The 2026
Happy Planet Index

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INDEX

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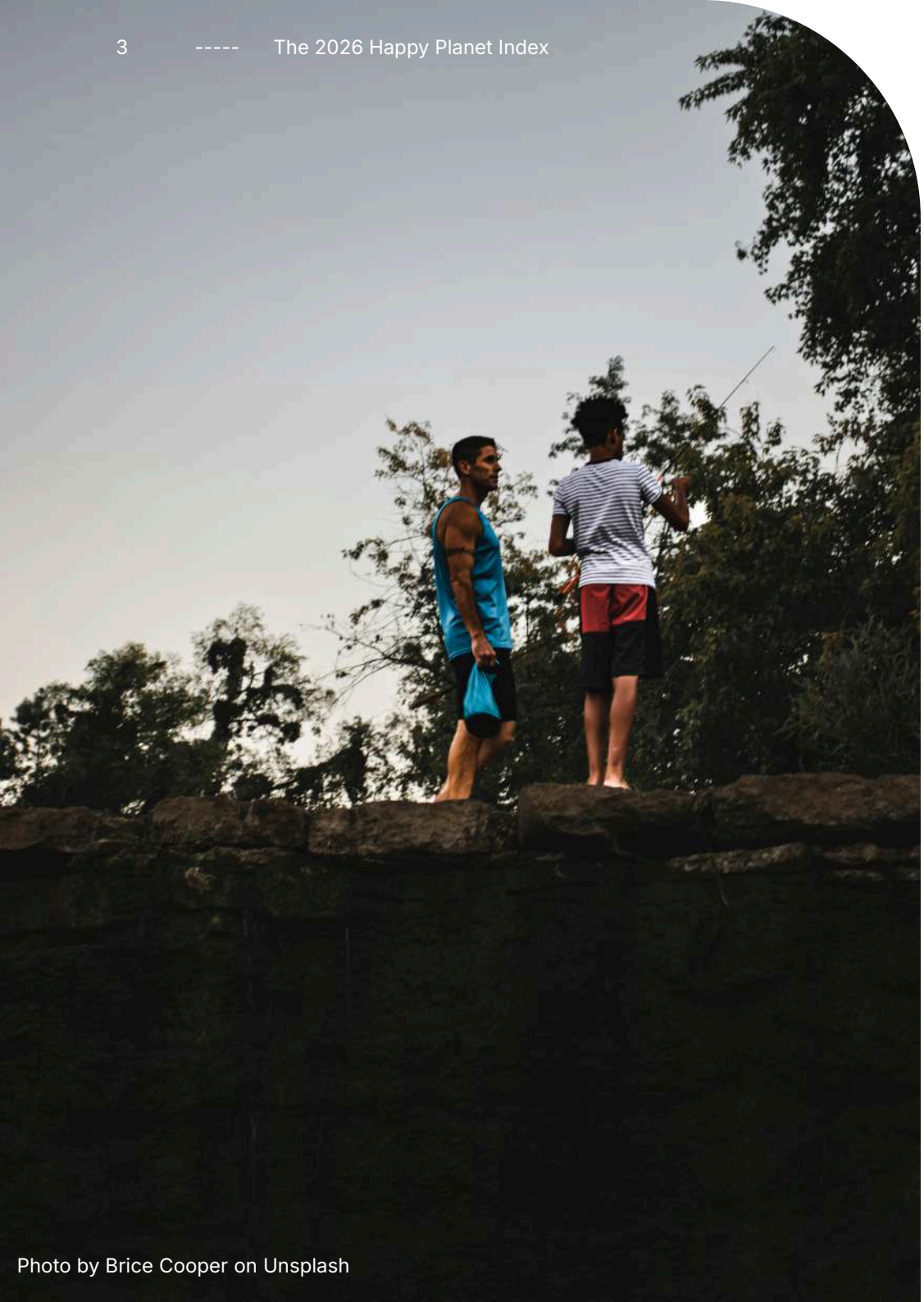

Photo by Brice Cooper on Unsplash

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Executive Summary

The Happy Planet Index (HPI) measures how well nations are doing at achieving sustainable wellbeing. In other words, how successful they are at supporting their inhabitants to live good lives now, while ensuring that others can do the same in the future. It is based on a simple idea: the ultimate outcome for societies should be sustainable wellbeing for all. And the ultimate input is environmental resources. If we want one single indicator to get an overall sense of how we are doing, that indicator should be a measure of how much wellbeing is achieved per unit of environmental resources, in effect a measure of socio-ecological efficiency.

The HPI operationalises wellbeing as adjusted happy life years: life expectancy combined with self-reported wellbeing. It then divides this by Ecological Footprint. Countries that perform well are those that achieve high levels of health and life satisfaction while maintaining relatively low ecological impact.

Latest results

The 2026 HPI presents data up to 2025 for 134 countries. As in previous editions, no country achieves sustainable wellbeing – that is, high life expectancy and high wellbeing within environmental limits. However, some countries come closer than others, showing that good lives that don't cost the Earth are within reach.

- Costa Rica returns to the top of the HPI rankings. Average life expectancy in the small Central American country is higher than in the USA, self-reported wellbeing is the third highest in the world, whilst the Ecological Footprint remains moderate.
- Tajikistan comes a surprise third due to its extremely low Ecological Footprint paired with moderate wellbeing outcomes. However, the country's heavy dependence on remittances may not be a winning formula in the long-term.
- Spain comes fourth, and is the highest scoring high-income country. Despite having the lowest per capita Ecological Footprint in Western Europe, it has excellent health outcomes and a decent level of self-reported wellbeing.

The HPI again highlights that the relationship between environmental impact and wellbeing is non-linear and inefficient. Beyond a certain point, higher consumption yields little or no gain in wellbeing. Countries with similar Ecological Footprints can achieve markedly different outcomes, pointing to the importance of social, economic, and policy choices.

GDP is not the destination

The findings reinforce a central message: GDP does not measure what matters. Whilst it is true that many of the lowest income countries, for example in Sub-Saharan Africa, also have low HPI scores, the relationship between the two variables is weak and non-linear. Indeed, wealthy countries such as Singapore, Luxembourg and the USA also perform poorly on the HPI, largely due to their disproportionate environmental impacts.

Trends over time: fragile progress

Aside from a dip during the COVID-19 pandemic caused by sharp drops in wellbeing and life expectancy in some countries, the global HPI has generally increased over the past two decades, from 43.7 in 2007 to 48.5 in 2025. This reflects gradual improvements in life expectancy and, in some regions, reductions in ecological impact.

However, this progress is uneven between regions:

- Western Europe has shown steady improvement, largely through reductions in ecological footprint.
- The Eastern Europe and Central Asia region has also seen gains.
- South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa have stagnated or declined.
- Countries affected by conflict or political instability show the largest drops.

Overall, the pace of progress remains insufficient to meet the dual challenge of improving wellbeing while rapidly reducing environmental impact.

The role of gender on sustainable wellbeing

In this edition, we contrasted the HPI of men and women – both at the individual level, based on analyses of disaggregated data, and in terms of male and female leaders of nations. In both cases, we found an effect of gender on the HPI. At the individual level, women consistently achieve higher scores than men across the countries analysed, with differences of over 8 points in some countries. This is driven by higher life expectancy and significantly lower ecological footprints.

The differences in ecological impact are particularly notable in transport and diet, where men tend to engage more in high-footprint lifestyles. These findings highlight how social norms and lifestyles shape sustainability outcomes, and how, even within a single population, individuals can choose to live more sustainable lives.

Meanwhile, a country with a woman leader tends to have a higher HPI score, even when controlling for income, level of democracy, and other factors. This shows how leadership and policy can influence sustainable wellbeing, with women leaders more likely to prioritise care-oriented policies and support climate action.

In other words, sustainable wellbeing is not simply a function of wealth or geography, it is a product of choices and priorities.

Individual level-data

Data from over 40,000 respondents to our personal HPI calculator, launched in 2024, provide further insight into the relationship between lifestyles, wellbeing, and environmental impact.

The findings challenge common assumptions:

- High-carbon lifestyles are associated with lower life satisfaction and shorter life expectancy.
- Sustainable behaviours, such as lower consumption, reduced meat intake, and active transport, correlate with better wellbeing outcomes.

Importantly, a meaningful share of individuals already achieve high wellbeing with low environmental impact, showing that sustainable lifestyles are not only possible but desirable.

These results reinforce a powerful message: the transition to sustainability is not about sacrifice, but about redefining what constitutes a good life.

Key messages

Three overarching conclusions emerge from this year's HPI:

- Good lives do not have to cost the Earth: Across countries and individuals, high wellbeing can be achieved at relatively low levels of environmental impact.
- GDP does not measure what matters: economic growth alone is an unreliable guide to progress, particularly at higher levels of income.
- Those with power are often the problem: Men have lower individual HPI scores and male leaders lead to lower national HPI scores. It's time societies pay more attention to how women are better at achieving sustainable wellbeing.

The path beyond GDP

The challenge now is not only to measure what matters, but to make it matter politically. Two priorities stand out.

First, the need to balance complexity and clarity. Comprehensive indicator frameworks are essential for analysis, but a small set of headline indicators is needed to shape public debate and guide decision-making.

Second, the importance of democratic legitimacy. Moving beyond GDP cannot be a purely technocratic exercise. Citizens must be actively involved in defining what a good society looks like, through deliberative mini-publics such as citizen assemblies.

Ultimately, indicators alone will not transform societies. But they can play a crucial role in shifting narratives, aligning incentives, and guiding collective action.

The Tide is Turning

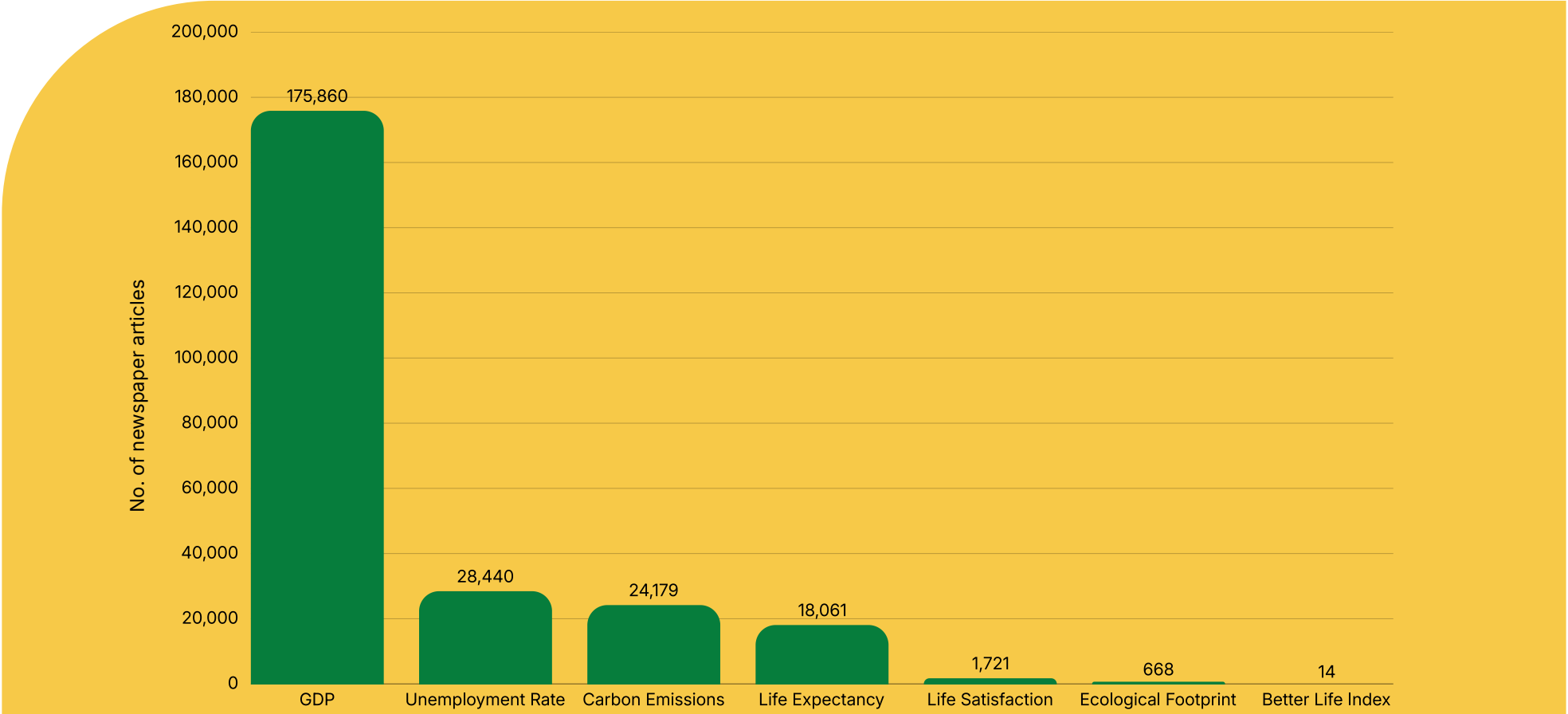
Almost exactly twenty years ago, on the 12th July 2006, newspapers around the world reported a surprising headline. A new ranking of countries found the little-known Pacific island nation of Vanuatu in top position. The happiest country in the world? Not exactly... rather the country that was most efficient at converting natural resource use into wellbeing (in terms of health and happiness). The argument made was that this new measure was more useful for understanding how well a country was doing than the standard measure of societal success, gross domestic product (GDP). Although there was no suggestion that this measure was immediately ready for policy use, the implication was clear: that we should consider countries like Vanuatu when trying to understand how we can live good lives that don't cost the Earth, rather than - for example - the USA, which ranked 150th out of 178 countries. Or even Scandinavian countries, which ranked between 64th and 119th.

