

Measuring wellbeing and progress towards sustainability

Beyond GDP...

*... there is the Sustainable Society Index,
an easy and transparent tool to measure wellbeing.*

GDP, maybe the oldest and worldwide most used indicator, certainly is a valuable tool to measure the state of a country's economy. But that is only as far as money is concerned. Therefore, these days most people are convinced that GDP certainly is not an adequate tool to measure a country's wellbeing or progress on the way towards a sustainable society.

Already over twenty years ago, Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway and the famous chairperson of the World Commission on Environment and Development, strongly advocated a balanced development towards a sustainable society. She brought sustainable development high on the agenda, all around the world. Her definition of a sustainable society, complemented with a third sentence, runs as follows:

A sustainable society is a society that

- *meets the needs of the present generation,*
- *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.*

Better measurements lead to better policies.

Thus development towards sustainability requires an integrated approach, simultaneously focusing on Human Wellbeing, Environmental Wellbeing and Economic Wellbeing. Human Wellbeing without Environmental Wellbeing is a dead end, and Environmental Wellbeing without Human Wellbeing makes no sense, at least not from an anthropocentric point of view. Human Wellbeing and Environmental Wellbeing are the goals to be met, Economic Wellbeing is a means to achieve these goals.

Measurement tool: Sustainable Society Index, SSI

To measure the level of sustainability, the Sustainable Society Index, SSI, has been developed. The framework of the SSI comprises all three wellbeing dimensions.



The SSI was published for the first time in 2006 and is updated every two years: SSI-2008, SSI-2010. By the end of 2012 the next update will be published, SSI-2012.

After the publication of the SSI-2008, a thorough evaluation of the SSI has been done. This resulted in a new framework, even more balanced and transparent than the original one. This year, 2012, the Joint Research Center (JRC) of the European Commission has audited the framework of the SSI. This led to some further changes in the framework in order to improve statistical coherence. The new framework is presented in figure 1. All previous editions of the SSI have been retro-calculated according to the new framework, in order to enable charting of progress across the years.

Sustainable Society Index	Human Wellbeing	Basic Needs	1. Sufficient Food 2. Sufficient to Drink 3. Safe Sanitation
		Health	4. Healthy Life 5. Clean Air 6. Clean Water
		Personal & Social Development	7. Education 8. Gender Equality 9. Income Distribution 10. Good Governance
	Environmental Wellbeing	Nature & Environment	11. Air Quality 12. Biodiversity
		Resources	13. Renewable Water Resources 14. Consumption
		Climate & Energy	15. Renewable Energy 16. Greenhouse Gases
	Economic Wellbeing	Transition	17. Organic Farming 18. Genuine Savings
		Economy	19. Gross Domestic Product 20. Employment 21. Public Debt

Figure 1 – New framework of the SSI

One may notice that GDP is included as one of the 21 indicators of the SSI. To be able to achieve a high level of wellbeing and sustainability, a country needs income, which can be expressed by GDP. Beside GDP, some other indicators are included with respect to Economy, like Genuine Savings (expressing a country's possibility to sustain wellbeing over time) and Public Debt (expressing a country's freedom to allocate budgets as required to its policies, instead of 'only' transferring money to the financiers).

The Sustainable Society Index is calculated for 151 countries, covering over 99% of the total world population. This offers the option for comparison between countries using various viewpoints: neighbouring countries, more or less similar countries, regional comparisons, comparisons between rich countries like the OECD-members, comparison between "North" and "South" etc. About 50 countries had to be left out due to lack of data. The bigger ones of those are Afghanistan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and Surinam.

For the calculation of the indicators of the SSI only data from public sources has been used.

Achieving sustainability requires defining its components in measurable terms and clearly fixing the responsibility to assess progress comprehensively.

Hales and Prescott-Allen, 2002

Results of the SSI

The SSI shows at a glance (figure 2) the level of sustainability for each of the 21 indicators.

