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The dangerous illusion cast by development rankings

The Cost of Development and Environmental Degradation

- The recent wildfires in California led to significant economic losses, estimated at around \$250 billion, which is comparable to Greece's GDP in 2023.
- These catastrophic events underscore the hidden costs associated with the development models of affluent nations. The financial costs of environmental disasters often outweigh the perceived benefits of development.

Unsustainable Resource Consumption

- If all countries consumed resources in a manner similar to the United States or the European Union, the Earth would need multiple planets to sustain such lifestyles.
- Despite these concerns, global benchmarks like the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) continue to portray these nations as models of development.
- This contradiction between the HDI rankings, which focus on human well-being, and the ecological toll of such consumption, is misleading. It promotes an unsustainable development model that fails to account for the environmental impact of such lifestyles.

Flaws in the HDI Model

- The HDI, which ranks nations based on life expectancy, education, and income, fails to consider the environmental impact of these nations' development models.
- Countries that top the HDI rankings are also among the largest consumers of resources and emitters of carbon.
- If the entire world were to adopt these high-consumption models, it would lead to severe ecological collapse.
- Wealthy nations have already surpassed several planetary boundaries, such as excessive greenhouse gas emissions and widespread ecological destruction.
- The HDI, by ignoring these critical factors, encourages an unsustainable path of progress that disproportionately benefits a few and harms the planet.

Planetary Pressures-adjusted HDI (PHDI) and Its Limitations

- To address criticisms, the UN introduced the Planetary Pressures-adjusted HDI (PHDI) in 2020, which lowers HDI scores for nations with high environmental impacts.



- However, the PHDI still compares nations relative to one another rather than against absolute ecological limits.
- High-income nations continue to score well on the PHDI, not because they are environmentally sustainable, but because other nations have even worse environmental records.
- This approach perpetuates the illusion of progress while allowing environmental degradation to continue unchecked.

The Need to Focus on Middle-Income Countries

- Some middle-income nations have managed to achieve decent living standards while maintaining a relatively low ecological footprint.
- Costa Rica, for example, has achieved high life expectancy, universal healthcare, and widespread literacy through investments in renewable energy and forest conservation.
- Sri Lanka, with an HDI of 0.78, has made significant strides in education and healthcare, although it faces ongoing challenges like economic instability, inflation, and political unrest.
- These examples highlight that it is possible to achieve human well-being while maintaining environmental sustainability. However, these successes are not without their challenges and require careful balance.

India's Path Forward

- The development models of affluent nations are not suitable for a country like India, with its population of 1.4 billion people. Adopting these models would lead to severe ecological consequences.
- India needs to explore alternative development models that promote both human well-being and environmental sustainability, drawing lessons from countries that balance economic growth with ecological responsibility.
- Progress should be measured not just by GDP growth or HDI rankings, but by ensuring that every citizen can live with dignity within the Earth's ecological limits.
- This approach is not only a moral imperative but also a necessary strategy for the long-term survival and prosperity of nations in the 21st century.

These points emphasize the urgent need to rethink the traditional metrics of development and to consider sustainability as a core component of any development strategy, especially for densely populated and emerging economies like India.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-dangerous-illusion-cast-by-development-rankings/article69322868.ece>