

Contact: Zachary A. Wendling, Ph.D., +1 (203) 436-9566 or epi@yale.edu

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2020 ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE INDEX FINDS
DECARBONIZATION PROPELS COUNTRIES TO TOP SUSTAINABILITY RANKINGS

*Denmark rises to #1 in the rankings,
while Malta and Portugal place near the bottom of EU countries*

Online release event:

Results from the 2020 Environmental Performance Index will be released online and live from Yale and Columbia universities on Thursday, June 4 at 11:00 a.m. EDT. Panelists from the research team will be joined by ministers from the Danish government. [View recording here.](#)

NEW HAVEN, Conn. — Denmark emerges at the top of the 2020 [Environmental Performance Index](#) (EPI), according to researchers at Yale and Columbia universities who produce this biennial scorecard of national results on a range of sustainability issues. Commenting on the rankings, Yale professor Dan Esty, who directs the Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy that co-produces the EPI, observed that “our analysis suggests that countries with broad-based sustainability efforts and particular emphasis on decarbonizing their economies come out at the top of the pack.”

Now in its 22nd year, the EPI report has become the premier metrics framework for global environmental policy analysis – ranking 180 countries on 32 performance indicators across 11 issue categories covering environmental health and ecosystem vitality. The 2020 EPI features new metrics that gauge waste management, carbon dioxide emissions from land cover change, and emissions of fluorinated gases – all important drivers of climate change. Project director Zach Wendling noted that “the expanded issue coverage promises to deepen the global capacity for data-driven environmental policymaking, clarifying sustainability leaders and laggards, and helping to identify best policy practices.”

Denmark’s #1 ranking reflects strong performance across nearly all issues tracked by the EPI. Other nations in the top tier include Luxembourg, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and

France. [Beyond providing issue-by-issue and country-by-country results](#), the 2020 EPI offers new insights into the factors associated with success on environmental sustainability goals. As **Alex de Sherbinin of Columbia's Earth Institute**, one of the lead authors of the 2020 EPI, explained, “**good governance more than any other** factor separates the nations that are moving toward a sustainable future from those which are not.” High-scoring countries generally exhibit long-standing commitments and carefully constructed programs to protect public health, conserve natural resources, and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Denmark excels in almost every indicator of environmental health, having long made significant commitments to air quality, advanced sanitation, and safe drinking water. The **country also stands out in solid waste management, with virtually all of the nation's waste** being recycled, composted, or incinerated. In addition, Denmark leads the world in the breadth and depth of its programs to tackle climate change, including a recently announced target to cut greenhouse gas emissions 70% by 2030.

Although many nations in Europe receive top scores in the 2020 EPI, every country has room to further improve. For example, while the United Kingdom ranks 4th overall both in the region and across the world, it received the lowest score for fisheries management of any Western European country. Portugal lags behind its neighbors on many environmental issues, notably climate change (44th globally) and ecosystem services (174th globally). Low EPI scores suggest a need for national sustainability efforts on a number of fronts, including air and water pollution, biodiversity protection, and the transition to a clean energy future. As the 2020 EPI builds on data published in 2019 and collected earlier, the results do not capture impacts from very recent events, including the burning of the Brazilian Amazon, wildfires in Australia, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

2020 EPI Global Trends

The 2020 EPI reveals that **global progress on climate change has been halting**. The Index's metrics on CO₂ emissions from land cover change and black carbon emission growth rates show that critical aspects of the battle to address climate change are trending in the wrong direction.

Over the last decade, many European countries have demonstrated more ambitious climate policies than the rest of the world, but EPI climate change scores for Portugal, Germany, and Belgium have declined. Meeting the goals set out in the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement requires sustained cuts in emissions of all greenhouse gases, and the 2020 EPI finds that no country is decarbonizing quickly enough. Some countries do excel on individual greenhouse gas reductions, most notably Denmark with respect to CO₂ emissions, the UK on methane, and Norway on fluorinated gases. To spread best practices around the world, policymakers must pay greater attention to how climate leaders achieve success. Such lessons can be drawn from European countries that have recently made notable improvements in climate change mitigation, such as Croatia, Finland, and Luxembourg.

