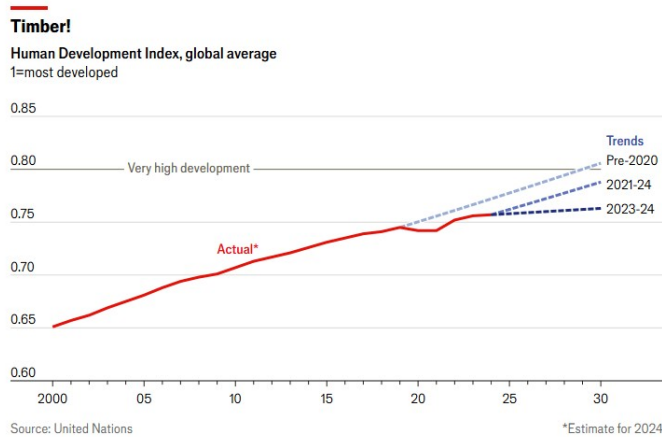


*The Economist*, 7 mai

## A setback : Which countries have the best, and worst, living standards?

A ranking of 193 countries shows that human development is stalling almost everywhere

Full text:



IN THE THROES of the covid-19 pandemic—when hospitals overflowed, schools and offices shut, and economies seized up—many asked when the world would recover. Five years later, the data show that the setback to living standards could endure.

The Human Development Index (HDI), produced by the UN, tracks progress in life expectancy, education and income. After GDP it is one of the most widely used measures of development. The global score fell in 2020 and 2021—the first declines since the index began in 1990. It recovered somewhat in 2022. The latest report, released on May 6th, shows that the pace of improvement in 2023 was the slowest on record (see chart).

Rich countries, unsurprisingly, do best. Ninety-seven per cent of them have fully recovered or exceeded their pre-pandemic scores, says Achim Steiner of the United Nations Development Programme. That is true of less than 60% of poor countries.

After two years at the top Switzerland was edged out (barely) by Iceland. Nordic countries have the highest spots in most rankings that measure quality of life. A baby born in Iceland today is expected to live longer than 82 years and receive more than 18 years of schooling. Average income per person is close to \$70,000 (explore the full ranking below).

## Human Development Index, 2023

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	Index score, 1=most developed	Life expectancy at birth, years	Expected years of schooling
1 Iceland	0.972	82.7	18.9
2 <sup>nd</sup> Norway	0.970	83.3	18.8
2 <sup>nd</sup> Switzerland	0.970	84.0	16.7
4 Denmark	0.962	81.9	18.7
5 <sup>th</sup> Germany	0.959	81.4	17.3
5 <sup>th</sup> Sweden	0.959	83.3	19.0
7 Australia	0.958	83.9	20.7
8 <sup>th</sup> Hong Kong	0.955	85.5	16.9
8 <sup>th</sup> Netherlands	0.955	82.2	18.6
10 Belgium	0.951	82.1	19.0
11 Ireland	0.949	82.4	19.2
12 Finland	0.948	81.9	19.5
13 <sup>th</sup> Singapore	0.946	83.7	16.7
13 <sup>th</sup> Britain	0.946	81.3	17.8
15 United Arab Emirates	0.940	82.9	15.6
16 Canada	0.939	82.6	15.9

The index does not consider inequality within countries (the UN publishes separate indices on that). Living standards for rich and poor citizens can vary widely. Rich Americans tend to have much longer lives than poor ones. But money isn't everything. A study led by researchers at Brown University, published in April, found that the richest people in America (which ranks 17th on the HDI) have a mortality rate similar to that of the poorest northern and western Europeans and to that of most eastern Europeans.

The bottom of the index is dominated by sub-Saharan Africa. Life expectancy at birth in South Sudan, the lowest-ranked country, is less than 58 years, average schooling is less than six years and gross national income per person is just \$688. After decades of narrowing, the gap between countries at the top and bottom of the index has widened for four years running. The world's poorest countries have stalled on other indicators, too. Extreme poverty has barely fallen since 2015. Measures of public health have declined since covid. And since the mid-2010s economic growth rates in poor economies have been [slower on average](#) than in richer ones. Cuts to [aid budgets](#) by governments in America and Europe will make things worse for poor countries. According to the HDI, countries in the Arab world and Latin America and the Caribbean have had the slowest post-pandemic recovery in living standards.

For decades it looked as though on average the world would reach very high levels of development before 2030. If today's sluggish progress continues, it could take decades longer to reach that milestone.■