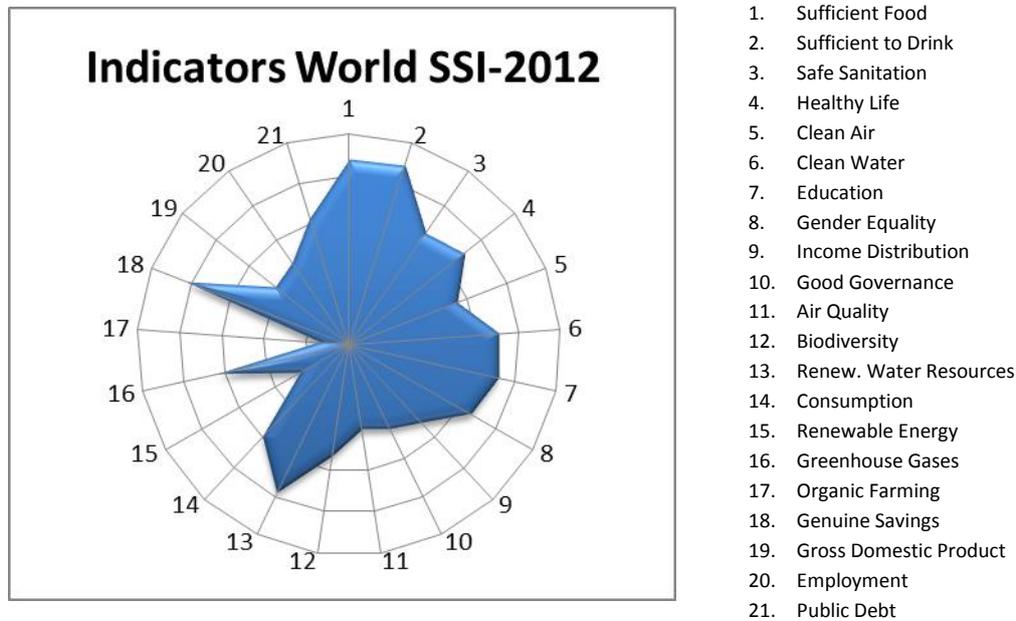


Figure 2 – Indicator scores

(The outer circle of the spider web represents full sustainability, a score of 10. The centre of the web represents a score of 0, no sustainability at all. In figure 2 the world average scores are presented, weighted for a country's number of inhabitants.)

Thus, the SSI very clearly shows which aspects (indicators) need attention most urgently. This offers a well-founded input for defining a comprehensive development policy and for measures to implement the policy. By regularly monitoring the level of indicators, one is able to monitor progress and effects of the implemented measures and so, if required, to timely adjust the policy.

The data of the indicators can be aggregated into scores for each of the three wellbeing dimensions. This offers the opportunity to assess the correlation between Human Wellbeing and Environmental Wellbeing, for instance distinguished per income class. This is shown in figure 3.

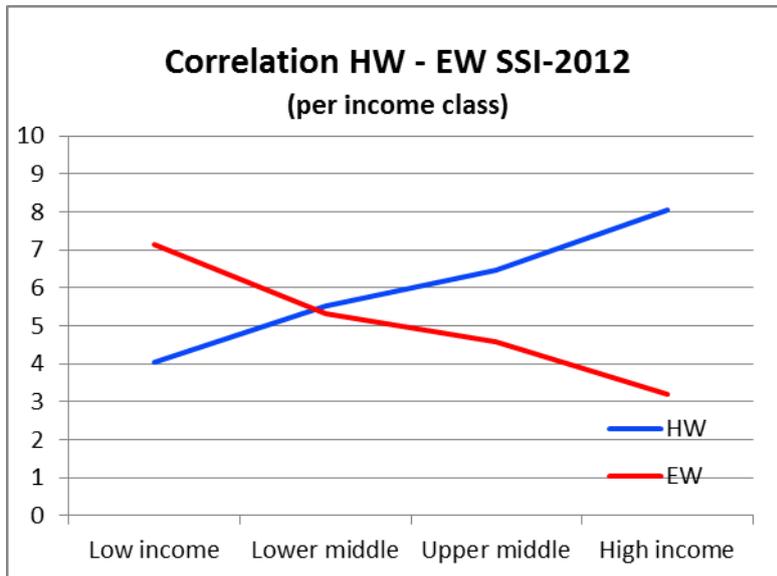


Figure 3 Correlation Human and Environmental Wellbeing

The graphs lend credibility to the widespread assumption that Human and Environmental Wellbeing are at collision course: on average, a higher income goes hand in hand with higher Human Wellbeing and lower Environmental Wellbeing. Reversing this trend may be the biggest challenge for the years to come.