This was of course the finding of the first Happy Planet Index (HPI), one of the first proposals to challenge GDP that gained widespread public attention (Marks et al., 2006). In the years that followed, many official initiatives were launched to move 'beyond GDP' including the OECD's Better Life Index, the EU's Beyond GDP conference, France's Sen-Stiglitz-Fitoussi Commission (Stiglitz et al., 2009), the UK's Measures of National Wellbeing, and Italy's Benessere equo e sostenibile programme. Just two months ago, the UN High Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP published its recommendations for a set of 31 indicators for measuring equitable, inclusive and sustainable wellbeing, a set which is likely to have implications for data collection and policy around the world (High Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP, 2026).

Photo by Florian Marette on Unsplash

Pretty much everyone who has anything to do with policy or economics has agreed that GDP is not an adequate measure of how well a country is doing. We've heard clear recognitions of this from world leaders such as EU President Ursula von der Leyen and UN Secretary General António Gutierres. And yet... it is still the single indicator which gathers the most media coverage. Economic growth (measured based on GDP) is still one of the most central goals of most governments.

There are many many reasons for GDP's persistence in public discourse (Hayden & Dasilva, 2022; Mason & Büchs, 2023). Some of them, such as the current growth dependence of our pension systems, will not be so easy to crack.



References to seven selected indicators in the media.

Source: Nexis Uni database, newspapers only, English language only, 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026.

Photo by Tim Mossholder on Unsplash

However, one challenge seems more manageable: for all the numerous official Beyond GDP initiatives, precious few allow an easy overall interpretation. How is a journalist supposed to grapple with a bulletin of 31 indicators? What is a politician supposed to do when confronted with a dashboard of 120? Current frameworks, that acknowledge and attempt to encompass the rich complexity of society are necessary and are already proving valuable for policy analysts looking to improve policies across different fields. But challenging GDP is not only a matter of identifying and measuring all the many facets of our societies that are undoubtedly important. It's also about identifying a simple coherent narrative that challenges the myth that GDP growth will deliver everything we need.

There are signs that this need is starting to be recognised by people working in the Beyond GDP space. For example, a recent study interviewing staff at official statistics offices identified the complexity of wellbeing / Beyond GDP initiatives as a major obstacle to their use (Abdallah et al., 2025). In February this year, the UK Office for National Statistics published a set of seven headline measures of wellbeing, which they will be updating quarterly. They recognise that the complete set of 60 indicators that are in their dashboard present a challenge in terms of producing a timely narrative. The UN High Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP have also recognised the need for headline indicators to cut through the complexity of their 31-indicator set (UN High Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP, 2026).

We do not produce the Happy Planet Index as a challenger to these valuable official initiatives, but rather as a reminder of the value of a clear narrative. Because, in its simple form, the HPI highlights just how wrong our standard measures are. And it serves as a loudspeaker to continue to stress what we believe are the two most important elements of any attempt to move Beyond GDP: 1) The purpose of our economies should be to improve human wellbeing; 2) They need to do this within environmental limits.

As Sir David Attenborough said, "The HPI and others like it are… encouraging a wider debate about the sum purpose of all humankind's efforts on Earth" (Attenborough, 2020). The debate still needs to be widened, so we continue to publish it.

Introducing the Happy Planet Index

The Happy Planet Index (HPI) is one attempt to measure the big picture. Inspired by surveys (Diener & Scollon, 2003)[1] that find that the most important things to people around the world are health and happiness, the HPI operationalises the 'ends' of society in terms of life expectancy and self-reported wellbeing. These two indicators are combined into a measure called adjusted happy life years.

It then considers the environmental cost associated with providing for a country's wellbeing, in the form of its Ecological Footprint.[2] The countries that score best achieve relatively high life expectancy and self-reported wellbeing with a relatively small Ecological Footprint. In other words, it measures how close countries are to achieving high wellbeing and life expectancy within a fair consumption space. It measures not just wellbeing, but sustainable wellbeing.

We should make one thing clear: the HPI is not intended to replace GDP in policy-making. Economists should not create models to determine the policies that would maximise the HPI with disregard for other variables.

We believe it's crucial that no one indicator should ever dominate economic discourse and policy to the extent that GDP has over the last eight decades. Rather the HPI is intended to open up the conversation about measuring how well countries are doing and highlight just how badly GDP has misled us. Ultimately, as we highlight at the end of this report, a more realistic approach to upending GDP's dominance over political debates is a small suite of headline indicators that can provide a snapshot of how nations are doing (and sit above more complex frameworks such as those being developed by statistics offices and official bodies at the moment).

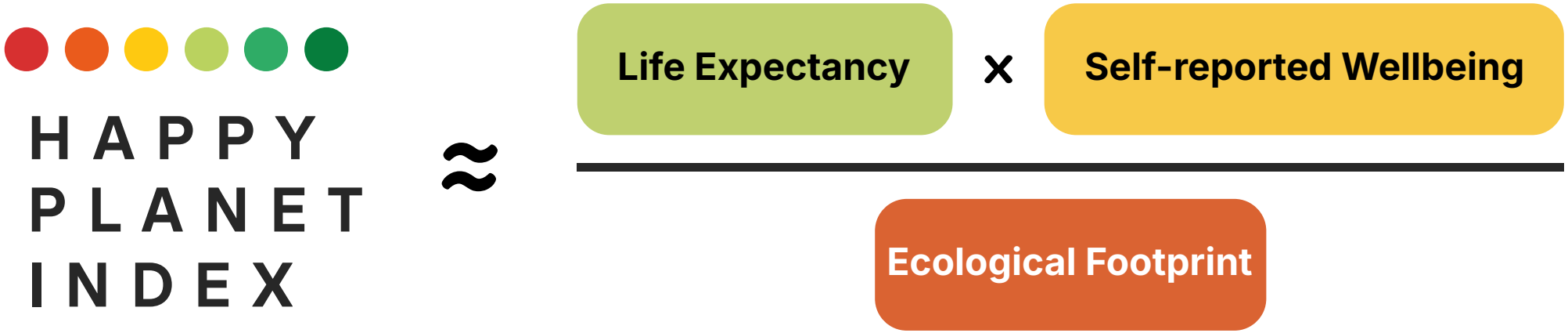
One way to interpret the HPI is as a measure of resource efficiency, such as GDP per tonne of CO_2 emissions. But rather than GDP per capita being the variable to be maximised, happy life years is prioritised as a proxy for society's ultimate goal. This reflects a call for such an indicator from the World Conservation Union (Adams, 2006).

[1] See also the user weightings of dimensions in the OECD's Better Life Index: https://oecd-better-life-index.truth-and-beauty.net/responses/

[2] The previous edition used the carbon footprint instead of the Ecological Footprint. This was because, at that time, there was more up-to-date carbon footprint data than Ecological Footprint data. Since then, however, there has been limited progress in updating carbon footprint data. Although carbon footprint has the advantage of simplicity and ease of understanding, the Ecological Footprint is more comprehensive, including other aspects of consumption alongside carbon. We believe that both serve to broadly capture the overall impact of a society on the environment. Although there are differences in the relative standings of countries based on the two footprints, they broadly tell the same picture.

This report presents the results from the latest (seventh) edition of the Index, with data from 2006 to 2025.[3] Alongside the national results we present three novel analyses:

1. A comparison of HPI scores between women and men
2. An analysis of the effect of women's leadership on national-level scores
3. Analysis of the responses of over 40,000 people who completed our online personal HPI survey, launched in 2024.



[3] Although the overall methodology has remained broadly consistent over all seven editions, changes in standardisation, and some changes in components, mean that the data is not comparable from edition to edition.

How is the HPI calculated?

The HPI brings together data from three global sources. Life expectancy (the average length of life a person can expect within a country) comes from the UN Population Division.

Self-reported wellbeing reflects average scores in response to the following question: *"Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you; and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time, assuming that the higher the step the better you feel about your life, and the lower the step the worse you feel about it? Which step comes closest to the way you feel?"*

The question is fielded regularly in the Gallup World Poll, which covers representative samples of at least 1000 people in almost all countries across the world. The data we use is also used in the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2026).[4]

The ecological footprint measures the surface area of the planet required to sustain a population's consumption patterns. It includes the land required to provide the renewable resources people use (most importantly food and wood products), the area occupied by infrastructure, and the area required to absorb CO_2 emissions. Crucially, at the national level, it includes 'embedded' land and emissions from imports (and subtracts impacts from exports). So the CO_2 associated with the manufacture of a mobile phone made in China, but then bought by someone living in Chile, will count towards Chile's Ecological Footprint, not China's.

To calculate the HPI, we multiply average life expectancy by average self-reported wellbeing to calculate a measure of happiness-adjusted life expectancy, and then divide that by ecological footprint per capita. At its simplest, this can be understood as a measure of 'wellbeing per hectare of ecological footprint'. However, we conduct several statistical adjustments ensuring that no single component dominates the calculations, and we scale the index to range from 0 to 100.

We have calculated the HPI from 2006 to 2025 for as many countries as possible. For 2025, we have data for 134 countries.[5] Further details on the calculation of the HPI can be found in the methodology paper.

[4] It should be noted that this question has been found to bias respondents to think about wealth and status in a way that other questions on subjective wellbeing don't (Nilsson et al., 2024), including the standard life satisfaction question recommended by the OECD for measuring subjective wellbeing. If we had been able to use this standard life satisfaction question, we expect that wealthier countries would not have scored as well.

[5] The world is becoming less peaceful. For the first time this year, we have taken the decision to exclude certain countries involved in major wars, due to data concerns. Specifically we excluded any country in a war where the number of deaths from armed conflict in that year exceeded 1 per 1000, based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. "In a war" means either that a war is being waged on a particular country's territory, or that a country's official armed forces are directly and substantively involved in that war. For 2025, this meant excluding three countries: Ukraine, the Russian Federation and Israel. Palestine would also have been excluded for this reason, but it had already been excluded (for 2025) due to lack of data. See methodology for more information and an explanation of why we have chosen to take this measure.

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Results

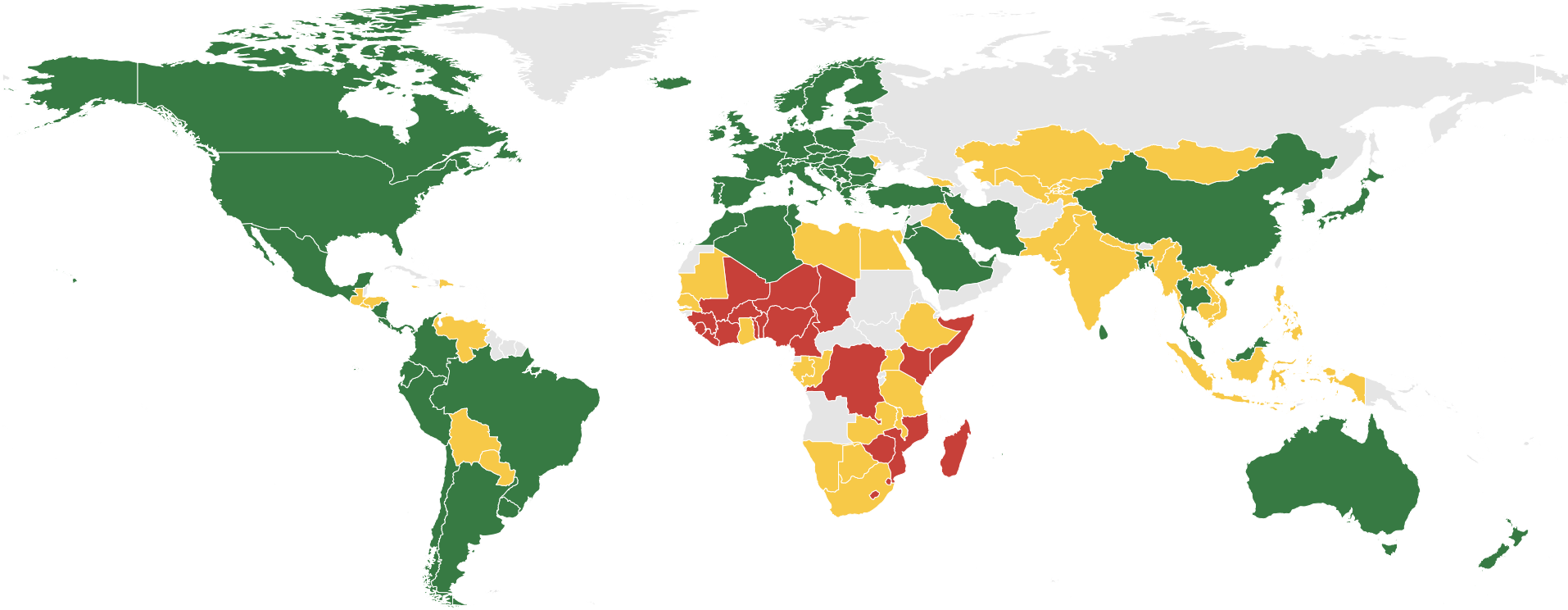
In this section, we present the latest results of the HPI, for 2025. We'll then look at changes in results over time since 2006.

The best way to understand the HPI is to first look at the results for its constituent components: life expectancy, self-reported wellbeing and ecological footprint.

Life Expectancy

Life expectancy (at birth) is the number of years a person born in a country in a given year can be expected to live given prevailing mortality rates.

This map is colour-coded such that countries with high life expectancy (75 years or more) are green, low life expectancy (less than 65 years) are red, and those in the middle are yellow.[6]



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024). World Population Prospects 2024, Online Edition. Life expectancy at birth, both sexes, 2025.

[6] These thresholds are somewhat arbitrary, but they have been used consistently since the first HPI in 2006.

Unsurprisingly, the countries with the highest life expectancies are mostly wealthy nations. Japan tops the list with an average life expectancy in 2025 of 85.0 years. South Korea, Switzerland, Australia and Italy complete the top five, followed by other wealthier Asian and European countries. But there are countries that buck this trend. Jordan, for instance, achieves a life expectancy of 78.1 years despite having a GDP per capita of only $9,520.[7] Bangladesh, Nicaragua and Morocco also achieve average life expectancies of over 75.0 with GDP's under $10,000 per capita. Albania has a life expectancy of 80.0 years with a GDP per capita little over $20,000.

