

The Happy Planet Index – Nic Marks (Excerpt from a TED Talk)

Section Expert: A

0:10 And we created, at the organization that I work for, the New Economics Foundation, something we call the Happy Planet Index, because we think people should be happy and the planet should be happy. Why don't we create a measure of progress that shows that? And what we do, is we say that the ultimate outcome of a nation is how successful is it at creating happy and healthy lives for its citizens. That should be the goal of every nation on the planet. But we have to remember that there's a fundamental input to that, and that is how many of the planet's resources we use. We all have one planet. We all have to share it. It is the ultimate scarce resource, the one planet that we share. And economics is very interested in scarcity. When it has a scarce resource that it wants to turn into a desirable outcome, it thinks in terms of efficiency. It thinks in terms of how much bang do we get for our buck. And this is a measure of how much well-being we get for our planetary resource use. It is an efficiency measure. And probably the easiest way to show you that is to show you this graph.

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1:20 Running horizontally along the graph, is "ecological footprint," which is a measure of how much resources we use and how much pressure we put on the planet. More is bad. Running vertically upwards, is a measure called "happy life years." It's about the well-being of nations. It's like a happiness adjusted life-expectancy. It's like quality and quantity of life in nations. And the yellow dot there you see, is the global average. Now, there's a huge array of nations around that global average. To the top right of the graph, are countries which are doing reasonably well and producing well-being, but they're using a lot of planet to get there. They are the U.S.A., other Western countries going across in those triangles and a few Gulf states in there actually. Conversely, at the bottom left of the graph, are countries that are not producing much well-being -- typically, sub-Saharan Africa. In Hobbesian terms, life is short and brutish there. The average life expectancy in many of these countries is only 40 years. Malaria, HIV/AIDS are killing a lot of people in these regions of the world.

Section Expert: C

2:30 But now for the good news! There are some countries up there, yellow triangles, that are doing better than global average, that are heading up towards the top left of the graph. This is an aspirational graph. We want to be top left, where good lives don't cost the earth. They're Latin American. The country on its own up at the top is a place I haven't been to. Maybe some of you have. Costa Rica. Costa Rica -- average life expectancy is 78-and-a-half years. That is longer than in the USA. They are, according to the latest Gallup world poll, the happiest nation on the planet -- than anybody; more than Switzerland and Denmark. They are the happiest place. They are doing that on a quarter of the resources that are used typically in [the] Western world -- a quarter of the resources.

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Section Expert: D

3:25 What's going on there? What's happening in Costa Rica? We can look at some of the data. 99 percent of their electricity comes from renewable resources. Their government is one of the first to commit to be carbon neutral by 2021. They abolished the army in 1949 -- 1949. And they invested in social programs -- health and education. They have one of the highest literacy rates in Latin America and in the world. And they have that Latin vibe, don't they. They have the social connectedness. (Laughter) The challenge is, that possibly -- and the thing we might have to think about -- is that the future might not be North American, might not be Western European. It might be Latin American. And the challenge, really, is to pull the global average up here. That's what we need to do. And if we're going to do that, we need to pull countries from the bottom, and we need to pull countries from the right of the graph. And then we're starting to create a happy planet. That's one way of looking at it.