



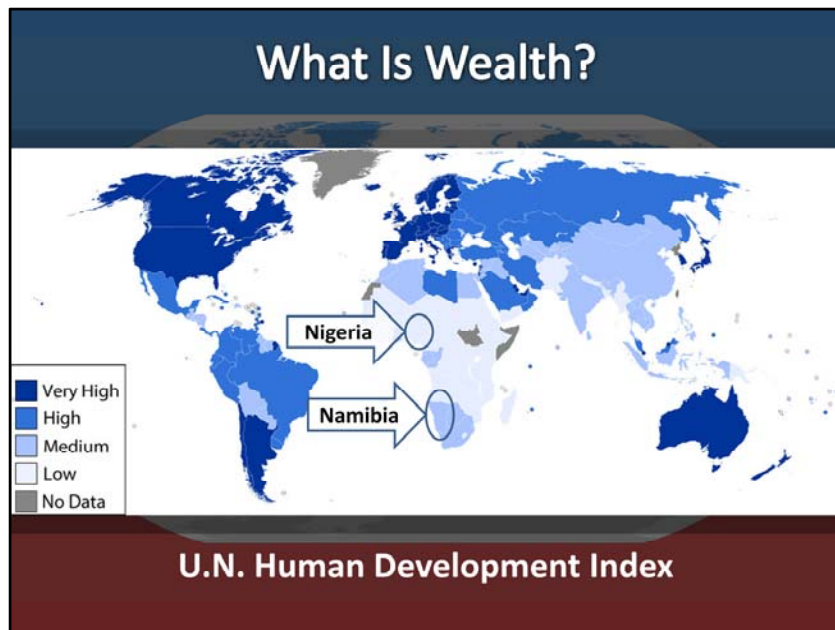
When economists classify the world into developed and developing countries, they usually do so using a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This number measures the approximate value of goods and services produced by a country in one year and is a broad measure of how well the economy is doing.

Many economists often link the GDP to the standard of living in a country. They assume that a country's citizens share in the wealth created by the economy. The higher a country's GDP, the higher its standard of living.

Take a look at this map showing the GDP of different countries around the world. One of the most striking features is that the majority of the countries with low GDPs are in the southern hemisphere, with the exception of Australia and some South American countries. Many of these countries were also colonies which gained independence in the twentieth century. Meanwhile, those countries with the highest GDPs are generally located in Western Europe, North America and the Far East.

Of course, just because a country has a higher GDP, that does not mean everyone in the country is wealthy. For example, there is a wide range of incomes in the United States. In many countries, there are a few extremely rich people, while the majority of people are much less well off. This is often the case in countries with oil or mineral wealth that is controlled by a few people.

[Map courtesy Roke.]



When people think about how well off the population of any given country is, usually they consider the factors that give people the opportunity to live a healthy and productive life, such as access to good health care, enough to eat, and education, among other things. While people living in countries with higher GDPs often have more access to these items, that's not always the case. Sometimes people living in the countries that are classified as developing have better social conditions than those living in richer countries.

This map shows social conditions for countries using the United Nations Human Development Index, an alternate tool for measuring the standard of living. Instead of focusing only on the GDP, this tool measures life expectancy, how many years of education the average person will receive, and how much income the average person makes.

Notice how some countries such as Namibia in Southern Africa have a low GDP, but its citizens have decent lives according the Human Development Index. On the other side, Nigeria in Western Africa has a relatively high GDP, but scores very low on the Human Development Index. This shows that a country's wealth does not always translate into better opportunities for its citizens.

[Map courtesy Wikimedia Foundation.]

General Characteristics



Developed Countries
High Birthrates
Higher literacy rates
Strain social services and environmental opportunities
Rapid population growth usually found in developing countries

Slow or shrinking populations usually found in developed countries
fewer children

Although each country is different, there are some general characteristics that are associated with most developed and developing nations. Aside from higher income levels, there are certain social conditions that are likelier to be found in more developed countries.