At the other end of the table, 28 out of the bottom 30 countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa, with the lowest life expectancy in 2025 being in Nigeria at 54.8 years. It's worth noting that Nigeria's GDP per capita is higher than that of Nicaragua's, and yet life expectancy is 20 years less.

[7] All GDP values in this report are given at purchasing power parity (PPP). Note that GDP per capita figures for 2025 were not available at time of analysis, so figures for GDP per capita used here refer to 2024. Based on the previous trend, one would expect Jordan's GDP per capita in 2025 to be between $9,600 and $9,700.

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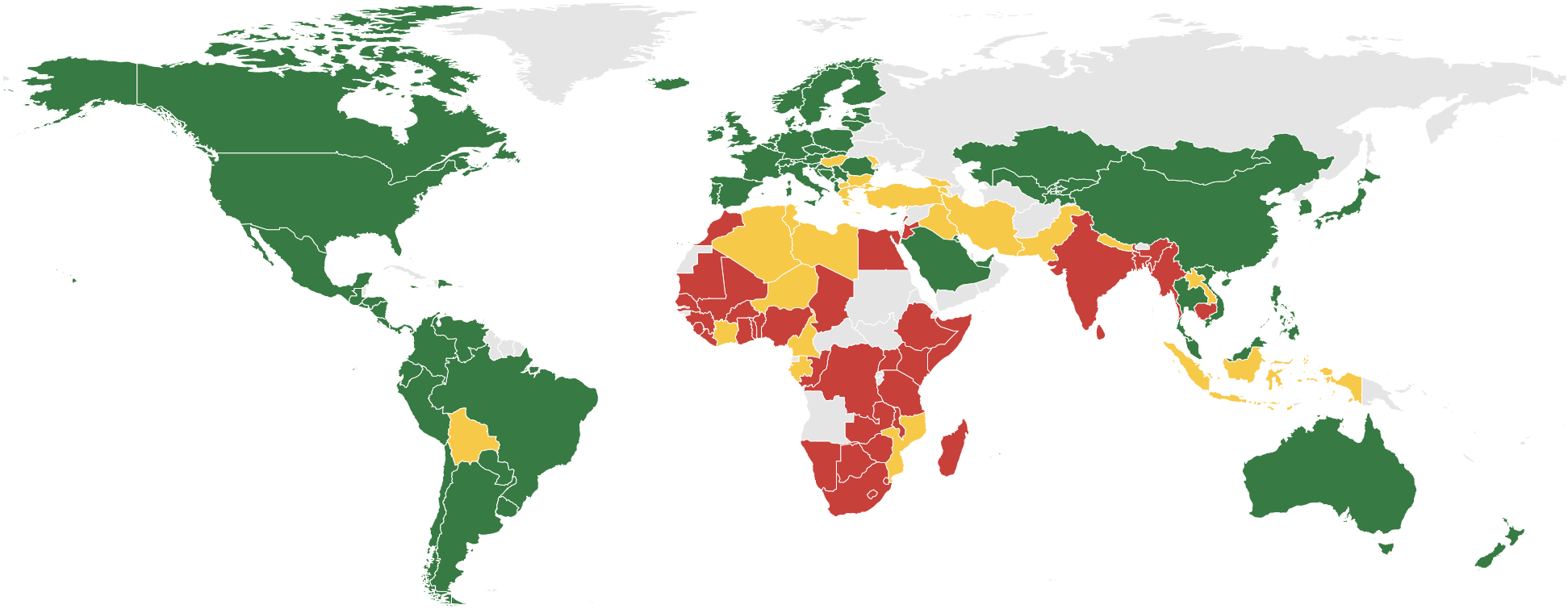
Self-reported Wellbeing



Source: World Happiness Report 2026, based on Gallup World Poll[8]

[8] Data downloaded https://files.worldhappiness.report/WHR26_Data_Figure_2.1.xlsx in March 2026.

< 5 > 6

Photo by Mi Pham on Unsplash

While Asian countries do well on life expectancy, they do not score highly in terms of self-reported wellbeing. Here, the top of the table is dominated by the Nordic countries, with all five landing in the top six. For the 10th year in a row, Finland has the highest score, 7.8 out of 10. Nestled amongst the wealthy Nordic countries, in third place overall, is Costa Rica, with a score of 7.6. Costa Rica is indeed the only non-Western European country in the top 10. It has consistently had high self-reported wellbeing, except for a steep decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 and 2021).

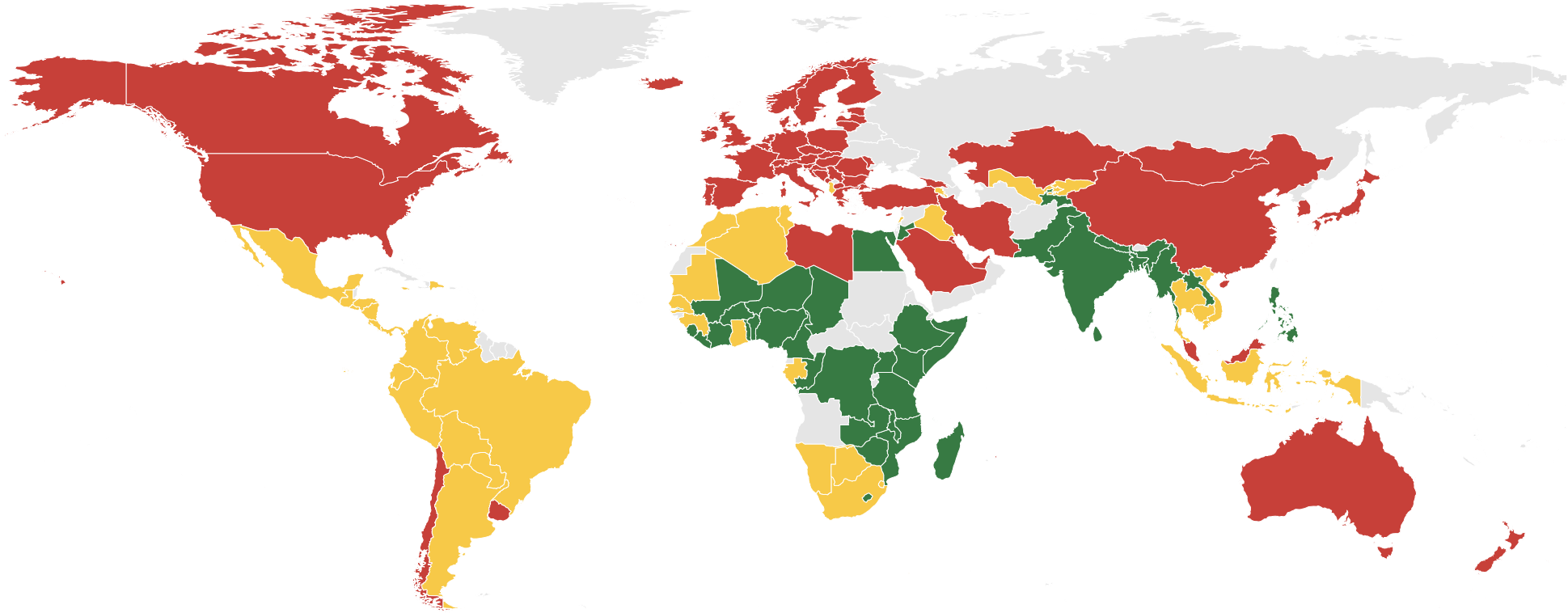
Beyond Costa Rica and the wealthy European nations, other noteworthy countries at the top of the table include Saudi Arabia and Mexico (both with a score of 7.0 out of 10). Post-communist European countries continue their convergence with their Western neighbours, with Slovenia and Poland both also scoring 7.0, and Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina not far behind.[9]

The lowest self-reported wellbeing score in 2025 was Zimbabwe, with an average of 3.1, with sub-Saharan African countries making up the entirety of the bottom seven. Lebanon, which scored only 2.2 in 2021, has risen to a score of 4.0. Large countries with a score of less than 5.0 include Ethiopia (3.9), Egypt (4.2) and the world's most populous country, India (4.4). Egypt's low score of 4.2 is particularly noteworthy, given it has a GDP per capita of almost $17,000 (not much lower than Brazil's GDP per capita, a country which nevertheless scores 6.7 for self-reported wellbeing).

[9] Trends over time for individual countries are not presented in this report, but can be explored on the HPI website: happyplanetindex.org

Ecological Footprint

The map is somewhat reversed when we look at Ecological Footprint. Using the Ecological Footprint as a measure of overall human pressure on the planet has the advantage that it can be compared to a measure of global biocapacity, and specifically a measure of per capita global biocapacity: how big can the footprint of each person on the planet be whilst living within environmental limits.



Source: National Ecological Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts 2026 Edition, Ecological Footprint Initiative, York University. Ecological Footprint of consumption per capita in global hectares. For 35 countries, the required data were not published by the Ecological Footprint Initiative, and so we estimated Footprint for those countries using a regression model (see methodology paper for details).

According to the National Ecological Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts, this value was 1.48 global hectares in 2025. Countries whose per capita footprints were below that value in 2025 can be said to be living within environmental limits on this measure (although of course, that does not necessarily mean they are living well).[10]

That was the case for only 37 out of 134 countries (although it is worth noting that these countries represent 43% of the population of the countries for which we calculate the HPI). These countries are coloured green in the map above. Meanwhile, countries that are using two or more times this amount are coded red. The largest per capita Ecological Footprint belongs to Luxembourg, at 10.12 gha, almost 7 times more than the fair share.[11] Singapore, the UAE and Australia follow, with the USA the first large country in the rankings, with the 8th largest footprint (7.05 gha).

There is a strong relationship between Ecological Footprint and the two 'positive' outcomes. The top 30 countries in terms of life expectancy all have per capita Ecological Footprints that are over twice their fair share. Of the top 30 in terms of self-reported wellbeing, only four do not go beyond that threshold, and none of them can be said to be living within environmental limits.

But not all countries with large Ecological Footprints have good wellbeing outcomes. For example Libya has an Ecological Footprint of 3.95 gha per capita (higher than Switzerland's or Japan's), and yet it fails to achieve high life expectancy or self-reported wellbeing. Mongolia has a footprint of 7.53 gha and yet life expectancy is only 72.2 years.

There are also positive exceptions, that is countries with smaller footprints with relatively high life expectancy or self-reported wellbeing. Three countries achieve life expectancies over 75 years within environmental limits: Jordan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The Philippines achieves a high level of self-reported wellbeing within environmental limits. However, no country manages all three: high life expectancy, high self-reported wellbeing and an Ecological Footprint within environmental limits.

[10] Some reports have used national per capita biocapacity to define living within limits. Whilst useful for calculating how dependent a country is on exports, this would not be suitable for global comparisons of sustainable wellbeing, as it would severely penalise dense countries compared to sparse ones. For example, Finland's per capita biocapacity is more than three times higher than Denmark's, but we don't believe that means that Finland should have the same HPI score as Denmark if it's footprint was three times as big.

[11] Qatar's per capita Ecological Footprint is somewhat larger (11.73 gha). However, as Gallup has not assessed self-reported wellbeing in that country since 2015, we have had to drop it from this year's HPI.

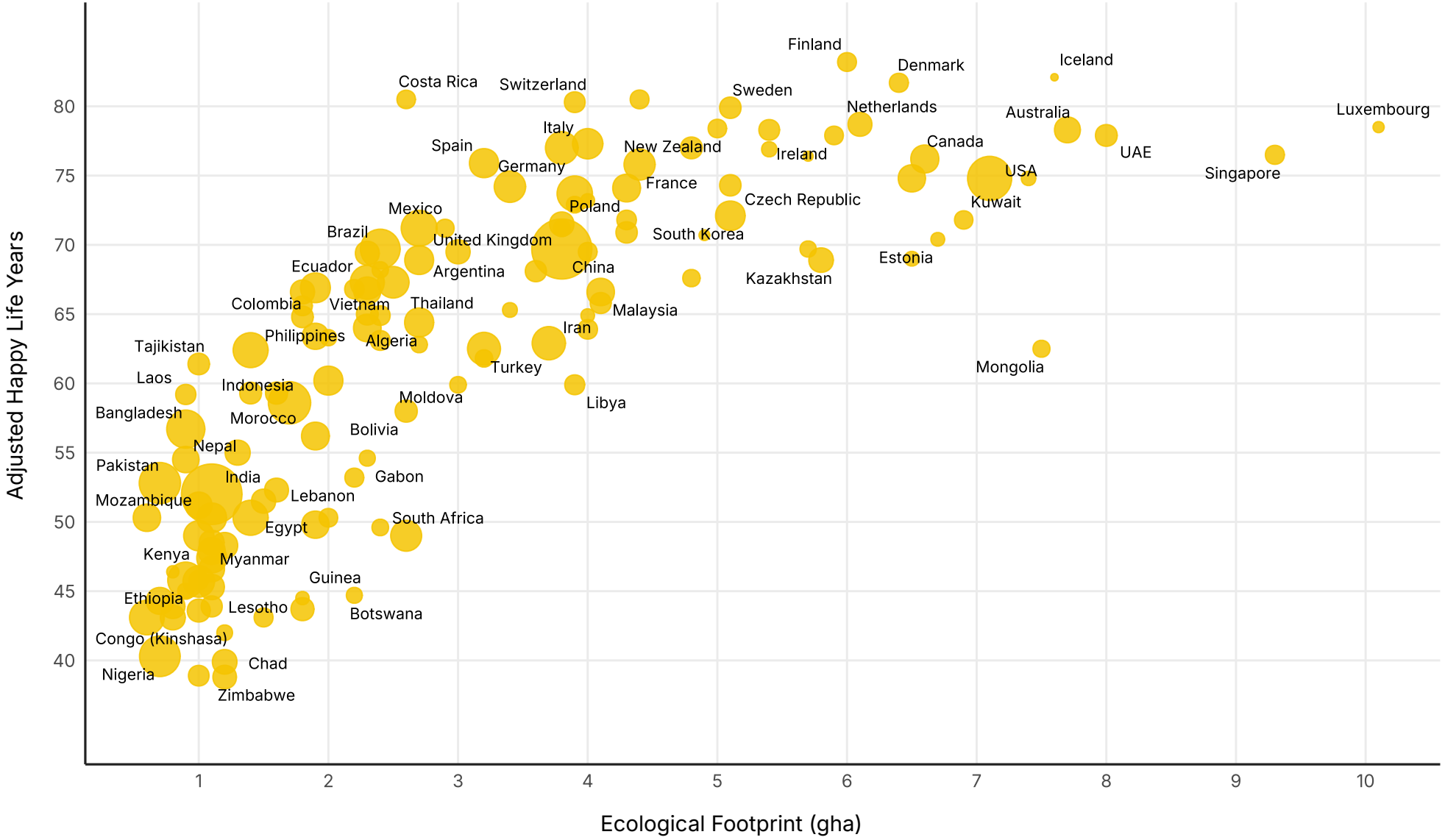
Patterns and Outliers

The maps on the preceding pages have considered each indicator in isolation. What happens when they are considered together? The scatter plot on the following page reveals the relationship between Ecological Footprint and what we call ‘adjusted happy life years’, which is a metric combining life expectancy and self-reported wellbeing. There is clearly a relationship: countries with higher Ecological Footprints achieve higher adjusted happy life years. But the relationship is not linear – by the time you get to an Ecological Footprint of about 4 gha, there does not appear to be any gain in terms of adjusted happy life years. The highest score in terms of adjusted happy life years is enjoyed by Finland (83.2 years), which has an Ecological Footprint of 6.0 gha. Costa Rica, with an Ecological Footprint of 2.6 tonnes per capita, is not far behind.