Opportunities of using the SSI

For any country it is a challenge to further enhance and extend the policy concerning sustainable development and to set up implementation plans for the various sectors. In this respect, knowledge about the actual level of sustainability is crucial. Moreover, it is very informative to know developments towards a sustainable society over the recent past (figure 4).

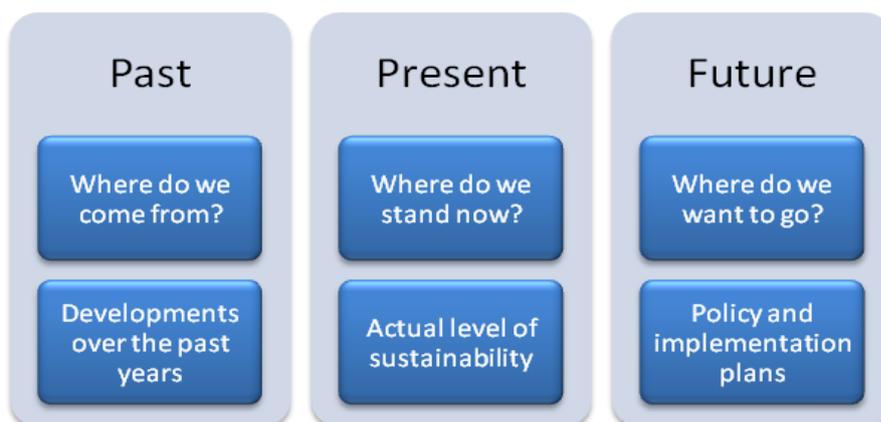


Figure 4 – Strategic thinking towards a Sustainable Society

One can use the information of the SSI in various ways, depending on one's role and position in society, and of course depending on interest, time and ambitions. Some possibilities are:

Polymakers, government officials

1. Use this information to show the public the actual situation concerning sustainability, not in an impressive but overwhelming report, but just at a glance, very transparent and easy to understand.
2. Use the 21 indicators – maybe complemented by additional indicators that may be required for a specific situation – to set the policy with respect to sustainability. For instance, at national level, each indicator can be assigned to a specific ministry. This ministry will be responsible for the development towards sustainability with respect to this indicator. The SSI can monitor the results of projects and programmes with respect to the contribution to sustainability. For example, what is the actual progress towards sustainability? Will the targets set by the government be met in time? This will be an input for the revision of projects and for the revision of strategies if and when required.
3. Use the SSI as a benchmark instrument for comparing countries and regions, and thus stimulating each other to make progress on the way towards sustainability.

Individuals

1. See how your own country performs with respect to development towards sustainability, where are the best possibilities for improvement, where is the necessity most urgent etc.?
2. Compare your country with neighbouring countries and see on which aspects these are performing better or worse than your own country. Why is this, what can you learn from this information?
3. Use the information to urge yourself and your community to take measures to speed up progress towards sustainability.
4. Tell your representatives and politicians what you expect them to do to enhance the level of sustainability, on short term as well as in the long run.

Education institutes

1. Include sustainability and development towards sustainability in the curricula at all levels, in schools as well as at university level. Use the information from the SSI to illustrate what is happening in the world around us.
2. Assign further research projects, using the information from the SSI, to pupils in secondary schools and students in high schools and universities.
3. Set up specific research programmes for subjects you're interested in.

NGOs

1. Evaluate your sustainability strategy using the SSI information and adjust if necessary. Communicate this new strategy to the public.
2. Monitor the development and implementation of the national sustainability policies using the SSI and hold politicians responsible in case of underperformance.

Industry

1. Use the SSI information to increase your own awareness of the actual level of sustainability in countries where your firm is operating.
2. Improve your own performance with respect to sustainability and corporate social responsibility.
3. Introduce further innovations. An example is the development of a tailor-made sustainability index for greenhouse cultures in the Netherlands, based on the concept of the SSI. This new index is already operational.

See for more information: www.ssfindex.com

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