For one thing, developed countries usually have much higher literacy rates as a result of greater educational opportunities. This creates a more skilled workforce.

When the women in a country receive access to education and quality health care, the country's birth rate tends to be lower. A better education provides greater opportunities for women in the workforce and, typically, this results in lower birth rates among women, regardless of the country where they live.

Why is this important? Countries with fast-growing populations put a greater strain on social services and the environment as more people have to be educated, housed and employed. Rapid population growth is normally associated with developing countries. Meanwhile, in the world's wealthiest countries, the population rates are so low that the overall population is often going down except for immigration.



Often, people in developing countries often have less access to health care than people in the developed world. Rapidly-expanding populations mean that governments in the developing world have less money to spend on health care per person. There are often fewer doctors in these countries. In developing countries, people in poverty often live in substandard housing that lacks basic sanitation. A lack of quality health care and poor sanitation can lead to diseases that modern medicine considers simple to treat and prevent. Also, it can lead to the rapid spread of disease.

[Image courtesy Stephen Codrington.]



The developing world also has a higher incidence of poverty, although this varies greatly by country. When discussing global poverty, many people reference that there are places where individuals make less than one U.S. dollar a day. While living on less than one dollar a day is extremely difficult, that dollar will buy a lot more in one country than in another.

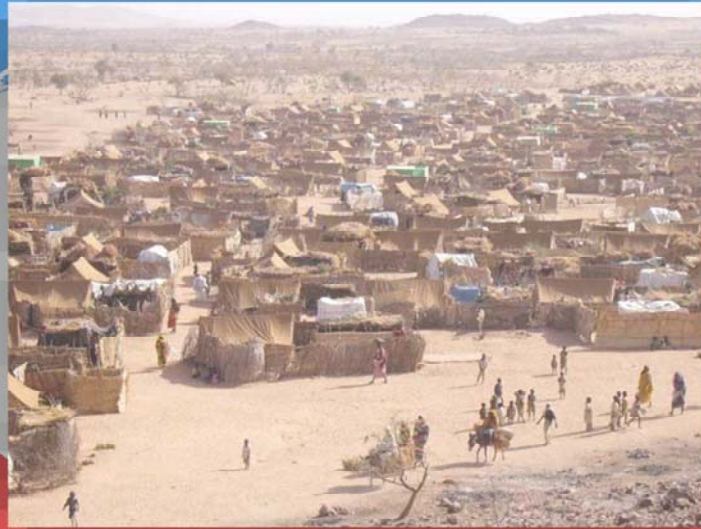
On the top, this map shows the GDP for each country. On the bottom it shows what the purchasing power is for the citizens of the country relative to the rest of the world .

For example, India falls somewhere near the second tier of countries as far as GDP. When measuring the purchasing power of its citizens, however, its in the top rank. This is because items are cheaper in India and money goes further than in some other richer countries.

Poverty is an issue that affects many quality of life factors for people, including life expectancy, educational opportunities, and job opportunities. In developing countries, poor people do not have the resources to think about the future, so they have to focus on the day-to-day. This can have implications for the environment, since people may be forced to cut down trees for fuel, or farm in areas where it harms the soil, because they do not have other methods of income.

[Map courtesy Roke. Image of shantytown courtesy Blazej Mikula.]

