

Contribution to Beyond GDP „Virtual Indicator Expo“

<http://www.beyond-gdp.eu>

Name of the indicator/method:

Sustainable Society Index (SSI): a new comprehensive index for world-wide use

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Date: 22 October 2007

Do you know how sustainable – or should we say unsustainable? – your country is? Probably not. The Sustainable Society Index shows you at a glance how far your country is on its way to full sustainability, what is going well and what needs urgent improvement.

Need for a new measurement tool

The notion of what is meant by sustainability differs strongly among people. Even among scientists there are numerous definitions of sustainability. However, to be able to adequately manage our efforts in achieving a sustainable way of living on our planet, a clear definition of sustainability is required. Since none of the numerous indexes that have been developed until now show at a glance the level of a country's sustainability, we developed a new measurement tool: the Sustainable Society Index, SSI.

Sustainable Society Index – SSI

The newly developed SSI is based on a solid definition: the world-wide respected Brundtland definition. In order to express that sustainability includes human well-being, we have extended the definition of Brundtland by adding a provision so that the qualitative aspects of human life are explicitly included. We have formulated the Brundtland+ definition as follows:

A sustainable society is a society

- *that meets the needs of the present generation,*
- *that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,*
- *and in which each human being has the opportunity to develop itself in freedom, within a well-balanced society and in harmony with its surroundings.*

Starting from this definition, 22 indicators have been determined, covering this comprehensive definition of sustainability in its broad sense. The 22 indicators are clustered into 5 categories as shown below.

I Personal Development

- 1 Healthy Life
- 2 Sufficient Food
- 3 Sufficient to Drink
- 4 Safe Sanitation
- 5 Education Opportunities
- 6 Gender

II Clean Environment

- 7 Air Quality
- 8 Surface Water Quality
- 9 Land Quality

III Well-balanced Society

- 10 Good Governance
- 11 Unemployment
- 12 Population Growth
- 13 Income Distribution
- 14 Public Debt

IV Sustainable Use of Resources

- 15 Waste Recycling
- 16 Use of Renewable Water Resources
- 17 Consumption of Renewable Energy

V Sustainable World

- 18 Forest Area
- 19 Preservation of Biodiversity
- 20 Emission of Greenhouse Gases
- 21 Ecological Footprint
- 22 International Cooperation

The most well-known indicator, GDP per capita (Gross Domestic Product per capita), is not included since economy is not explicitly included in the Brundtland+ definition. Only few people still consider GDP per capita to be a useful indicator for development towards sustainability. In that respect other indicators, the ISEW or the Dutch DNI (Duurzaam Nationaal Inkomen, Sustainable National Income), are far more indicative. Unfortunately they cannot be used for the SSI on a world-wide scale since these two indicators are available for no more than a couple of countries.

The Sustainable Society Index has been calculated for 150 countries. This offers the option for comparison between countries using various viewpoints: neighboring countries, more or less similar countries, regional comparisons, comparisons between rich countries like the OECD-members, comparison between "North" and "South" etc. 43 of the existing 193 countries had to be left out due to lack of data. The bigger of those are Afghanistan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and Surinam. But mostly it concerns smaller countries including small island states. For the calculation of the indicators of the SSI only data from public sources has been used

Each indicator has been expressed on a scale from 0 to 10. A 10 expresses full sustainability; a 0 no sustainability at all. This quantitative approach requires that it should be defined what full sustainability for each indicator means. For some indicators this is very clear; for example the percentage of people with access to safe drinking water should be 100 to receive a score of 10. For some other indicators where this is not obvious, one can make an educated guess as to full sustainability and for some others even that is not possible. For the latter group the highest score in any of the 150 countries has received a 10 and the lowest score a 0. One has to bear in mind that the sustainability value of an indicator might be subjective to some extent. Moreover, it is likely to change over time. For instance population growth: now our planet seems overpopulated by human beings. However, it can very well be that in the future one has a different view on this issue.

A more detailed description of the calculation methodology and all results can be found on www.sustainablesocietyindex.com.

Results

As could be expected, the world at large is far from sustainable. The average ISS score of all countries on our planet is only 5.5. See Figure 1. Does that mean half-way down or half-way up? When updates of the ISS become available in the coming years this question can be answered.

Norway is currently topping the SSI ranking list with a 7.0. Though being the best in class, even Norway is way below full sustainability.

