

Summary

Over a period of only two years the world made a small step forward on the way of development towards sustainability, according to our findings. A small step, but anyhow a step in the right direction. The average score of the world at large of the SSI – Sustainable Society Index, is a 5.7. On a scale of 0 to 10, it is still a long way to a score of 10, the level of full sustainability. Further and significant progress requires combined and urgent efforts of all countries.

SSI

Published in 2006 for the first time, now the first of two-yearly updates of the SSI is available. The SSI combines the main aspects of Quality of Life and Sustainability, which are relevant for development towards sustainability. Based on the – extended – definition of the Brundtland Commission, the SSI comprises no more than 22 indicators, grouped into 5 categories. This shows at a glance the level of sustainability of each of the 151 assessed countries.

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.

Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)

Results

As mentioned above, the world average score is 5.7. The scores for the seven distinct regions into which the 151 countries are grouped do not differ very much; they range from 6.1 for Europe to 5.3 for Asia. However, taking a look at the underlying figures, differences become

more noticeable. On average, high income countries score relatively high on the three categories with emphasis on Quality of Life (Personal Development, Healthy Environment and Well-balanced Society) and low on the two categories with emphasis on Sustainability (Sustainable Use of Resources and Sustainable World). For low income countries the picture is quite the opposite. Middle income countries take a position in between the high and the low income countries.

Africa reports by far the lowest score for the category Personal Development and – to a lesser extent – for the categories Healthy Environment, Well-balanced Society and Sustainable Use of Resources. On the other hand, Africa has the highest score for the category Sustainable World. Other regions offer a more differentiated picture. Asia's low score for Sustainable Use of Resources is very pronounced, being the lowest of all regions for a category.

Going one step further into detail, the 22 indicators give more detailed information. As yet, none of the indicators achieves the level of full sustainability. International Cooperation comes nearest with a world average score of 9.2. The lowest scores are for Consumption of Renewable Energy (3.2) and Waste Recycling (1.7).

Progress and set-backs

Compared with the results of the SSI-2006, one needs two decimals to show progress for the world average score of the overall index: from 5.63 to 5.65. The positive news is that the scores of all 6 indicators of the category Personal Development have increased, be it modestly. However, the largest contribution to the progress comes from Employment and Public Debt, thanks to a worldwide growth of the economy during the period considered.

The bad news is that some issues which may be of decisive importance for this century, are deteriorating. In spite of all plans and targets, the increase in renewable energy production does not keep in step with the rapidly growing energy consumption, resulting in a decrease of the score for the indicator Consumption of Renewable Energy. The emission of greenhouse gases has, also very contrary to all targets set, further increased, resulting in a decrease of the score for this indicator. Mid November 2008 the IEA published its World Energy Outlook, projecting a further growth of the global energy consumption by 45% till 2030. It states that drastic measures are needed to limit – if possible at all – the global warming to the generally accepted rise by 2° C.

Current trends in energy supply and consumption are patently unsustainable – environmentally, economically and socially – they can and must be altered. ... [If not,] greenhouse gas emissions would be driven up inexorably, putting the world on track for an eventual global temperature increase of up to 6° C.

*Nobuo Tanaka, executive director IEA
World Energy Outlook 2008*

Of all indicators the Ecological Footprint shows the largest decrease in score. Furthermore there is a decrease in the score for Income Distribution, expressing a growing inequality in income distribution.

Priorities

Each country will set its own priorities to achieve progress on its way to a sustainable society. This process can be supported by the results of the SSI-2008. On a worldwide scale it is obvious that the direction of indica-

tors that now are in decline, should be reversed urgently to avoid further deterioration. This is particularly important for Renewable Energy and Emission of Greenhouse Gases, as well as for Ecological Footprint and Income Distribution. Many are convinced of the necessity for a structural change with respect to Renewables and Emission of Greenhouse Gases. Time has come for action, if it's not already too late.

Inequality in Income Distribution, though showing only a slight decrease so far, is still growing in many countries and may become a possible threat for a well-balanced society in these countries.

Special attention is also needed for the indicator with the lowest score: Waste Recycling. This does not alter the fact that actually all indicators need attention, in one region more than in another.

Lack of data

The lack of reliable and up to date data still is a serious handicap for regular measuring and monitoring. Worldwide arrangements for a significant improvement in this respect are thus urgently required.