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Human Development Report Shows Great Gains, and Some Slides

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR, 4 November 2010

UNITED NATIONS — The world has made significant progress in income, education and health over the past 40 years, but the gains have been uneven and in some places war and the ravages of AIDS shortened life spans, according to a [United Nations](#) report on Thursday.

Over all, average life expectancy around the globe jumped to 70 years in 2010, up from 59 in 1970. School enrollment through high school reached 70 percent of eligible pupils, up from 55 percent, and average per capita income doubled to more than \$10,000 in the 135 countries for which numbers were available. The statistics cover about 92 percent of the world's population.

While the broad measures advanced globally, life expectancy declined in nine countries and improved by varying degrees in others. Arab states measured an 18-year jump in life span, according to [the report](#), while the average for people in sub-Saharan Africa increased by 8 years.

The authors of the report said the changes among such a variety of nations underscored that there was no one policy answer to the question of development. “There are no universal prescriptions which we can see taking effect in all of the countries,” said Jeni Klugman, the lead author.

Even within countries, the progress was sometimes asymmetrical. China jumped way up the income scale, registering a 2,000 percent increase in daily wages, but did not improve markedly in education or health, the authors said. On the other hand, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria managed to do both, broadening access to health and education, and improving average income, though disparities remained.

In certain African nations — the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Zambia, [Zimbabwe](#), Lesotho and Swaziland — life expectancy decreased because of the AIDS epidemic or war, the report found.

But in some parts of the former Soviet Union where life spans shortened, specifically Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, the reasons were harder to gauge. The report noted that alcohol consumption combined with the stress of changing to a market economy was the likely cause.

The countries improving most since 1970 are Oman, China, Nepal, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Laos, Tunisia, South Korea, Algeria and Morocco.

The Arab gulf state of Oman benefited from a huge jump in income from oil and a coup that removed an aging ruler who had opposed basic services like roads and telephones. In 1970, for example, the country had three elementary schools and one vocational institute, the report noted, and a child born in 1975 had a 10 percent chance of dying before reaching its first birthday. Now, only 1 percent of such infants die, while elementary school enrollment has reached 100 percent and secondary school 90 percent.

Developed nations still ranked the highest in terms of overall well-being, particularly Norway, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Ireland, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, Canada, Sweden and Germany.

The United States, which once dominated the top of all the indexes, has gradually been shifting downward. Some of that slide is linked to the introduction of new measurements — this year's report included a ranking for gender equality, for example, in which the United States ranked 37th. It does poorly in relation to its income peers in terms of the number of women in Congress, as well as on maternal health.

Some countries have essentially switched places since 1970. In Africa, Benin had a life expectancy of 45.5 in 1970, while Zimbabwe's was 54.9. But since then, it rose to 62 years in Benin and dropped to 47 in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is one of three countries — along with Congo and Zambia — that rank lower now over all than in 1970, with Zimbabwe at the very bottom of the list.

Zimbabwe was once one of the continent's most promising nations, known as a regional breadbasket whose people were highly literate. But it now has the lowest per capita income of the countries and territories for which the United Nations has data, two-fifths lower than the second worst-off nation, Congo.

Zimbabwe's per capita gross domestic product peaked in 1998, and has plunged since then to a level far below what it was in 1970.

President [Robert Mugabe](#), 86, and his state-controlled media daily blame Western economic sanctions for the impoverishment of Zimbabweans, but most economists say mismanagement caused economic collapse.

Celia Dugger contributed reporting from Johannesburg.