



## Time to stop celebrating the polluters

The United Nations must include sustainability in its quality-of-life index to encourage countries to develop responsibly, says Chuluun Togtokh.

The United Nations Development Programme this month released its annual league table of countries judged according to their state of development. Who leads this ranking? The usual suspects: the United States, Canada and Australia are all among the top six. My own nation, Mongolia, languishes in 110th place.

The UN goes out of its way to promote sustainable development, yet the Human Development Index (HDI) mostly ignores sustainability. Worse still, the index celebrates gas-guzzling developed nations. It is time that this failure — hidden in plain sight — was exposed and corrected.

The HDI has set straightforward benchmarks for countries and international organizations for more than 20 years. Its success and influence owes much to its simplicity. The index brilliantly summarizes development and quality of life in a given country using health, education and income levels. Yet it fails to cover an increasingly crucial question: how responsible is that development? With Earth's human population reaching 7 billion in the past month, it is reasonable to question the UN's true commitment to sustainability.

In the current HDI, developed nations and oil-rich countries are placed highly without regard to how much their development paths cost the planet and imperil humanity's future development. There is an assumption that natural resources are unlimited, and little regard is given to the fundamental changes to Earth's biological, physical and chemical processes that result from development. Either we have unbridled optimism that a miracle will occur, or our scepticism about our ability to overcome this massive challenge is so paralyzing that we do not even bother to try.

In 1992, the first UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, defined the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental growth. Globally, humanity has had remarkable success with the first two of these. But we have failed to tackle all three dimensions simultaneously, owing to reductionism, fragmentation, division and territoriality. The HDI is emblematic of this fragmented approach.

As the UN prepares to return to Rio de Janeiro for the Earth Summit 2012, it must lead by example. From next year, it should change the way it calculates the HDI. The revised index should include each nation's per capita carbon emissions, and so become a Human Sustainable Development Index (HSDI).

Per capita emissions are a simple, available and quantifiable indicator, and this month's report announcing the HDI did include some important analysis of them. Emissions are positively and strongly correlated with income; less so with the HDI; and not at all with health and education. And in general, the

faster a country's HDI improves, the faster its carbon dioxide emissions increase. The bottom line is that progress in the HDI has come at the cost of global warming. But these environmental costs are related only to economic growth, not to broader gains in the HDI, and the relationship is not fixed. Some countries have advanced in both the HDI and environmental sustainability.

How would inclusion of emissions affect the HDI? To find out, I recalculated the index using the UN's published methodology, but taking per capita emissions into account. The resulting HSDI gives some interesting results.

Australia, the United States and Canada fall straight out of the top 10: Australia slides from 2nd place to 26th, the United States drops from 4th to 28th, and Canada falls from 6th to 24th.

Cultures that value moderation do well in this sustainability index: Norway remains in the top position, Sweden rises from 10th to 2nd and Switzerland moves from 11th to 3rd. But anyone who has visited the Nordic countries will recognize that moderation need not compromise a high standard of living. And for the first time, an Asian state appears in the top ten. Hong Kong rises from 13th place to 4th. Japan and South Korea, originally just outside the top ten, move down by only one or two places.

Noticeably, oil-producing countries and those with intensive oil use drop the most. The United Arab Emirates, Brunei Darussalam, Qatar, Luxembourg and Bahrain are no longer listed in the 'Very High Human Development' quartile.

Using the HSDI, Mongolia advances slightly. My country is likely to become one of the fastest growing economies in the world, but the current HDI offers no encouragement for it to grow sustainably. Ulaanbaatar is already one of the worst capital cities in the world for air pollution. The country's water, forage and forest resources are depleted. Mongolia is at a turning point in environmental, social, economic, political and cultural development. We urgently need international collaborations to preserve our natural and cultural systems and introduce green technologies.

It seems part of human nature at all levels to compete, and this can be harnessed. The HDI has shifted the target of development beyond the almighty dollar; the proposed HSDI would go one step further, and change the role models for development. We need such a change because, if the UN continues to encourage countries such as Mongolia to aspire to the US lifestyle, we will all be in serious trouble. ■

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**Chuluun Togtokh** is a professor of ecosystem and sustainability sciences at the National University of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar and vice-chair of Mongolia's Global Change National Committee. e-mail: [chuluun@warnernr.colostate.edu](mailto:chuluun@warnernr.colostate.edu)