As well as not being linear, the relationship is also not tight. Countries with similar Ecological Footprints can have very different outcomes. Compare, for example, Mongolia and Iceland (both with footprints of about 7.5 tonnes) but adjusted happy life years of 62.5 and 82.1 years respectively, or South Africa and Costa Rica (both around 2.6 tonnes) with adjusted happy life years of 49.0 and 80.5 respectively.

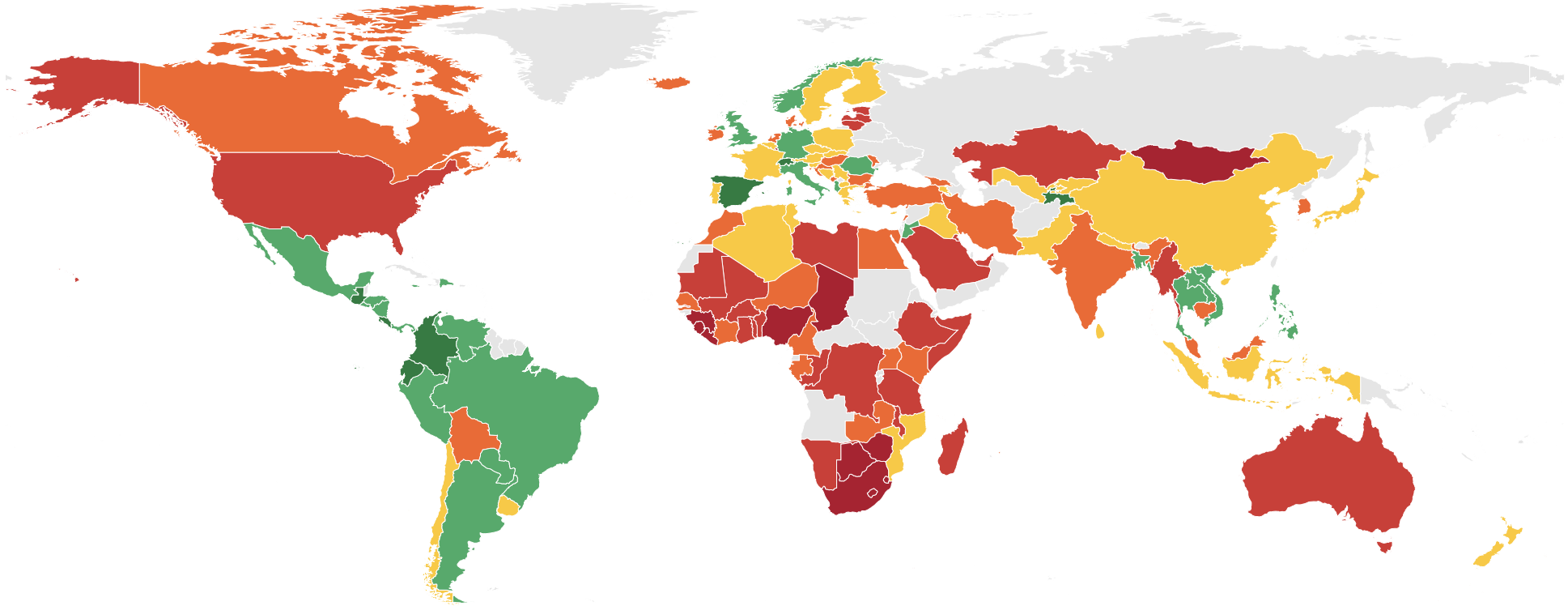
Sustainable wellbeing is implied by reaching the top left-hand corner: with an Ecological Footprint below 1.48 gha, and high wellbeing. In 2025, no country achieves that, although certain countries, such as Costa Rica and Spain, appear to come closer.


Photo by Vas on Unsplash


Adjusted Happy Life Years
80
75
70
65
60
55
50
45
40
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
Ecological Footprint (gha)
Finland
Denmark
Iceland
Costa Rica
Switzerland
Sweden
Netherlands
Australia
Luxembourg
Italy
Spain
New Zealand
Ireland
Canada
UAE
Germany
France
USA
Singapore
Czech Republic
Kuwait
Poland
Mexico
Brazil
United Kingdom
South Korea
Estonia
Ecuador
Argentina
China
Kazakhstan
Colombia
Vietnam
Thailand
Malaysia
Iran
Philippines
Algeria
Tajikistan
Turkey
Mongolia
Laos
Indonesia
Moldova
Libya
Bangladesh
Morocco
Bolivia
Nepal
Pakistan
India
Gabon
Mozambique
Lebanon
South Africa
Egypt
Kenya
Myanmar
Guinea
Ethiopia
Lesotho
Botswana
Congo (Kinshasa)
Chad
Nigeria
Zimbabwe

The Overall HPI

This balancing act between health, happiness, and sustainability is exactly what the overall HPI score seeks to capture.



< 40 > 60

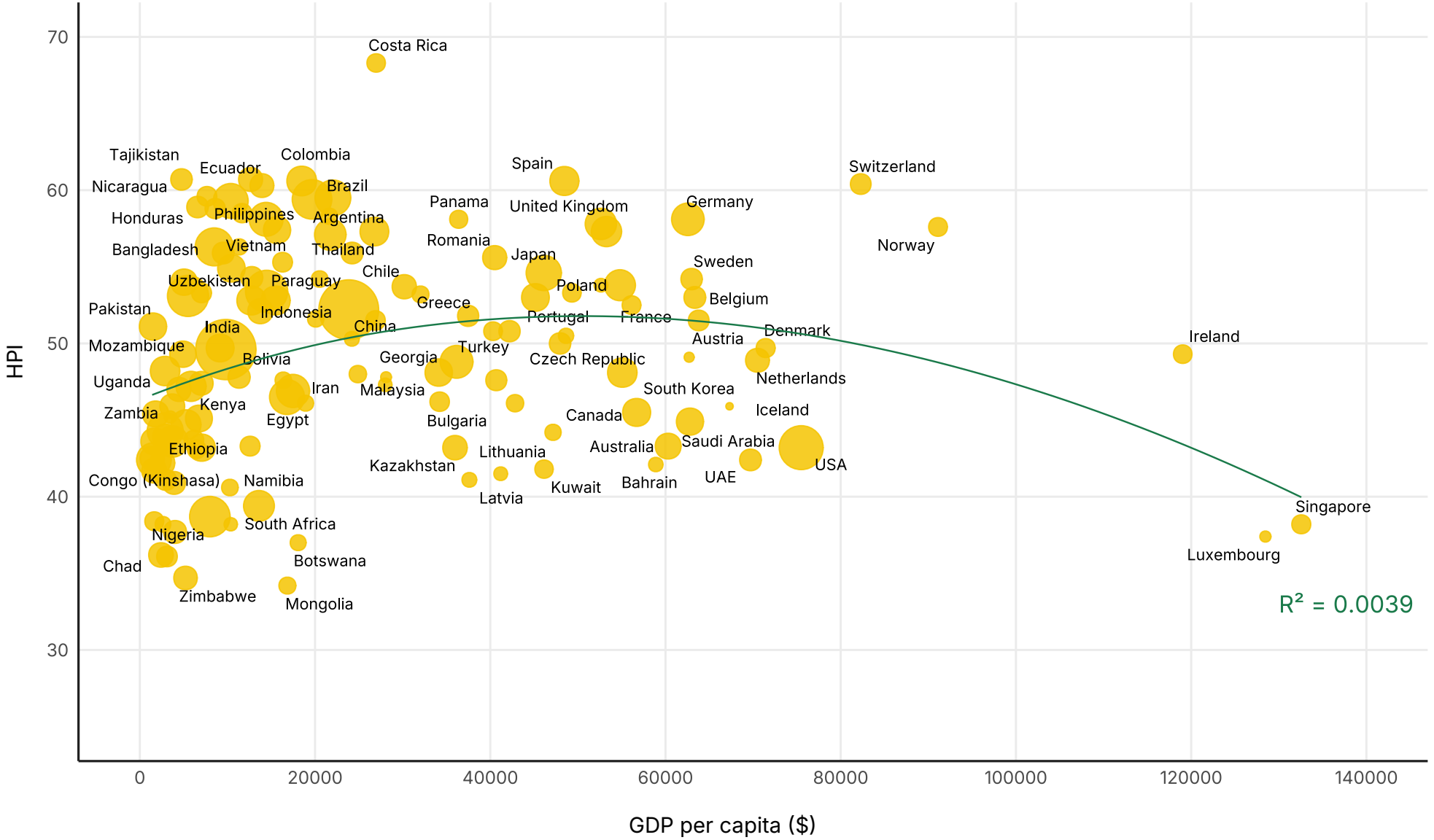
As with previous years, Latin America stands out as the highest scoring region, securing 7 of the top 10 spots in the HPI rankings, including the two largest countries by population – Brazil (10th) and Mexico (9th). Costa Rica returns to the top of the rankings, with a score of 68.3 out of 100. Far behind Costa Rica are a group of six countries (Guatemala, Tajikistan, Spain, Colombia, Switzerland and Ecuador) that all score between 60 and 61.

Western Europe remains the second highest scoring region, with Spain, Switzerland, Germany, the UK and Norway in the top 20.

In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa suffers the worst scores overall, with four of the bottom five countries in that region. The lowest scoring country this year, however, is Mongolia.

Whilst the comparison between Western Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa might suggest that richer countries have higher HPI scores, that is far from the case. The data show a very weak quadratic relationship, with HPI scores rising slightly with GDP per capita until around $40,000 to $50,000 and then falling off afterwards.

Photo by Samuel Malmstrom on Unsplash


HPI
GDP per capita ($)
70
60
50
40
30
0
20000
40000
60000
80000
100000
120000
140000
Costa Rica
Tajikistan
Ecuador
Colombia
Nicaragua
Brazil
Honduras
Philippines
Argentina
Bangladesh
Vietnam
Thailand
Uzbekistan
Paraguay
Pakistan
Indonesia
India
Mozambique
Bolivia
Uganda
Kenya
Zambia
Egypt
Ethiopia
Congo (Kinshasa)
Namibia
Nigeria
South Africa
Chad
Botswana
Zimbabwe
Mongolia
Spain
Panama
United Kingdom
Romania
Japan
Chile
Poland
Greece
Portugal
France
China
Turkey
Georgia
Czech Republic
Iran
Malaysia
Bulgaria
Canada
Lithuania
Kazakhstan
Latvia
Kuwait
Australia
Bahrain
Saudi Arabia
UAE
USA
Switzerland
Germany
Norway
Sweden
Belgium
Denmark
Austria
Netherlands
South Korea
Iceland
Ireland
Singapore
Luxembourg
R² = 0.0039

Costa Rica

Costa Rica is back on top of the Happy Planet Index, as it has been in almost every edition of the index. Its temporary fall from the top in the last edition of the Happy Planet Index (published in 2024, but using data from 2021) can be attributed to sharp dips in both self-reported wellbeing and life expectancy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, both indicators have recovered and indeed exceeded their pre-COVID levels. As we have already noted, Costa Rica's average self-reported wellbeing score of 7.6 out of 10 is the third highest score globally, similar to levels in Nordic Europe. Life expectancy, at 81.2 years, is only half a year less than in European countries such as the UK and Germany. It is 1.6 years longer than in the USA. And all at what ecological price? Its Ecological Footprint of 2.6 gha per capita is one third of Australia's per capita footprint and similar to countries with much worse outcomes including South Africa and Moldova.

Costa Rica has achieved these results through decades of investment of public funds into education, health and pensions – partly made possible by having abolished its army in 1948,[12] and a foresighted switch to renewable energy. The share of electricity production from renewables in Costa Rica is practically 100%, a milestone currently achieved only by 9 countries worldwide.[13] Furthermore, in recent years, Costa Rica has established itself as a leader in the protection of biodiversity and sustainability, with significant efforts in the field of conservation.

However, Costa Rica's environmental leadership is increasingly challenged by anti-sustainability narratives, which frame environmental protection as an obstacle to economic growth and advocate for immediate financial gains through extractive activities. These shifting perspectives are compounded by a critical reduction in economic resources for conservation despite a significant increase in protected land area, undermining the state's ability to enforce environmental regulations (Karen, Chacón Araya, 2024).

Consequently, Costa Rica faces serious risks of environmental regression as it stalls on key commitments like decarbonization and waste management, potentially undoing decades of conservation progress. These retreats are most visible in the renewed pressure for gold mining exploitation in the north of the country involving toxic mercury and controversial, large-scale logging projects in addition to attempts to open national discussions on oil and gas exploration despite existing bans (Nueva Sociedad, 2024; swissinfo.ch, 2026).