Agricultural Issues

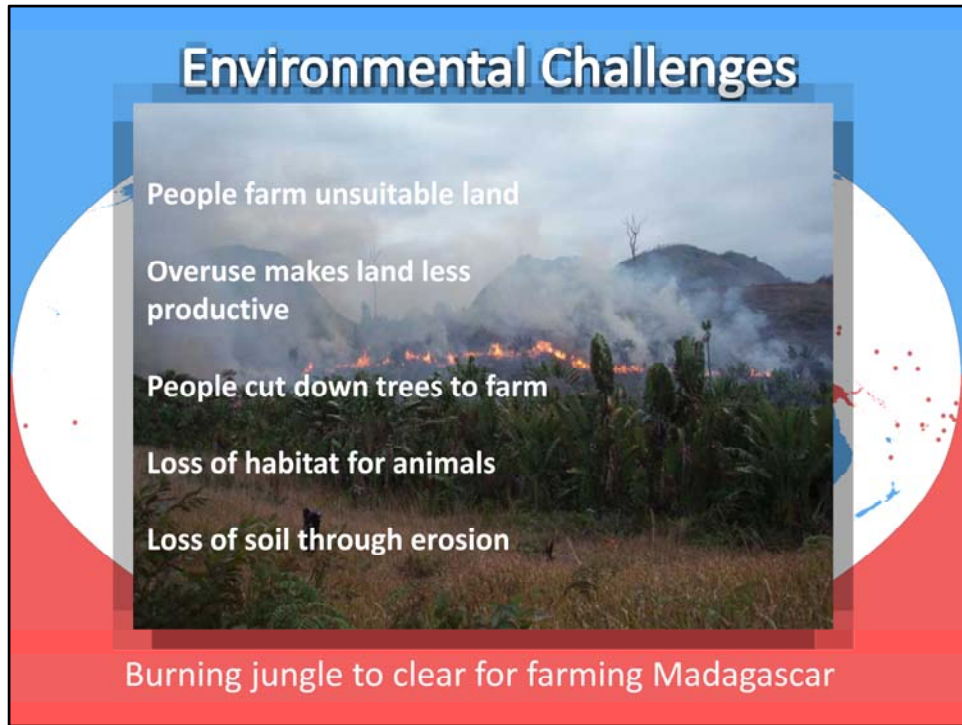


Refugee camp in Darfur, Sudan

Some developing countries are located in parts of the world that are subject to environmental issues such as drought. Combined with farming in areas that are unsuited to agriculture, this can lead to famine. When faced with long periods without rain, these marginally productive farms can be devastated and the people who rely on them forced to seek help. In some parts of the world, brutal conditions happen in war zones where the people have to migrate through areas where they are subjected to violence.

Even if they make their way to a refugee camp, these people have limited means of going back to their lands once the immediate environmental issue is resolved. Over time, the cycle of famine tends to repeat in these areas as the soil becomes less and less fertile. The result is long term environmental destruction.

[Image of town courtesy Holger Reineccius and refugee camp courtesy Mark Knobil.]



As you can see, poverty in the developing world can create conditions that increase environmental destruction. Poor people in the rural areas of the developing world may farm lands that are not suited to agriculture. Overuse of these lands makes them less productive over time. People often cut down, or burn down, the surrounding forests to farm new land. The loss of forests also means loss of natural habitats for animals and can encourage erosion of the soil.

[Image courtesy Diorit.]



Damage to the environment does not just occur in the developing world; environmental issues are present in developed countries. Many large cities experience smog, which is a sign of air pollution caused by transportation and industry in the area. If you travel to either Los Angeles or Mexico City, you can see the smog that shows the air pollution. In areas of industry, factories and large scale agricultural operations can drain chemicals and other pollutants into waterways. Access to clean water is a problem in much of the developing world and many people get sick from contaminated water.

Deforestation, or the removal of trees without replacing them, occurs when people need firewood and building materials, and to make room for farming and ranching. The immediate issue is the loss of habitat for animals and the erosion of topsoil. However, because the forests of the world are key to absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, deforestation can also contribute to global climate change. The irresponsible use of the land has resulted in a shrinking of the world's largest forests, like the Amazon Rainforest.

[Image of Taipei courtesy John Tarrantino and deforestation Wikimedia Foundation.]



As the global population increases and more people move out of poverty, it is likely that these people will consume more food and other items. It is challenging to balance this desire for more consumer goods and the impact that the production of these goods has on the environment. How can you, with the rest of the global community, help balance these two factors, so that more people can live better lives while protecting the environment from irreparable damage?