development Index (World Bank).

Equatorial Guinea thus serves as a prime example of a "rentier state," which is characteristic of stark inequality as a result of poorly distributed resources and sheer opacity regarding how the country's finances are spent. For instance, as a means for President Obiang to consolidate political power against opponents and legitimize his rule, a new planned capital city in the interior of the country away from the current capital of Malabo has been extraordinarily financed by oil revenue (Campante et. al, 2019). Additionally, current factions in Equatorial Guinea are based on ethnicity, since power is currently held by a family from the Fang people and other groups like the autonomy-seeking Bubi have had private property seized and publicized by the ruling class in a process known as expropriation (Yates, 2012). Due to the wealth disparity in and of itself and the inability of those in power to direct profits from natural resources into institutions which serve the populace instead of to themselves, the high GDP per capita measurement relative to Sub-Saharan Africa fails to attest to the average person's living situation in Equatorial Guinea.

Even if a country's statistics indicate otherwise, the whims of government can hinder its state's economic outcomes. Take the example of Nauru, a Small Island Developing State in the Pacific Ocean just under the Equator with an upper-middle-income GDP per capita of $12,982.80 (World Bank). This microstate was once covered by 80% of phosphates, which were most profitable when leveraged as high-grade fertilizer in Australia and New Zealand's farmlands (Pollock, 2014). Since gaining independence from Australia in 1968, this island country has exercised inequitable control over its mineral resources through trust funds such as the Nauru Royalty Trust Fund and Long Term Investment Trust Fund, disregarding property rights at the individual level. (Cox, 2009). Because of the phosphate mineral's non-renewable properties, the effects of exploitation and exhaustion are irreversible, highlighting another example of a resource-rich country's adherence to the "resource curse" of many countries rich in raw goods but economically underachieving as a result of mismanagement.

Due to the lack of privatization of resources that the government poorly channeled into unsustainable and purely speculative investments, Nauru had crossed a point of no return with bleak prospects of assets amounting to positive returns (Cox, 2009) and attaining a 90% unemployment rate as of 2004 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2022). This is exacerbated by the fact that other industries on the island pose much lower chances of generating revenue for the country, despite the potential of residual phosphate reserves and the ability of Nauru to sell its fishing rights to other countries (Cox, 2009). Due to the effect of Nauru's governmental policies on the labor force, the island state's overall population has borne the burden of the "resource curse" in a way that ultimately alienated the people from true high-income status.

Human Rights Violations - Qatar

The measurement of GDP per capita may be a sufficient indicator of a country's well-being in most scenarios, as seen in the United States which has a relatively high GDP per capita and HDI, or in Ethiopia which has a lower GDP per capita and low HDI (World Bank). However, it can be a false measure when considering countries accused of human rights violations and forced labor practices. The Middle East is a region fraught with economic inequality, both between countries and within specific countries. In the past few years especially, the region has experienced heightened tensions and severe conflicts that caused the inequality gap to widen between high-income and low-income earners. For the past few decades, the top 10% of income-earners in the Middle East have earned at least 25 times more than the bottom 50%, accounting for up to 60% of the total national income (Moshrif, 2022). Of the oil-rich Gulf countries, Qatar in particular has top 10% earners making 29 times that of the bottom 50% earners (Moshrif, 2022).

The heightened inequality gap within Qatar reveals much about its economic and political make-up, mirrored more or less in all the Gulf countries. As a nation reliant on exporting natural resources, Qatar employs more than 2 million migrant workers each year to extract the petroleum and natural gas that constitutes nearly 40% of its GDP (Human Rights Watch, 2020; International Trade Administration). These workers are often subject to abusive conditions, low wages and dangerous working environments. While they are paid, the wages are often not enough to cover their debt bondage from illegal recruitment fees, effectively keeping them in forced labor. Therefore, while Qatar is ranked fourth in the world based on GDP per capita, making it one of the richest countries on paper, this wealth is not shared equally amongst those who live there (World Bank). This is a trend seen across numerous of the oil-rich Gulf countries, most notably including Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE (Moshrif, 2022).

Qatar, specifically, was cast into the word's spotlight as the host country of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. While South Africa only spent 3.6 billion USD in 2010 and Russia spent 11.6 billion USD in 2018, Qatar spent a record-high 220 billion on hosting the World Cup (Armstrong, 2022). A large portion of the budget was allocated towards the construction of 8 new stadiums, an airport, a metro system and housing for the guests. Accused of exploiting migrant workers for the construction of its projects, Qatar came under intense criticism over human rights and labor law violations. After enduring harsh working conditions, many workers were left unpaid and denied end-of-service benefits. The government, under pressure, promised to resolve all cases of denied wages for migrant workers, yet many have reported they have not been compensated for the thousands of US dollars owed to them (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The World Cup is simply one example that highlights how GDP per capita in a country does not translate to a higher standard of living for all people residing there.

Lack of Access to Healthcare - Russia

Russia was classified as a high income country in 2023 as abundant natural resources, agriculture, and the energy sector can be credited for the country's relatively high GDP per capita of $13,817 (World Bank). This should indicate that the standard of living in Russia is fairly high, however, closer examination of other economic measures, such as the Human Development Index (HDI) indicate that the standard of living is lower than what GDP per capita would suggest. Russia has an HDI of 0.821, which typically correlates to a higher GDP per capita. The health care system in Russia is particularly poor with regional and gender differences as key issues in the system. In the case of Russia, GDP per capita does not tell the whole story of standard of living.

When closely examining health care disparities in Russia, the main problem of understanding underlying issues is the lack of quantitative data the Russian Federation provides publicly. However, by observing medical studies we can begin to get a better understanding of the healthcare industry in the country. In 2021, Natalia Shartova et al. published a study which examined health care disparities across the entire region. In this study gender differences can be readily observed as life expectancy for women is historically 13 years longer than for men (Shartova et al., 2021). This can be attributed to high male mortality rate from cardiovascular disease, hazardous work conditions, and poor dietary decisions including high alcohol consumption.

Additionally, in a study conducted about the rapid growth of HIV in St. Petersburg, patients experienced barriers to receiving health care including long wait times, stigmatization around the disease, and poor organization in medical facilities (Vasquez, 2013). When looking at the HIV epidemic globally there is typically a clear correlation with declining GDP per capita and an increase in HIV especially in sub-Saharan Africa. However, in a study conducted by David Bloom around HIV and other diseases in Russia there was no relation between an increase in deaths and GDP per capita (Bloom & Malaney, 1998). This contradicts the findings from sub-Saharan Africa and shows how GDP per capita in Russia does not reflect the prominent health and health care issues. This further illustrates how in some countries, GDP per capita is not the best indicator for standard of living and fails to quantify ongoing issues.

Conclusion

Throughout our paper, we have continuously stressed the importance of thoroughly scrutinizing examples of countries where the GDP per capita is misaligned with the level of prosperity of citizens. In this proof by counterexample fashion, we have thus presented the shortfalls of GDP per capita as a completely reliable benchmark, despite the reputability it has gained from decades of research and analysis by economists and policymakers. Perhaps a more comprehensive analysis of such exceptional countries, as indicated by income level, would involve a deeper dive into alternate measurements such as GNI per capita, HDI, and the Gini coefficient, since they still supplement discussion about economic development and could be used in conjunction with GDP per capita. For now, it is enriching to refute hasty generalizations in the context of macroeconomic trends through such a critique.

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