Tajikistan is not a country that we have written about before. Although

[12] See https://diplomatmagazine.com/imagine-theres-no-army/
[13] See Renewable Energy - Our World in Data

Tajikistan

it has always had a relatively high HPI score, standing out in its region, this is the first time it has reached the top three.

The country is not a haven for high wellbeing. Life expectancy is 72.1 years, which is less than in India. Self-reported wellbeing is a shave below 6.0 out of 10, which places it firmly in the middle of the global rankings on that indicator. What stands out is its Ecological Footprint, which is only 1.03 gha per capita, well below the threshold of 1.48 gha per capita. Other countries with such a small footprint include Benin or Myanmar, which have much worse wellbeing outcomes. Indeed, if one were to look only at countries that are living within their environmental limits, and rank them according to adjusted happy life years, Tajikistan comes second, behind the Philippines.[14] In that sense Tajikistan looks on paper to be one of the most successful low-impact countries in terms of achieving wellbeing.

Tajikistan's high HPI can be mostly attributed to two factors. One is a smart use of its geographical advantages. Mountains, valleys, and over 13,000 glaciers shape Tajikistan's climate and water supply, feeding the rivers that power its hydropower sector. Generating 95–98% of the country's electricity, hydropower has helped Tajikistan maintain one of the lowest per-capita carbon footprints globally (Tajikistan's Sustainable Energy Future, 2026).

The second, however, is potentially not that sustainable. Tajikistan has the highest rate of personal remittances in the world, with 47% of its GDP coming from workers living abroad, mostly in Russia.[15] This has led to a steady decline in poverty over the last decades, from around 38% in 2009 to 14.8% in 2025 (World Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2026). However, it makes the country's wellbeing heavily dependent on conditions in Russia. Long-term, the country needs to be able to shift to a more locally generated source of income to continue its improvements in living standards.

[14] The Philippines has an Ecological Footprint of 1.37 gha compared to Tajikistan's 1.03 gha.
[15] World Bank: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS

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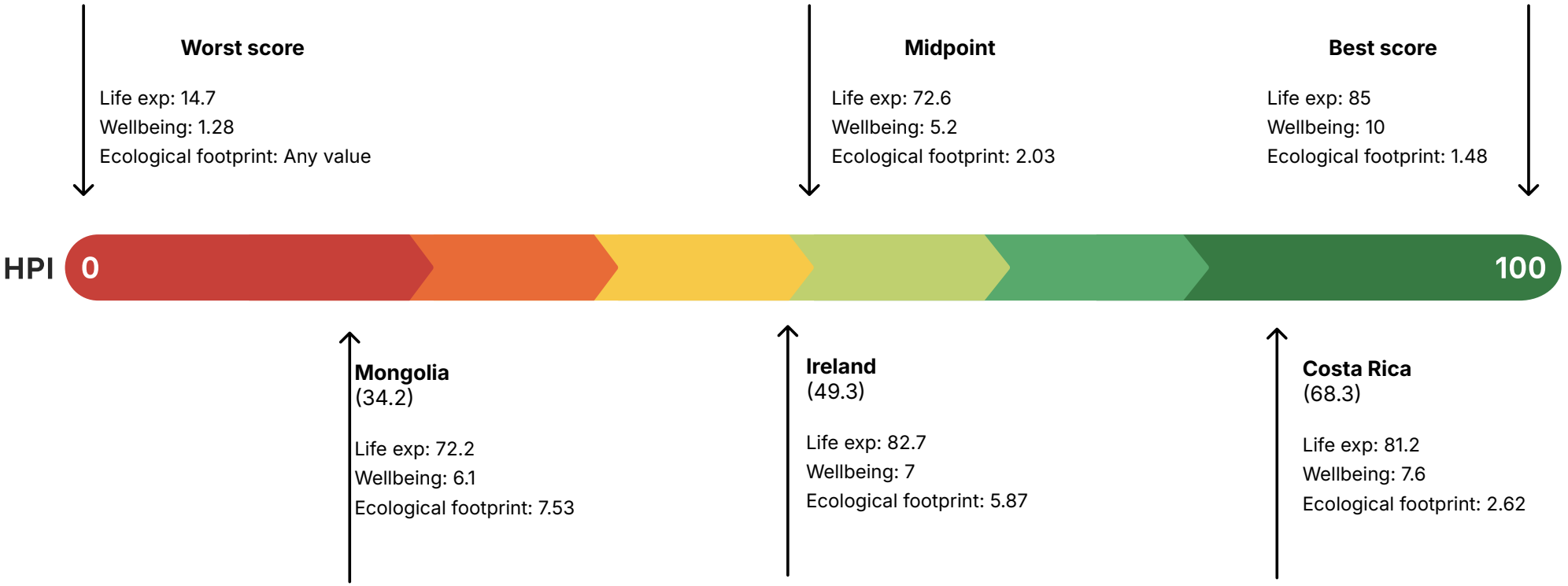
Spain

Western European countries have seen rising HPI scores over the last 20 years. Since 2022, Spain has led the way. In 2025, it ranked 4th, 0.1 points behind Tajikistan. Like Tajikistan, Spain's high score reflects the efficiency with which ecological resources are converted into wellbeing outcomes. But the level at which this occurs is obviously quite different. Spain's Ecological Footprint is three times higher at 3.18 gha per capita. This is more than twice the limit. Nevertheless, Spain's per capita Ecological Footprint is still the smallest in Western Europe (and indeed the second smallest in the European Union behind Romania). And yet, it achieves some of the best outcomes in the region, with a life expectancy of 84.0 (the sixth highest in the world) and a decent level of self-reported wellbeing (6.6 out of 10).

Spain's high life expectancy is due to various factors including an inclusive healthcare system, the Mediterranean diet and an active lifestyle with a walking culture and strong social connections. The Spanish lifestyle does not only play a role in the good health of Spaniards, but also in their low footprint. The warm climate also reduces heating energy demand significantly compared to Germany, France, or Scandinavia, which cuts the household energy footprint.

Even so, Spain's good results are not simply the result of being blessed with a good climate and healthy lifestyle. Changes in its economic and energy production structure have contributed to the reduction of emissions. The almost halving of Spain's per capita Ecological Footprint since 2006 has three overlapping causes: a deep economic crash that wiped out construction and industrial activity; a genuine and accelerating renewable energy transition that has decarbonised the electricity grid; and a structural drift toward services. The first was painful and involuntary, the second is a real success story (the share of renewable energy in Spain has risen from around 15–20% at the start of the century to over 55% by 2025), and the third is somewhere in between. Together they've enabled one of the most dramatic declines in emissions in Western Europe.



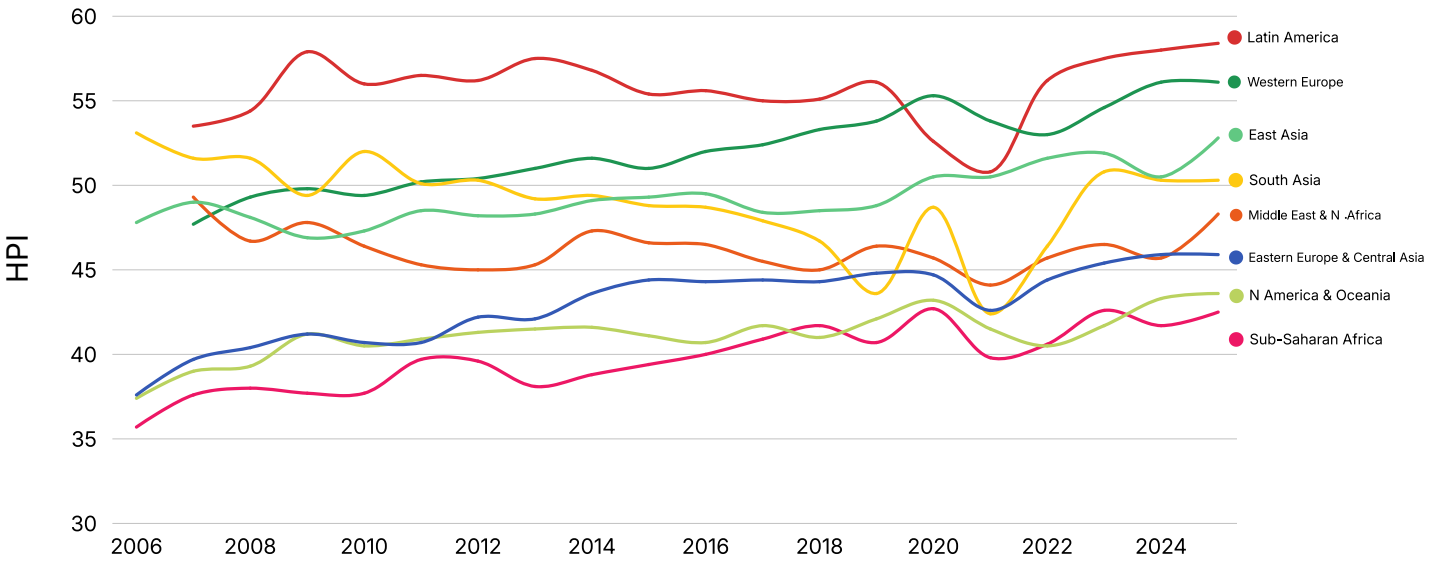
It is important not to get carried away in celebrating the countries that score the best on the HPI. The Index has been calculated such that a score of 50 is halfway between a country with dismal wellbeing and life expectancy and one achieving maximum wellbeing within environmental limits. But even the highest-ranking Costa Rica only scores 68.3, with the next best country scoring 60.7. Importantly, using the Ecological Footprint as our measure of environmental impact, no country achieves, or indeed has ever achieved, a 'good' score on all three components. As we noted, the Philippines achieves the best wellbeing outcomes within environmental limits in 2025, but that refers to a life expectancy of 70.1 years and self-reported wellbeing of 6.4 out of 10.

Thinking about it the other way, the smallest Ecological Footprint that was required in 2025 to achieve good scores on both wellbeing outcomes (i.e. life expectancy over 75 and self-reported wellbeing over 6.0 out of 10) is 1.8 gha – which is that of 8th placed Nicaragua. Even here, of course, there are reasons (particularly human rights violations) to be cautious about highlighting this country as a model of success. Perhaps more promising is Colombia, which has over the years generally achieved high wellbeing outcomes with a footprint of less than 2.0 gha. Furthermore, since 2022, Colombia's per capita footprint has been declining.

HPI over time

Consistent data collection techniques allow us to look at the trends in HPI over time.

Globally, average HPI has risen slightly from 43.7 in 2007 (data for many countries is missing for 2006) to 48.5 in 2025. This rise has been relatively consistent, albeit with a slight drop during the COVID-19 pandemic (particularly in 2021).



Regions used in this report

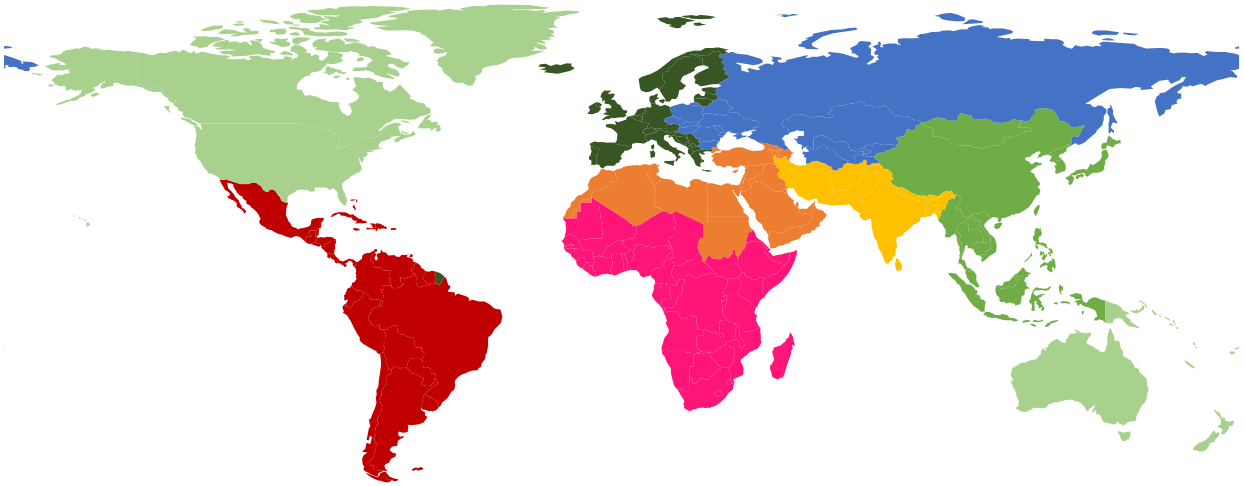


Photo by Abazie Uchenna on Unsplash

The patterns for different regions, however, vary somewhat. Latin America has had the highest average HPI over the entire time series, with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic years (2020 and 2021), when it was overtaken by Western Europe. Although Western Europe continues to see rising HPI scores, it has fallen back behind Latin America since 2023. Nevertheless, it is the fastest improving region, with an increase of 8.4 points from 2007 to 2025.

The other region that has improved faster than average is Eastern Europe & Central Asia, increasing 6.2 points between 2007 and 2025.

Meanwhile, South Asia and the Middle East & North Africa have seen declines over the two decades. South Asia (driven very much by developments in its largest country, India) saw its average HPI fall to 42.4 in 2021, little higher than Sub-Saharan Africa. Since then, scores have increased again, but are still below levels before 2008. Meanwhile the Middle East & North Africa has suffered consistently low scores, with only a recent increase in 2025.

Looking at individual countries, the fastest growing HPI scores include three Sub-Saharan African countries (Cote d'Ivoire, Togo and Gabon) whose scores have increased by over 0.7 points per year over the time period due to increases in life expectancy and self-reported wellbeing, with – in the case of Gabon – a declining Ecological Footprint.

