

EMBARGOED UNTIL SATURDAY, JANUARY 25, 2014

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SWITZERLAND TOPS THE 2014 ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE INDEX

Singapore's High Ranking Identifies Opportunities, Challenges for Urban Sustainability

DAVOS, Switzerland – Switzerland leads the world in addressing environmental challenges, according to the 2014 Environmental Performance Index (EPI). Luxembourg, Australia, Singapore, and Czech Republic round out the top five positions of the Index, which ranks countries on high-priority environmental concerns including air quality, water management, and climate change.

While reinforcing the challenges nations face in promoting sustainable development, the 2014 EPI shows that top countries have relatively strong performance across the board and have advanced on a range of environmental issues over the last decade. But the scorecard reveals weaknesses for many countries and areas of concern for even the best performers. Switzerland, for example, is only average on forest protection, demonstrating that all countries – regardless of rank – can improve.

“Many perennial top performers repeat their strong showings in 2014,” said Angel Hsu of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy and lead author of the report. “A quick scan of who does well year after year suggests that good environmental performance is securely tied to policymakers prioritizing environmental concerns and committing resources to them.”

Singapore's emergence as a top-5 performer highlights both the unique opportunities and challenges urban environments pose to sustainability. The city-state did well on wastewater treatment, access to improved drinking water, and access to improved sanitation, all of which speak to urban infrastructure's potential to secure and improve some environmental health factors. However, Singapore ranked 109th on biodiversity and habitat protection, highlighting that some elements of sustainability are more difficult to address under crowded conditions.

With expanded data coverage, the 2014 EPI ranks 46 more countries than the last EPI release. These countries are mostly sub-Saharan African nations and Small Island Developing States, providing a first look at where these developing countries stand on their environmental efforts. Tonga, for example, far outperforms all other countries with similarly sized economies, coming in at 47th overall. In total, the 178 countries in the Index represent 99 percent of global population, 98 percent of the world's total land area, and 97 percent of global GDP.

The sweeping coverage of the 2014 EPI reveals important global trends. For example, the world is doing well on improving drinking water and sanitation. Child mortality has declined as a result. Progress in these categories tracks the concerted pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, which have clear targets, strategies, and metrics for assessment on water and sanitation.

Poor environmental performance is difficult to improve when policymakers do not set clear targets, as with fisheries, industrial wastewater treatment, and air quality. Since 2000, the number of people

breathing unsafe air has risen by 606 million people, to a total of 1.78 billion. These numbers are heavily concentrated in the developing world.

“The EPI reveals that improved environmental results are possible when measurement and management practices align,” said Yale University Prof. Daniel Esty. “When data and measurement are poor or not in concert with policy priorities, natural and human systems suffer.”

The Index also demonstrates what happens when countries are unable to prioritize environmental management. The bottom five performers – Somalia, Mali, Haiti, Lesotho, and Afghanistan – all grapple with civil unrest, significant economic development pressures, and political turnover. Still, each of the bottom-performing countries has improved environmental performance in some areas over the past 10 years. The percentage of households in Afghanistan with access to improved drinking water, for instance, increased from 5 percent in 1991 to 61 percent in 2011.

Emerging economies, including China, India, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa, have had modest improvement over the past decade, but they have also paid an environmental price for their rapid growth. This group represents 55 percent of global growth from the end of 2009 to 2012, and the stresses of urbanization without sufficient investment in environmental protection helps explain why they perform poorly on air quality as well as biodiversity and habitat protection.

While the 2014 EPI offers an overview of global performance on some issues, it also reveals distressing data gaps. The sustainability of agricultural practices and toxic chemical exposure, among a range of critical policy challenges, have virtually no reliable metrics by which to identify priority needs, set policy targets, or evaluate national performance. The international community must continue to prioritize these issues and work toward better metrics. The impending Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are one avenue of international opportunity.

“The EPI has clear implications for the international effort on the SDGs,” said Columbia University's Marc Levy, an architect of the EPI. “The good news about the SDGs is the commitment to treating the environment as an integral part of the next generation of development goals. The bad news is that this political breakthrough rests on a dreadfully weak measurement infrastructure.” Potential SDGs on agriculture and water, for example, will fail without dramatic measurement improvements.

Delivering better data will not be easy. “It is going to require more than just the work of national governments and NGOs,” said Kim Samuel, the EPI’s co-creator. “The private sector is realizing the parallel benefits of business and environmental sustainability. The hope is that the EPI will guide increased cooperation among all sectors of society.”

The EPI is produced biennially by researchers at Yale and Columbia universities, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum and with support from the Samuel Family Foundation and the McCall MacBain Foundation. Full details available at <http://epi.yale.edu>.

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Angel Hsu, the lead author of the 2014 EPI, co-author Marc Levy, and Kim Samuel, co-creator of the project, will hold a press conference at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2014 in Davos, Switzerland, on January, 25 at 2:00 PM local time.