

Decarbonization drives countries to the top, PH drops to 111th spot

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Countries that exhibit long-standing commitments and carefully constructed programs to protect public health, conserve natural resources, and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and make concerted efforts to decarbonize their economies propel them into the top sustainability rankings, according to the 2020 Environmental Performance Index.

Denmark dominated the 2020 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), the biennial global performance on sustainability issues.

Yale University's Hillhouse Professor of Environmental Law and Policy Daniel Esty, who was one of my lecturers when I attended the executive program on sustainability leadership in the same university in 2017 and who directs the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy that co-produces the EPI, observed that the analysis suggests that countries with broad-based sustainability efforts and particular emphasis on decarbonizing their economies come out at the top of the pack.

Denmark excels in almost every indicator of environmental health, having long made significant commitments to air quality, advanced sanitation and safe drinking water. The highest-ranked country also stands out in solid waste management, with virtually all of the nation's waste being recycled, composted or incinerated. In addition, Denmark leads the world in the breadth and depth of its programs to tackle climate change, including a recently announced target of cutting its GHG gas emissions by 70 percent by 2030.

Completing the top ten are nine other European countries – Luxembourg, Switzerland, United Kingdom, France, Austria, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Germany.

The Philippines dropped to 111th out of 180 countries from 82nd in the last EPI two years ago. Among 25 Asia-Pacific countries led by Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, the Philippines slipped from 8th to 9th.

The 2020 EPI is a careful measurement of environmental trends and progress that provides a foundation for effective policymaking. It provides a data-driven summary of the state of sustainability around the world. Using 32 performance indicators across 11 issue categories, it ranks 180 countries on environmental health and ecosystem vitality.

The indicators provide a gauge at a national scale of how close countries are to established environmental policy targets. The EPI offers a scorecard that highlights leaders and laggards in environmental performance, and provides practical guidance for countries that aspire to move towards a sustainable future.

The 2020 EPI Summary for Policymakers states the following conclusions:

1. Good policy results are associated with wealth (gross domestic product per capita), meaning that economic prosperity makes it possible for nations to invest in policies and programs that lead to desirable outcomes. This trend is especially true for issue categories under the umbrella of environmental health, as building the necessary infrastructure to provide clean drinking water and sanitation, reduce ambient air pollution, control hazardous waste and respond to public health crises yields large returns for human well-being. “Good governance more than any other factor separates the nations that are moving toward a sustainable future from those which are not,” explained Alex de Sherbinin of Columbia University.

2. The pursuit of economic prosperity — manifested in industrialization and urbanization — often means more pollution and other strains on ecosystem vitality, especially in the developing world, where air and water emissions

remain significant. Data suggests that countries need not sacrifice sustainability for economic security or vice versa. In every issue category, there are countries that rise above their economic peers. Policymakers and other stakeholders in these leading countries demonstrate that focused attention can mobilize communities to protect natural resources and human well-being despite the strains associated with economic growth. Indicators of good governance — including commitment to the rule of law, a vibrant press and even-handed enforcement of regulations — have strong relationships with top-tier EPI scores.

3. While top EPI performers pay attention to all areas of sustainability, their lagging peers tend to have uneven performance. Denmark has strong results across most issues and with leading-edge commitments and outcomes with regard to climate change mitigation. In general, high scorers exhibit long-standing policies and programs to protect public health, preserve natural resources and decrease greenhouse gas emissions. It further suggest that countries making concerted efforts to decarbonize their electricity sectors have made the greatest gains in combating climate change, with associated benefits for ecosystems and human health. The index noted, however, that every country — including those at the top of the EPI rankings — still has

issues to improve upon. No country can claim to be on a fully sustainable trajectory.

4. Laggards must redouble national sustainability efforts along all fronts. A number of important countries in the Global South, including India and Nigeria, come out near the bottom of the rankings. Their low EPI scores indicate the need for greater attention to the spectrum of sustainability requirements, with a high-priority focus on critical issues such as air and water quality, biodiversity and climate change. Some of the other laggards, including Nepal and Afghanistan, face broader challenges such as civil unrest, and their low scores can almost all be attributed to weak governance.

The 2020 EPI also reveals that global progress on climate change has been halting. The metrics on carbon dioxide emissions from land cover change and black carbon emission growth rates show that critical aspects of the battle to address climate change are trending in the wrong direction over the past decade. Meeting the goals set out in the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement requires sustained cuts in emissions of all GHG gases, and the 2020 EPI finds that no country is decarbonizing quickly enough. Some countries do excel on individual greenhouse gas reductions. To spread best practices around the world, policymakers must pay greater attention to how climate leaders achieve success. Such lessons can also be drawn from

countries that have recently made notable improvements in climate change mitigation.

The EPI is a joint project of the Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy of Yale University and the Columbia Center for International Earth Science Information Network of Columbia University and was released last June 2020.

An invitation to a virtual round table discussion

You are invited to attend virtual round table discussion titled “Environmental Stewardship Post Pandemic: The Path to a Green Economic Recovery” on June 25, 2020 at 9:00 to 11:30 a.m. I will share my insights and knowledge on the need for environmental stewardship and a whole-of-society approach in building a resilient new normal. It is organize by the Stratbase ADR Institute in partnership with the Philippine Business for Environmental Stewardship.

The author is the executive director of the Young Environmental Forum and a Non-Resident Fellow of Stratbase ADR Institute. He completed his climate change and development course at the University of East Anglia (United

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<https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/06/20/business/green-business/decarbonization-drives-countries-to-the-top-ph-drops-to-111th-spot/732983/>