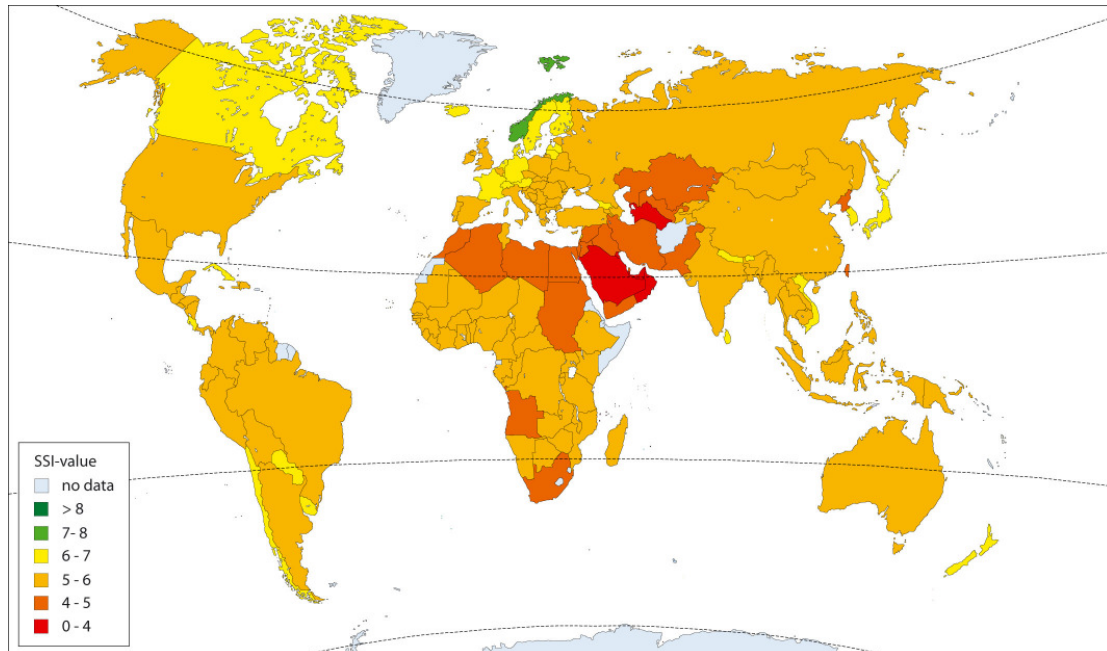


Figure 1 Overall SSI score for 150 countries

The average indicator scores for the 27 EU-member countries are shown in the spider web diagram in Figure 2. From this figure it is clear that in several areas there is much room for improvement. It concerns in particular the indicators of category IV (sustainable use of resources) and of category V (sustainable world). As could be expected, the scores for the indicators in category I (personal development) are relatively high.

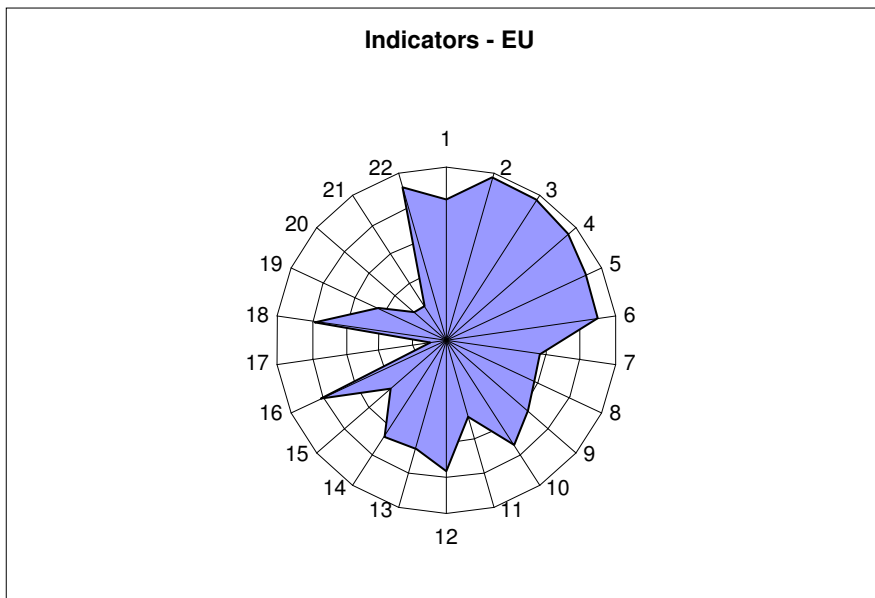


Figure 2 Average SSI indicators for the EU-27

History of the SSI

The concept of the SSI has been developed by the Sustainable Society Foundation during the past three years. It was published late 2006 and presented in May 2007 at the Amsterdam Conference 2007. The SSI received a warm welcome, and at the same time, as could be expected, with questions and criticism.

Research and further development of the SSI is a continuous process. In the meantime we are already working on the next biennial update of the SSI.

Examples of using the SSI

The SSI can be used in many ways:

1. To enlarge the awareness of people of the level of (un)sustainability of their own country.
2. As a policy instrument for all government levels. For instance at national level, each indicator can be assigned to a specific ministry. This ministry will then be responsible for the development towards sustainability with respect to this indicator. Frequent monitoring of progress will stimulate to reach the objectives set according to an agreed time schedule.
3. By NGOs to help them with their strategy towards Sustainability.
4. To compare the scores of countries in order to learn from, and to stimulate each other to make progress on the way to sustainability.
5. For educational purposes at all levels.

The SSI already has stimulated and supported various new developments.

- The international Peer Review of the Netherlands' sustainability policy used the SSI in its considerations.
- The SSI has played a role in the planning and monitoring of the sustainability policy of the Netherlands Government.
- Based on the SSI a sustainability index for greenhouse culture is now under development.

- Recently a project has started to introduce the SSI in Romania, both on national and regional level. It is the intention to use the SSI as tool for planning and monitoring sustainability policies in the country. Spreading to other countries is foreseen.

We hope to present a – further developed and improved – Sustainable Society Index next year, when the next update will be published. We welcome your comments and suggestions.