

Book Review

The Wellbeing of Nations: A Country-by-Country Index of Quality of Life and the Environment, by Robert Prescott-Allen. Washington: Island Press/Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001.

Kim Naqvi

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Two years ago, at a colloquium on sub-Saharan Africa, a colleague raised an uncomfortable question. How, she asked, can we teach about broad social and economic patterns without stereotyping sub-Saharan Africa as region of deprivation? Most students encounter sub-Saharan Africa in an introductory social science elective, without the context of colonial history and cultural diversity. Mass-produced texts, with repetitious maps of GDP per capita; birth, death, and fertility rates; available calories; and urbanization present a patchwork quilt of data with one recurring hole in the center. Such false comparison with the supposedly unqualified success of older industrialized countries dulls and disempowers the curious mind. One achievement of Prescott-Allen's *The Wellbeing of Nations* is to provide alternatives to this map. For those applying the Bahá'í International Community's development publications in search of counterweights to material measures of well-being, this work identifies new patterns and raises new questions.

The Wellbeing of Nations applies the 1996 Bellagio principles for assessing sustainable development at the global and nation-state scale. It presents the rationale for and results of two new indices for both critical evaluation and application. But it is also a valuable resource for the critical researcher and instructor looking for new data and visuals, and the increasingly skeptical mainstream researcher looking for new explanations for old failures. In addition to proposing new indices for human well-being (HWI) and ecosystem well-being (EWI), the book reviews existing development measures. Most of the book comprises appendices of explanation and data, and readers would do well to tackle appendices A and B after the introductory chapter for a thorough background on the rationale.

All development research and measures are normative, and the guiding norm for *The Wellbeing of Nations* is the concept of sustainable development. Here, it is applied with the particular assumption that human and ecosystem well-being are of equal importance. The proposed HWI and EWI are each further defined through five elements and ten sub-elements, captured through over fifty indicators. Results for indicators, elements, and indices are then ranked from 0 to 100, with qualitative ranks from "bad" to "good" calculated separately for each indicator. They are also mapped, although an unfortunate color choice makes the ordinal scale difficult to read. From this analysis, Prescott-Allen produces two further indices, a two-dimensional well-being measure (WI), which graphs HWI versus EWI; and a wellbeing stress ratio (WSI) of human well-being to shortfall in ecosystem well-being (that is, $HWI/[EWI-100]$).

Assigning equal weight to human and ecosystem well-being might seem arbitrary, but the WI's strength is transparency and readability. Causal assumptions about human and ecosystem interaction are left to policy makers and planners responding to conditions identified in the WI

graph. Despite its obvious limitations, a WI average is also used as a general measure of “distance from sustainability.”

Transparency and simplicity of measures are key requirements of the Bellagio principles. They require that indicators reflect a framework which links vision and goals to measures, are described in simple language, are based on readily available data, are generated with broad participation, include policy recommendations, and can be replicated and improved. In brief, they are a commitment to open communication, participation, and practical action.

Prescott-Allen compares the HWI and EWI to the established Human Development Index (HDI) and ecological footprint. The HWI arguably improves upon the HDI by including controversial and more complex measures such as community, equity, knowledge, and communication, and by refining health and education measures. It captures distance from an ideal, rather than distance from destitution, thus mapping a broader range of well-being, lowering the rank of most countries, and reducing the gap between Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Most elements of the HWI are linearly related, with the telling exception of equity. This makes the index both easy to interpret, and fertile ground for further critical analysis. Regional blocs of missing data do affect the strength of inflation, unemployment, basic services, public debt, corruption, and household equity indicators, while the selection and availability of others reflect Western cultural biases. There are no measures for culture, no sub-national measures for community, or sub-household measures of equity or structure, and no differentiation between the acquisition of new knowledge and the loss of traditional knowledge. These gaps are not unnoticed by the author, nor reflective of his views. But their absence at the national scale does illustrate why development research is increasingly done at local scales, where a greater complexity of well-being determinants can be investigated.

One odd categorization, with tremendous significance for overall rankings, is the categorization of low fertility as “good,” even when it drops below population replacement rates. The impact of aging populations on financial systems, population distribution, immigration patterns, and ethnic strife is increasingly hard to ignore, and its absence is a conspicuous limitation.

While the HWI broadens the range of well-being, the EWI radically changes world patterns. No country ranks as “good,” and those ranked “fair” are in less-industrialized countries. Most older industrialized countries and industrializing countries are in “poor” shape. However, only two of the EWI’s five elements are linearly related, making the index difficult to interpret. This complexity leaves the reader wishing for fewer or simpler indicators, as reading each distinct summary becomes an information overload. On the other hand, it accurately reflects ecosystem complexity, diversity, and disjunction with national boundaries. While the crossboundary nature of ecosystems and resource use is addressed through adjustments to individual indicators, the variability of nation-state size, shape, population distribution, and trade relations still weakens the index at times. Nation-states with large, sparsely populated areas have higher EWI ranks for land and water than small densely populated areas. Yet this difference reflects national resource endowment, not local well-being. Likewise, heavily transformed areas of ancient civilization may be ranked lower than more recently urbanized areas, even though a long-term balance may have deteriorated only recently. Prescott-Allen does note that EWI’s measurement needs to be taken in broader regional context. However, additional adjustments should to be made for

national population patterns. Also, regional scale measures of resource use will not capture globalized trade. Tying imports and high HWI in specific countries to exports and low EWI in others would be a complex, but valuable, extension of basic ecosystem rankings. Finally, regional patterns of missing data for inland water, local air quality, and plant species may artificially raise some ranks in less-industrialized countries.

Regional reviews of the WI and WSI are left to the reader. Here, it is sufficient to note two patterns. First, the two-dimensional WI also produces a new map of well-being. No country has both a high HWI and EWI, so the remaining general categories of low HWI and high EWI, high HWI and low EWI, and low HWI and EWI are mapped. Again, a poor color scheme renders interpretation virtually impossible, but two observations stand out. First, many countries with both low HWI and EWI are those undergoing rapid industrialization. Second, EWI varies in all groups, despite an overall trend to decline as HWI rises. This, Prescott-Allen argues, is evidence that human well-being does not necessarily require ecosystem destruction.

The second notable pattern is that countries with high HWI still cluster in one group. The HWI has higher values than the EWI, so simple arithmetic isolates high HWI countries in any comparative measure. Thus, maps of the WI average and WSI ratio produce the old familiar patterns of “well-off” and “poorly off” countries, with some exceptions. True, “well-off” countries are now ranked “medium” or “poor,” rather than “good,” but the overall geographic distribution can also be used by the skeptic to argue that ecosystem destruction is a necessary consequence of improving human well-being. Hence, the map of the two-dimensional WI is more effective at capturing worldwide development diversity, while the maps of WSI and the WI average capture worldwide low ecosystem wellbeing.

There are so many ways to measure development and well-being that to criticize Prescott-Allen’s extensive effort seems almost petty. The new HWI is fertile ground for application and comparative analysis. It should be adjusted for new concerns about aging, which would break the bloc of high HWI-high income countries. The EWI combines a wealth of material but is difficult to interpret. One wonders if its separate components are more valuable for detailed research. Poor graphics are an unfortunate handicap, sometimes masking critically important information. Policy recommendations, while integral to the Bellagio principles, seem to draw on general principles of sustainable development rather than specific observations of the study. Inevitable shortcomings aside, Prescott-Allen has produced an extensive, original, and valuable work, with practical applications for the researcher, instructor, and planner. *The Wellbeing of Nations* turns up in required course readings and in policy presentations. However, a search of citation indices found no academic citations or reviews.