Luxembourg is the fourth fastest improver, with its Ecological Footprint falling from 15.1 gha in 2006 to 'only' 10.1 gha in 2025. In more recent years, Bangladesh has been a country to pay attention to, its score rising from 45.2 in 2022 (ranking 81st) to 56.3 in 2025 (ranking 27th).

Meanwhile, the fastest falls in HPI are seen in countries which have had political turmoil in recent years, including Afghanistan, Lebanon and Yemen. Another notable faller has been Singapore, whose score has declined thanks to an increasing Ecological Footprint.

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Further analyses

Gender Differences

In the 2024 Happy Planet Index (Abdallah et al. 2024), we looked at how the HPI varied between income groups within countries. We found that, in wealthy and even middle-income countries, HPI was lowest for the highest income groups. Typically, increases in self-reported wellbeing and life expectancy did not compensate for the vastly larger carbon footprints for those in the top income deciles.

In this edition, we sought to look at gender differences in HPI. Who has the biggest footprint, and is this compensated for by better wellbeing outcomes?

We looked at differences between women and men for 11 countries for which we had necessary data.[16] We used the following data sources to calculate gender differences, applying these differences to the national averages where necessary:

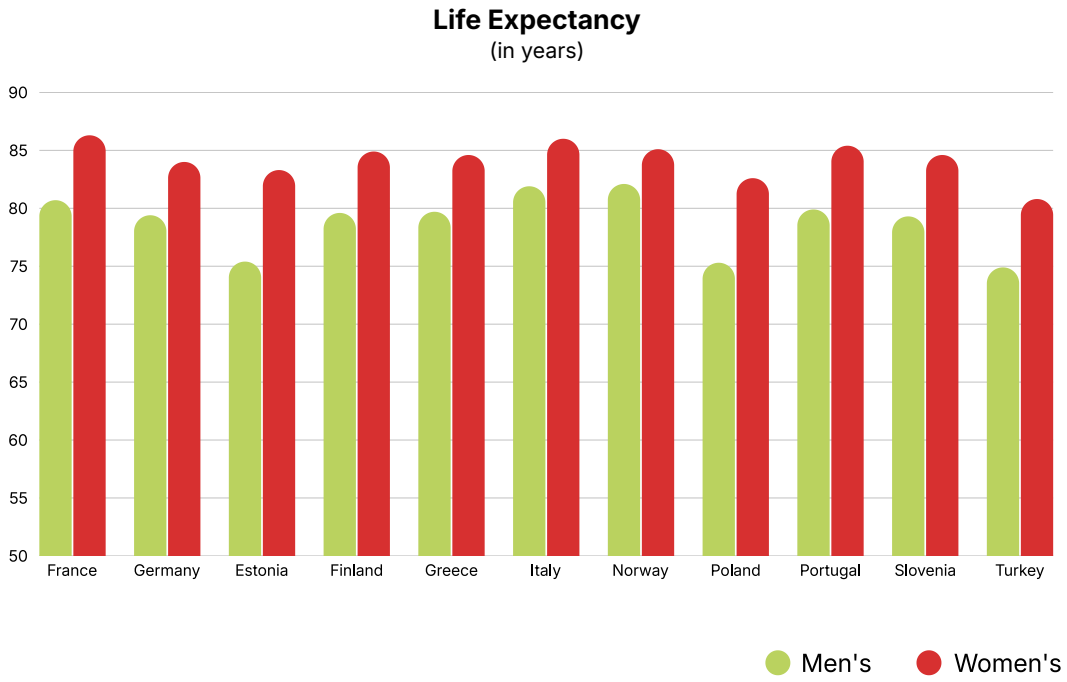
1. **Life expectancy.** Life expectancy by sex at birth is readily available from the UN Population Division for all countries.
2. **Self-reported Wellbeing.** We used Round 11 of the European Social Survey (2023). The ESS Data Portal allows one to compare women's and men's self-reported wellbeing. Whilst the survey does not include the precise question used in the Gallup World Poll, it does include the well-established question on overall life satisfaction, which is known to correlate strongly with it. For Turkey, we used data from the national Life Satisfaction Survey (Türkiye Istatistik Kurumu, 2026)
3. **Ecological Footprint.** This was the biggest challenge. We found no data comparing the Ecological Footprint of women and men, but we were able to use data from the PS Lifestyle online carbon footprint calculator which was available for 10 countries. This was augmented with findings from a study looking at gender differences in food and transport carbon footprints in France (Berland & Leroutier, 2025). We assumed the difference in Ecological Footprints between the two genders was the same as the difference in carbon footprints. We assumed differences from these two data sources only applied to the 72% of the national ecological footprint which is associated with individual consumption patterns (Hertwich & Peters, 2009). We assumed that the remaining 28%, which is mostly caused by government spending and investment, can be attributed equally to women and men.

In the social sciences, and specifically in this report, we use the term gender rather than sex. The HPI components are related to consumption habits, preferences, lifestyles, professional trajectories, subjectivity, attitudes toward risk and reward, aspirations, and expectations, which are shaped primarily by identity and social norms rather than by biological characteristics alone. We acknowledge that biological sex may influence some of these dimensions to a certain extent. However, the concepts analysed in this report are more closely related to gendered experiences and social roles. At the same time, we note that the available data sources differ in their measurement approaches: some refer to sex assigned at birth (UN data), while others rely on gender as reported by interviewers or respondents (ESS data).We also recognise that gender exists on a spectrum and is not limited to a binary classification. Unfortunately, the available data only allow us to analyse the two largest gender groups, women and men.

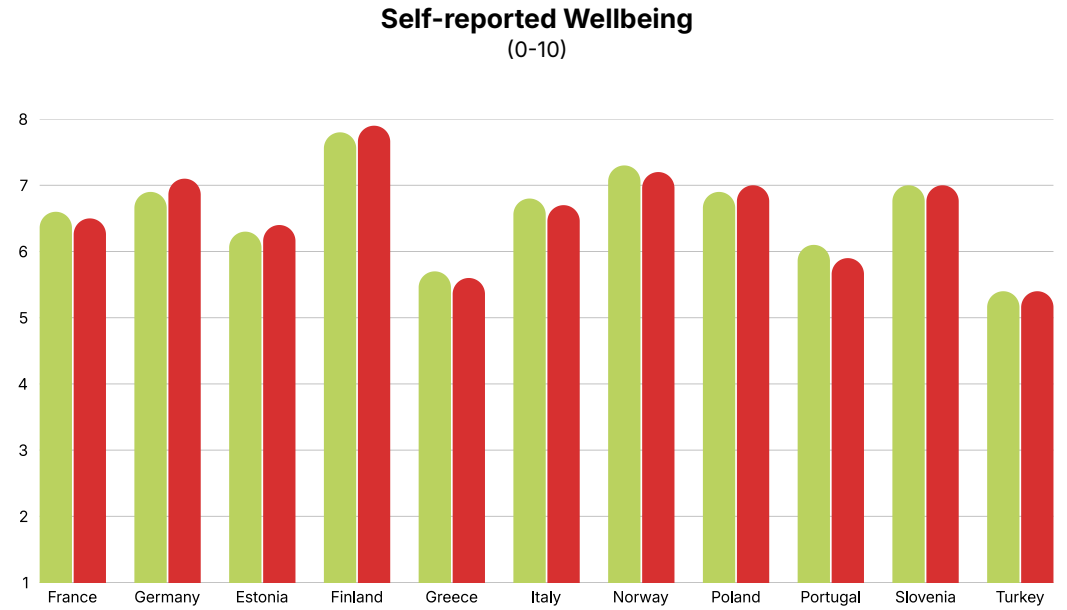
[16] France, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Turkey.

Taking these component by component, we can observe the following:

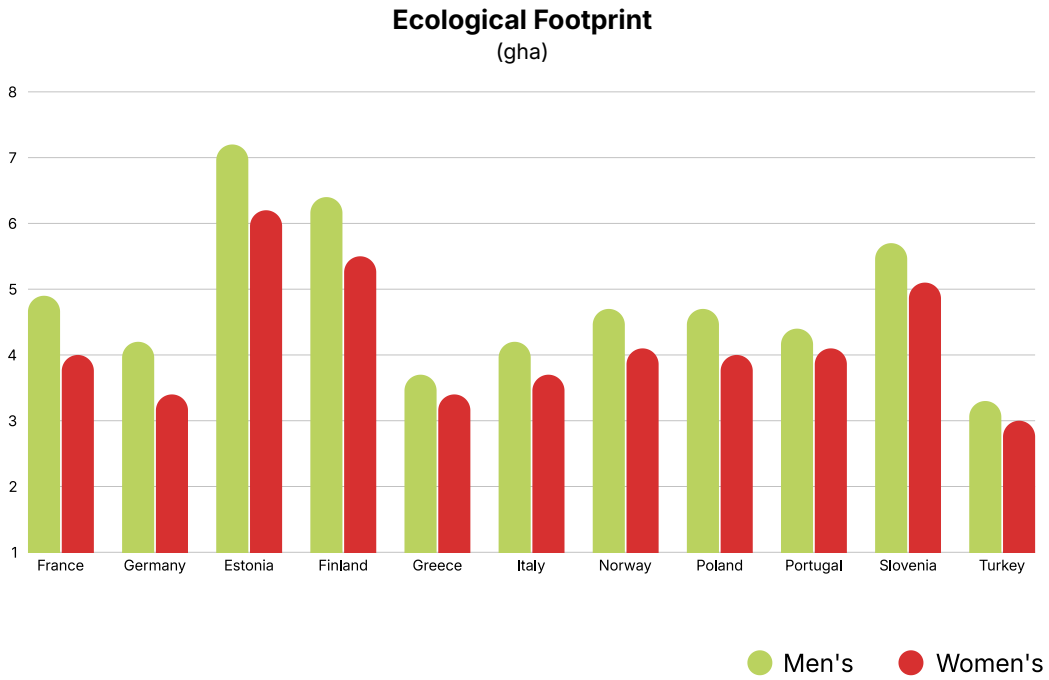
- Women's **life expectancy** is consistently and considerably higher than men's, with differences ranging from 3.0 years in Norway to 7.9 years in Estonia. This is a phenomenon which can be seen worldwide. In 2025, there was no country where male life expectancy was longer than female life expectancy. The smallest differences were in Nigeria and Togo (where both women and men have very short life expectancy) and Gulf States such as Bahrain and Qatar. Meanwhile, the largest difference was in Russia, where men can expect to live almost 12 years less than women. Their life expectancy of 67.7 years is lower than that of men in Egypt or Cambodia.



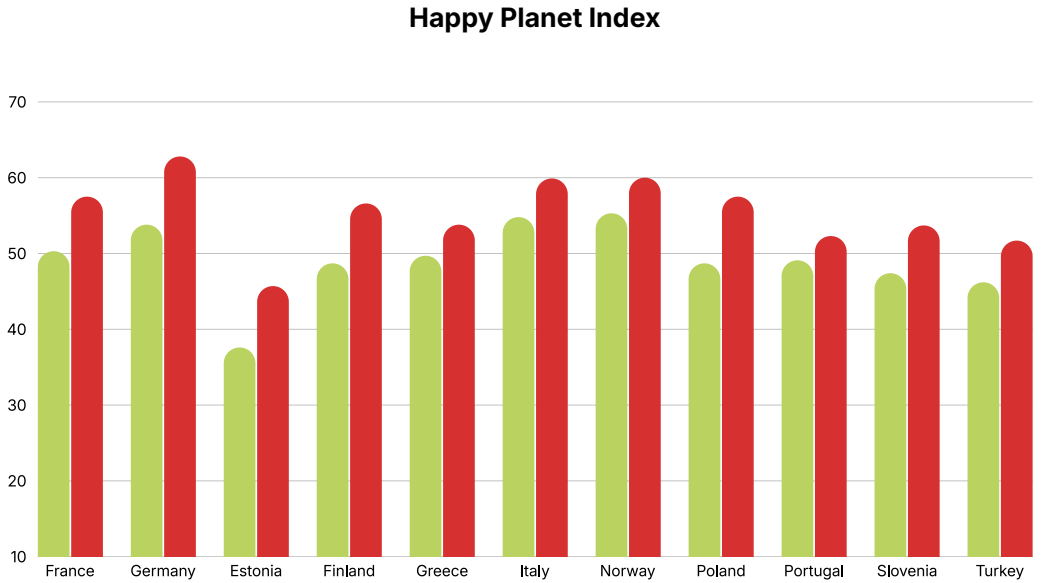
- **Self-reported wellbeing** is roughly equal across genders, with marginally higher scores amongst men in the southern European countries (such as Italy and Portugal) and marginally lower scores amongst men in more northern countries such as Germany and Finland. Globally, women have marginally higher self-reported wellbeing (a +0.05 difference on a 0 to 10 scale), with the largest advantage in East Asia (Joshanloo & Jovanović, 2020). Men in Sub-Saharan Africa have marginally higher self-reported wellbeing than women.



- Women's **Ecological Footprints** are consistently lower, with differences ranging between 0.2 gha in Greece and Portugal and 1.0 gha in Estonia. Our analysis of carbon footprint data (see Box) indicates that this difference is mainly driven by differences in diet and transport habits. For example, in Germany, men's transport carbon footprints are 52% larger than women's.