Taking into account historic data on environmental performance, the 2020 Index also recognizes countries that have made significant progress over the past decade. Many countries have improved health outcomes related to sanitation, drinking water, and indoor air pollution, demonstrating that investments in public health can translate into rapid advancements in human well-being. Environmental health gains can be traced to successful campaigns to reduce household use of solid fuels in a number of countries, particularly in the Middle East. Such efforts must be expanded to all countries, especially as the world tackles persistent problems like poor air quality. In the 2020 EPI, Italy and Portugal receive the lowest environmental health scores in Western Europe. Worldwide, the report makes it clear that hundreds of millions of people still suffer from dangerous levels of air pollution, most notably in Pakistan, India, and Nepal.

Performance on protecting and enhancing the vitality of ecosystems reveals both gains and stubborn challenges. Croatia, Malta, and Finland substantially improved in the protection of biodiversity and habitat. On some issues, the world community is doing well, while a few countries are trending in the wrong direction. Slovenia, Portugal, and Italy, for example, have experienced the most deforestation in the region in the last ten years. Fisheries are also in global decline, with significant trouble noted in a range of countries including Bahrain, Argentina, and Australia – and in Latvia, regionally.

Explaining EPI Results

At every level of development, some countries achieve scores that exceed peer nations with similar economic circumstances. Analysis of the factors underlying the 2020 EPI rankings makes it clear that sustainable development requires not only economic prosperity to generate the funds required for investments in public health and environmental infrastructure but also careful management of the pollution threats and natural resource management challenges that emerge from industrialization and urbanization. This analysis demonstrates that positive environmental performance requires good governance, including a strong rule of law, vibrant public engagement, an independent media, and well-crafted regulations.

EPI and Global Sustainability Data

The EPI builds on the best available global data from international research entities, such as the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, the World Resources Institute, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, CSIRO, the [Mullion Group](#), and the Sea Around Us Project at the University of British Columbia, as well as from international organizations like the World Bank and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Complete methods, data, and results – including those for individual countries – are available online at epi.yale.edu. The EPI team is dedicated to transparency and constant improvement and invites critique and commentary from the global community.

The push for better data analytics as a foundation for policy choices has gained momentum in recent years, particularly after the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. And while more environmental data have become available, the EPI research team decries the lack of methodologically rigorous and globally comprehensive indicators on a number of fundamental issues including wetlands protection, toxic waste management, and groundwater quality and availability.

About the Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy

[The Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy](#) advances fresh thinking and analytically rigorous approaches to environmental decision-making across disciplines, sectors, and boundaries. In addition to its research activities, the Center aims to serve as a locus for connection and collaboration for all members of the Yale University community who are interested in environmental law and policy issues. The Center supports a wide-ranging program of teaching, research, and outreach on local, regional, national, and global pollution control and natural resource management issues. These efforts involve faculty, staff, and student collaboration and are aimed at shaping academic thinking and policymaking in the public, private, and NGO sectors.

About the Columbia Center for International Earth Science Information Network

[The Center for International Earth Science Information Network](#) (CIESIN) is part of the Earth Institute at Columbia University. CIESIN works at the intersection of the social, natural, and information sciences, and specializes in online data and information management, spatial data integration and training, and interdisciplinary research related to human interactions in the environment. Since 1989, scientists, decision-makers, and the public have relied on the information resources at CIESIN to better understand the changing relationship between **human beings and the environment**. From its offices at Columbia's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory campus in Palisades, New York, CIESIN continues to focus on applying state-of-the-art information technology to pressing interdisciplinary data, information, and research problems related to human interactions in the environment.

Contact:

Zachary A. Wendling, Ph.D.

Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy

epi@yale.edu

+1 (203) 436-9566

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