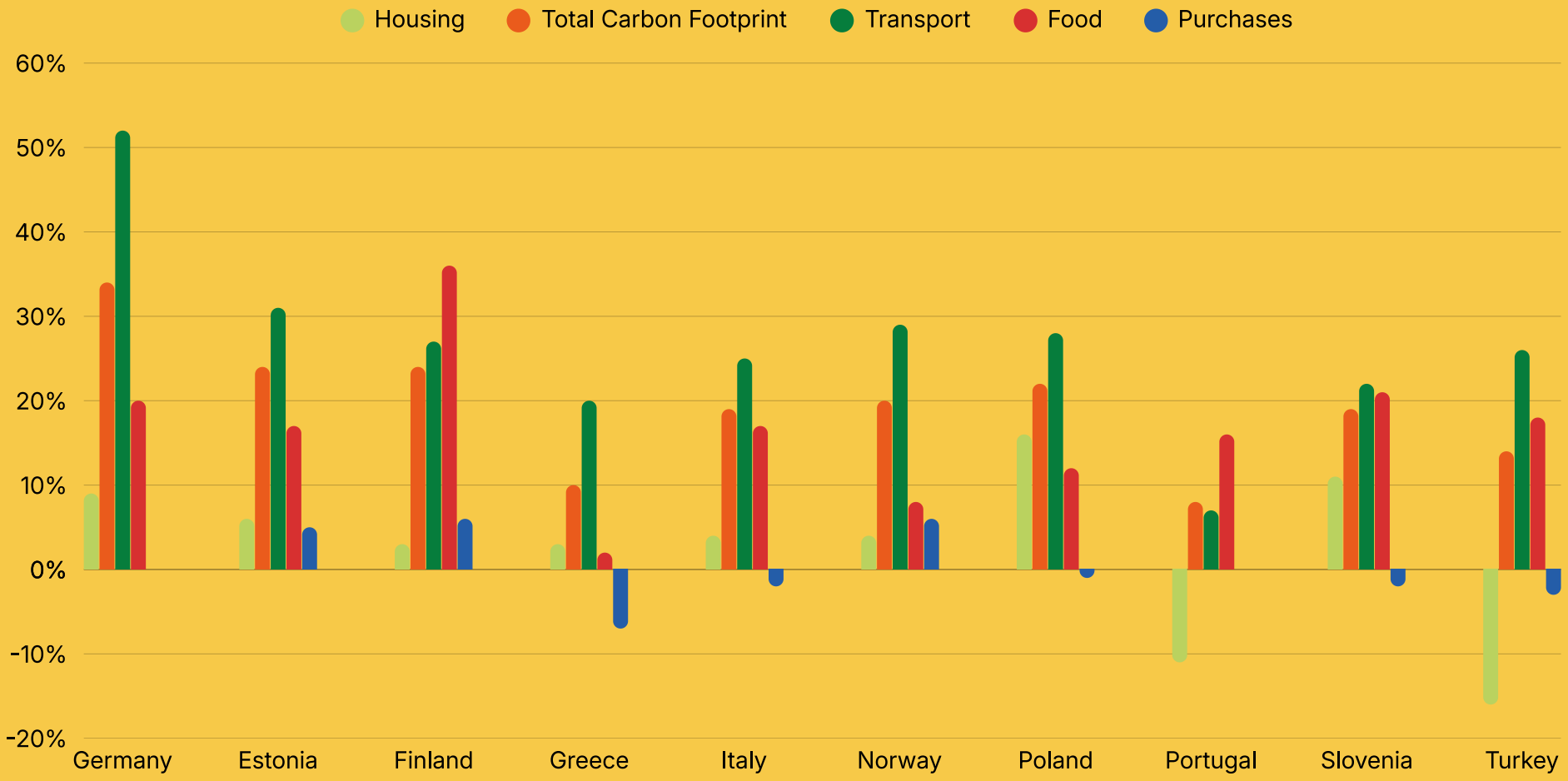


The differences in Ecological Footprint and life expectancy combine to produce a substantial difference in **HPI scores** between men and women. Differences range from a 3.2 difference in Portugal to a 8.9 difference in Germany. If German women were a nation unto themselves, their HPI score would be 62.8, which would only be second to Costa Rica's score. Meanwhile, the HPI score for Estonian men is 37.6, which would rank them bottom globally.



Gender, lifestyles and carbon footprint

As well as providing an assessment of the overall carbon footprints of men and women in several countries, the PS Lifestyle carbon footprint calculator also allowed us to compare the sexes on different domains of consumption, including housing, transport, food and purchases. The figure below shows these comparisons for each country for each domain.



Relative gap in carbon footprint by domain (men's footprints relative to women's, in %)

A gap driven by transport and diets

The biggest differences between men and women are for transport and food. By contrast, housing emissions are broadly similar, reflecting shared infrastructures and household conditions, while purchases play only a minor role, with little gender differences. This is consistent with the study by Berland and Leroutier (2025), which found women's emissions in France from food and transport are around one quarter lower than men's.

International evidence indicates that women tend to exhibit more pro-environmental behaviours and preferences, while men are more likely to engage in high-emission activities (UNEP, 2016; OECD, 2021; Hot or Cool Institute, 2026). Men are more likely to rely on private cars and air travel, whereas women more often use public and active transport (Peters, 2013; Mattioli et al., 2020; Brand et al., 2021). Similarly, men tend to consume more emissions-intensive diets, particularly higher levels of meat, while women are more likely to adopt plant-based diets (Sabaté & Soret, 2014; Bianchi et al., 2018).

These differences are not simply a matter of individual choice, but are shaped by structural inequalities and social norms. Income differences (UN DESA, 2020b), caregiving responsibilities, commuting patterns and access to transport, and safety concerns all influence how women and men move through cities and organise daily life and mobility (UN DESA, 2020a). Together these factors can lead to lower emissions, although they also limit the ability to invest in low-carbon solutions, such as energy-efficient housing or clean technologies (UNDP, 2016).

Photo by Alif on Unsplash

Shifting norms and aspirations to low-carbon lifestyles

These findings have both practical and deeply societal implications. They point to important leverage points for reducing emissions, while also challenge us to confront the gendered social norms that underpin high-carbon lifestyles. Behaviours – such as driving large cars, flying frequently, consuming meat – are often associated with identity, status and, in some contexts, masculinity. This raises an important question: to what extent are high emissions socially reinforced, and even culturally rewarded?

Evidence suggests that carbon-intensive behaviours can become socially reinforced and culturally rewarded. Environmentally friendly behaviours are perceived as less compatible with traditional masculine identities, discouraging their adoption (Brough et al., 2016; Leferink et al., 2025), while mobility and dietary choices can also reflect status signalling and cultural expectations (Kadri et al., 2025). Women, by contrast, generally report higher environmental concern and engagement, reflecting gendered patterns in values and risk perception (UNEP, 2016; OECD, 2021; Velzeboer et al., 2024).

Addressing these dynamics requires going beyond information and incentives. It means recognising how aspirations, identities and social norms shape consumption, and understanding how carbon-intensive lifestyles have become associated with success or perceived freedom. The challenge is to transform systems and narratives, such that low-carbon lifestyles are not seen as somehow unmasculine or signalling a lack of success.

Policies can support this transition by enabling attractive low-carbon alternatives – such as safe and reliable public transport, attractive and accessible plant-based food options, and compact, energy-efficient housing – while also reshaping narratives around what constitutes a good life (UNEP, 2015; OECD, 2021; UNDP, 2026). Ultimately, the gender gap in carbon footprints is not just a statistical difference – it reveals how high-carbon lifestyles are normalised, and highlights the opportunity to redefine prosperity and wellbeing on low-carbon, equitable and sustainable terms.

Photo by KT Leung on Unsplash

Women's Leadership

The last section shows how women, as individuals, tend to do better at achieving wellbeing sustainably than men do. The policy and political implications of this difference, however, are not straightforward. One potential conclusion is that countries do better in terms of sustainable wellbeing if they have women leaders. In this section we test that hypothesis.

Do women in power lead differently? There's increasing evidence that they do, and it matters for societal wellbeing. Numerous studies suggest that men and women in leadership positions tend to have differing priorities. Women in leadership roles often prioritise care-oriented policies, including areas like education, health, and environmental protection (Hasanaj & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2026; Jaramillo Ruiz et al., 2026). They also seem more willing to take stricter action when it matters most, something that became especially visible during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Coscieme et al., 2020; Hasanaj & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2026). Beyond crisis situations, there's also growing evidence that women's leadership helps reduce carbon emissions and supports climate action (Ganda, 2024). More generally, female leaders are often described as acting quickly, communicating clearly and taking fewer risks (Ozdenerol et al., 2023). These leadership traits can make a real difference as they help to build trust, improve public compliance and enhance policy effectiveness.

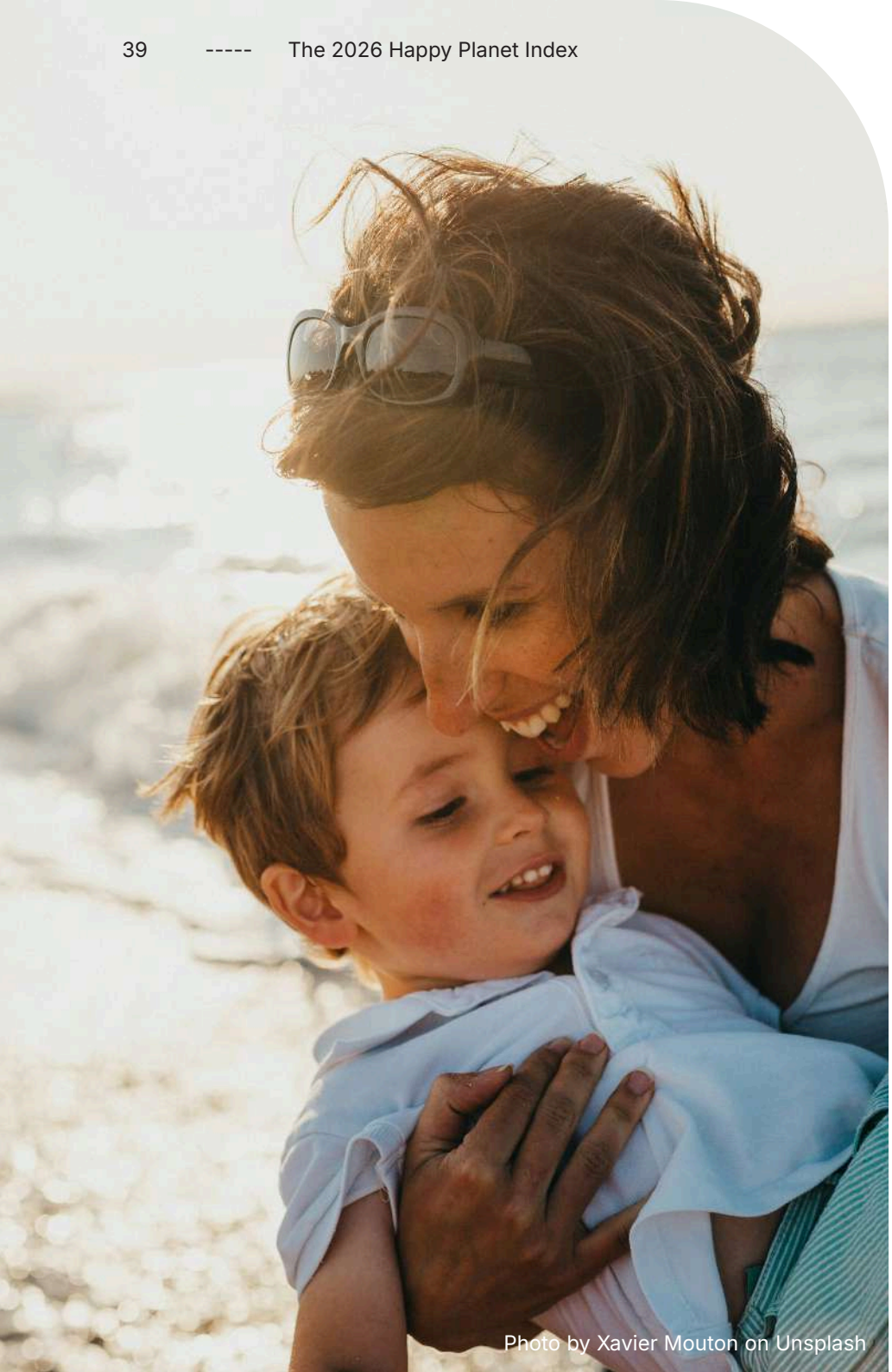


Photo by Xavier Mouton on Unsplash

So how does all of this connect to broader sustainable wellbeing? In this section, we look at whether countries led by women perform better on the HPI. To do this, we use data from Our World in Data on the gender of each country's most powerful leader, defined as either the head of government or head of state, depending on who actually holds executive power (based on V-Dem data). Some studies suggest that the positive effects of women's leadership on wellbeing and sustainability tend to be larger in more democratic systems and in societies with stronger gender equality norms (Audette et al., 2019; Helliwell & Huang, 2006; Imran & Javaid, 2017; Reeves et al., 2022). To take this into account, we control for a democracy index and the share of women in parliament. We also control for country fixed effects, meaning that we are looking at what happens when women leaders take or leave the leadership role, rather than differences between countries.[17]

What do we find? Women's leadership tends to be associated with an increase in HPI of about 0.6 points. This means that, on average, when a country has a woman leader, its HPI score is 0.6 points higher than when it has a man leader. Given that HPI year-to-year within-country variation is around 1.7 points, we are talking about a meaningful impact of female leadership on sustainable wellbeing. Importantly, the relationship doesn't disappear once we factor in income levels, population size, democratic quality, or women's representation in parliament. These findings align with previous evidence and point to the importance of promoting women's leadership as part of broader strategies to advance sustainable and inclusive development. Structural barriers that limit women's access to executive power, including entrenched governance norms and cultural attitudes around masculinity and leadership, remain key challenges that policy efforts should seek to address.

[17] The regression analysis covers the period from 2006 to 2024 and includes data from 148 countries. In addition to country and year fixed effects were also added, and errors were clustered by country. Further information can be found in the methodology paper.

Individual HPI Scores

When the HPI was updated last time in 2024, Hot or Cool simultaneously launched a new online tool for individuals to calculate their own personal HPI scores. The tool also provides tips for how individuals and societies can improve their scores.

We were pleasantly surprised that over 40,000 people completed the survey, allowing us to conduct some preliminary analyses for this report. The sample covers the period from May 2024 to January 2026, spanning 147 countries worldwide, with strong representation from more developed countries. Almost one third of the sample resided in Australia, with Germany and other anglophone countries also strongly represented. It should be remembered that, although the sample is large, it is not representative (neither globally nor for the individual countries covered). People who completed the survey were self-selecting, and it is likely that they are more environmentally aware than the average person. Nevertheless, the data allow us to address a key question: do good lives have to cost the Earth? Is there a correlation between Ecological Footprint and wellbeing? And are there people who achieve high wellbeing despite a low footprint?

Firstly, we recognise that there are limits to how much an individual can reduce their environmental impact within a given economic and social system. No matter how hard we try to live sustainably, most of the products or services we consume (including public services such as education or roads) will have some embedded impact. At the same time, a significant part of the Ecological Footprint generated by humans is linked to high levels of production and consumption that do not improve wellbeing. However, even in the context of overconsumption today, particularly in the most developed countries, it is possible to live good lives without costing the Earth. Around 5% of the sample population enjoy a happy sustainable life with behaviours consistent with a long life expectancy.[18] Whilst this percentage is likely to be an over-estimation of the proportion in the broader population, given that the people who completed the survey are likely to be more environmentally conscious than the average person, it does indicate that good lives that don't cost the Earth are at least possible.

	Happy, long life	Not happy or not long life
Unsustainable	72.44%	20.65%
Sustainable	**4.75%**	2.16%

[18] Note: The individual thresholds used to define high levels of life satisfaction and life expectancy, as well as low levels of emissions, are as follows: life satisfaction ≥6 (on a scale of 1–10), life expectancy ≥75 years and a carbon footprint ≤3.17 tonnes CO_2.

Our data also suggest a negative relationship between carbon footprint and the other two indicators at the individual level, Life satisfaction (−0.11) and Life expectancy (−0.18). This might seem counterintuitive at first, but it starts to make sense when you look at what high-carbon lifestyles actually look like in practice. To some extent, people with larger carbon footprints tend to live in ways that are bad for them: long commutes, sedentary routines, meat-heavy and ultra-processed diets, high consumption, and less time for relationships or rest. Moreover, negative lifestyles usually lead to other negative lifestyles (poor diet, physical inactivity, long commuting, loneliness, chronic stress, etc.), overall undermining both health and happiness. There's also a psychological dimension: research consistently shows that lifestyles built around material consumption tend to produce lower life satisfaction over time. This happens partly due to hedonic adaptation, you get used to what you have and always want more, and the time poverty that comes with maintaining an expensive, high-consumption lifestyle (Curran, 2017; Galiani et al., 2015; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). In short, the behaviours that drive carbon footprints up appear to be the same ones that quietly undermine wellbeing and longevity.

But which behavioural patterns actually make a difference to our wellbeing? Is there a sustainable correlation, or an unsustainable tension, between living a good life and respecting the environment? Drawing on our data, we compared the sample averages for life satisfaction and life expectancy with those for those subsets of the survey sample who reported more unsustainable lifestyles. In all cases, more unsustainable lifestyles are associated with lower life satisfaction and life expectancy.

	Life satisfaction	Life expectancy
Sample average	6.53	85.27
"I eat dairy several times a day"	6.36	83.74
"I eat meat several times a day"	6.21	81.10
"I have a habit of buying things that I rarely use"	6.01	82.10
"I travelled by plane more than 30 hours last year"	6.01	81.50
"I travel by car more than 400 km a week"	5.30	76.51

Photo by Filiz Elaerts on Unsplash

When it comes to diet, we know that plant-based diets carry a lower individual environmental footprint than those that include animal products (González et al., 2020; Westhoek et al., 2014). Our data suggest that consuming dairy products multiple times a day and eating meat several times a day is also associated with both lower life satisfaction and reduced life expectancy. This is consistent with a growing body of evidence linking high animal-product diets to long-term health risks (González et al., 2020; Virtanen et al., 2019; Westhoek et al., 2014). Regarding consumption, people with the highest consumption patterns, those that report regularly buying things they rarely end up using, score on average half a point lower in life satisfaction and live more than three years less than the average. This stands in contrast to more sustainable consumption habits, such as buying second-hand or prioritizing repair over replacement. These results align with the consumption paradox described earlier: consuming more tends only to raise our expectations, without improving or even actively worsening, our quality of life. Finally, the way we move from place to place also shapes our wellbeing. Spending more than 30 hours a year on flights is associated with reductions in life expectancy and life satisfaction similar in magnitude to those caused by heavy consumption patterns. Even more striking, people who drive more than 400 km per week were estimated to have a life expectancy almost 10 years lower, and reported life satisfaction more than 1 point lower, compared to the overall sample. This finding echoes a wide range of research on how transport habits and daily commuting affect physical and mental health (Frey & Stutzer, 2008; Künn-Nelen, 2015). Taken together, these results point in a consistent direction: the lifestyles that tend to be least sustainable are also the ones that undermine the very wellbeing they are often pursued in the name of. Consuming less, including animal products, and moving more sustainably by reducing car dependency and air travel is a clear way to have better lives that don’t cost the earth.

Where do we go from here?

This year's edition of the Happy Planet Index highlights three key findings that have we have seen time and time again:

- **Good lives don't have to cost the Earth.** Yet again we see that the relationship between Ecological Footprint and adjusted happy life years is non-linear and relatively loose. Some countries are much more efficient at converting environmental impact into good lives. Examples of this relative success can be seen at multiple levels of development from Spain in Western Europe all the way to Tajikistan in Central Asia. Whilst none of these countries has found the 'perfect' solution, they can all provide lessons on how to work towards sustainable wellbeing. Meanwhile, our data from the personal HPI calculator revealed that there are people who are able to achieve sustainable wellbeing, with high levels of self-reported wellbeing, high life expectancy, and low environmental impact.

- **GDP does not measure what matters.** The two countries with the highest GDP per capita – Luxembourg and Singapore – score abysmally on the HPI. The USA, which has the largest total GDP, and the sixth highest GDP per capita at $75,489, ranks 105th. Meanwhile, the top five countries in the HPI have GDP per capita ranging from $4,756 (Tajikistan) to $48,460 (Spain). If maximising wellbeing for both people and the planet is our goal, the HPI reveals that our focus on GDP is leading us in the wrong direction and indicates that our current political and economic systems are woefully inefficient.

- **Those with power are often the problem.** In the 2024 edition of the HPI, we looked at differences between income groups and found that those with the highest incomes had the lowest HPI scores. Here we look at differences between men and women and find that men's HPI scores are up to 8 points lower than women's. Perhaps more interestingly, we also found that women leaders increase the HPI scores of their countries, highlighting the need for more women's leadership and a transformation of cultural norms.

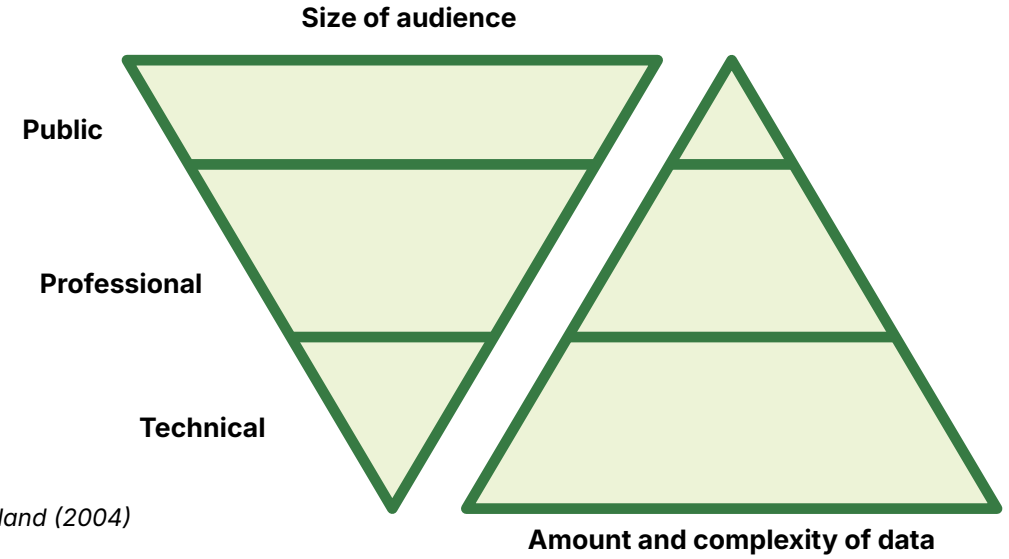
The next steps on the path to go Beyond GDP

Two months before the launch of this report, the UN High Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP published its recommendations for a set of 31 indicators to measure sustainable and inclusive wellbeing. If the recommendations are heeded, this will lead to a step-change in the collection of valuable data around the world, data that could help shift the focus of societies onto 'the broader well-being of people and planet' (UN High Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP, 2026, pg. 3).

But data and indicators on their own will not transform our politics: "a new compass is useful only if someone is willing to steer the ship" (Bjørkskov, 2026). For the indicators to be noticed at the political level, and not just at the technical and analytical level, we believe two challenges need to be addressed:

1. Complexity

It has been long understood that, for an indicator framework to be effective, the number of indicators should be inversely related to the size of the intended audience, as presented in Statistics New Zealand's audience model from 2004 (see figure). For specialised technical audiences, a large number of indicators is acceptable and useful. However, when it comes to larger audiences, who are less likely to invest significant time or cognitive capacity to the data, only a small number of indicators are likely to enter the conscience and debate. Most people in the public have a grasp of a few key measurable concepts such as economic growth, unemployment rate and CO_2 emissions. A reasonable proportion of the population could tell you whether these are changing favourably or unfavourably. But no one is going to be able to remember 31 indicators.



Reproduced from Statistics New Zealand (2004)

The HPI mimics the success of GDP by proposing a single index for measuring societal success. But let's be honest, the multiple facets of what makes up a successful society cannot be summarised in a single number. Most importantly, as seen in this report, the numerator and denominator of the HPI (i.e. adjusted happy life years, as a proxy for wellbeing, and Ecological Footprint, as a proxy for environmental sustainability) do not correlate consistently. Or at least they do not correlate in the desired direction: high wellbeing is not consistently associated with sustainability. In statistical parlance, the concept of sustainable wellbeing is not 'unidimensional'. The concept of sustainable and inclusive wellbeing, which we endorse, even less so.

As we and others have argued (Abdallah, 2023; Charveriat et al., 2024; Colebrook, 2018; Jeffrey & Michaelson, 2015; Terzi, 2021; Vladimirov et al., 2023), what is needed is a small set of headline indicators – enough to acknowledge the fundamental multi-dimensionality of sustainable and inclusive wellbeing, but few enough to be easily recalled and retold by the public, the media and busy politicians.

2. Democratic legitimacy

The world faces many crises in the 21st century. Alongside climate change, one of the most fundamental is the erosion of our democracies. The rise of populism and increasing acceptance of authoritarianism are symptoms of a trend that had already begun last century, with decreasing trust in political leaders and elites.

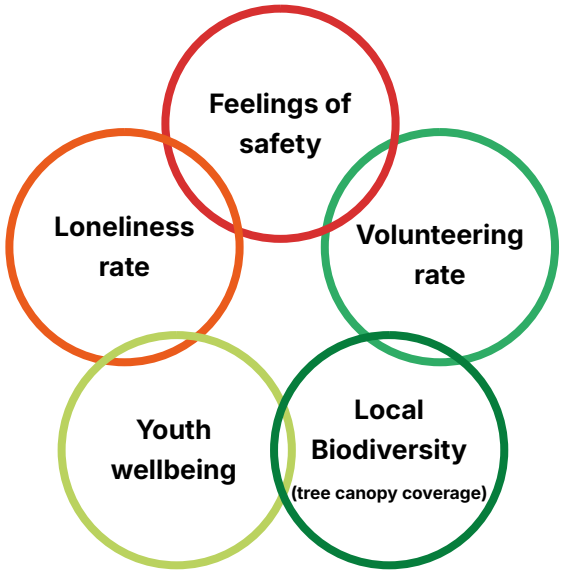
The Beyond GDP agenda has an opportunity here. The populist zeitgeist has a natural affinity to critiques of GDP, as was poignantly expressed by a disgruntled member of the public at a debate on Brexit in the UK: "that's your bloody GDP, not ours" (Van Bouwel, 2023). But replacing GDP with another indicator or set of indicators selected by technical experts is unlikely to appease this sentiment, even if it is intended to reflect people's wellbeing more directly.

Furthermore, to date, the debate on replacing GDP has remained largely outside the political realm. There are no mass demonstrations calling for new indicators of societal success. One could argue that there has been an intentional strategy of remaining below the political radar. This might be the right strategy if the goal is to encourage statistics offices to collect new indicators, or finance ministries to model impacts of policies on multi-dimensional wellbeing or inequality. But one cannot, and indeed should not, attempt to change overall political priorities by stealth. For a more ambitious transition, for political debate to really begin to centre sustainable and inclusive wellbeing, the public needs to be consciously and intentionally engaged.

Deliberative mini-publics for Beyond GDP

This spring, Hot or Cool conducted the world's first ever 'deliberative mini-public' (sometimes known as 'citizen assemblies') on Beyond GDP. We brought together a panel of over 30 randomly selected residents of the town of Kerava in Finland, broadly representative of the town's demographic make-up, to select five headline indicators of the Good Life for their town. The residents were randomly selected from the city's register, and were paid for participation, to ensure that we reached a diverse group – a 'mini-public'. They were introduced to some of the key concepts in wellbeing and told about important Beyond GDP initiatives. They were told that they need to keep the set to just five indicators, because a larger set would be too complex to remember or assess.

Their journey began with self-reflection on what matters to them. Over three evenings, they met and discussed and deliberated, in small groups and in plenum. The groups then proposed sets of five indicators, which were voted on by the panel members. The final set of indicators is shown below:



This is the right set for Kerava. But it is not necessarily the right set for Finland as a whole, nor indeed any other country. And we purposefully did not ask the residents to choose indicators of ecological sustainability, because there we do believe that experts should play the lead role in that decision. A full process would include the expert-led selection of headline sustainability indicators and ensure a sensible approach to communicating and using the two sets coherently.

We are already exploring replicating this process in other larger cities, ideally also beyond Europe. Afterwards, we'll be looking to national governments to dare to listen to their citizens, and set up national citizen assemblies to define national measures of success.

Of course, that isn't the end of the matter. Indicators on their own won't fix our mess. But it's definitely one of the steps on the way to achieving sustainable wellbeing for all.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