

Norway has best quality of life: UN report

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

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UNITED NATIONS (AFP) - The going only seems to get better in Norway which on Thursday was named by the United Nations as the country with the best quality of life for a record-matching eighth time.



The UN's annual A-to-Z of global wealth, poverty, health and education highlighted in its 20th anniversary edition though that despite "growth surges" in the Asia-Pacific region, it is becoming ever more difficult to break into the rich club of nations.

Oil-rich Norway -- with its 81.0 years of life expectancy, average annual income of 58,810 dollars and 12.6 years of schooling -- has now topped the Human Development Index (HDI) for all but two years since 2001.

It is not the best in any individual category -- average income in Liechtenstein for example is a wallet-busting 81,011 dollars -- but Norway's all-round performance gave it a crushing superiority in the UN Development Programme (UNDP) annual rankings.

Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Ireland took the following places in the top five. Zimbabwe came bottom of the 169 nations ranked, behind Mozambique, Burundi, Niger and Democratic Republic of Congo.

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Zimbabwe, where in stark contrast life expectancy is just 47 years and per capita income 176 dollars, has come bottom of the table for the past five years.

DR Congo, Zambia and Zimbabwe have seen their HDI value fall below 1970 levels in the four decades since, said the study.

"These countries offer lessons on the devastating impact of conflict, the AIDS epidemic and economic and political mismanagement," said UNDP administrator Helen Clarke, the former New Zealand prime minister.

The study aims to give a broader assessment of quality of life than just income -- by including, health, education, gender equality and political freedom -- and its lead writer Jeni Klugman said most of the world has seen "dramatic progress" since 1970.

Average life expectancy rose from 59 to 70 years, primary school enrollment grew from 55 to 70 percent, and per capita incomes doubled to more than 10,000 dollars. Many of the poorest countries achieved some of the greatest gains, she said.

"Overall they are healthier, more educated and wealthier and more power to appoint and hold their leaders accountable than ever before," Klugman added.

"But some countries have suffered serious setbacks, particularly in health -- sometimes erasing the gains of several decades," Klugman added.

"The recent global financial crisis was a shock for many, especially for those who have lost their jobs."

The nations which have risen most up the rankings in the 20 years that the report has been produced include "growth miracles" such as China, which has risen eight places in the last five

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years to 89th, Indonesia and South Korea.

But there is also Nepal, Oman and Tunisia "where progress in the non-income dimensions of human development has been equally remarkable," the study said.

The new good life nations have taken different paths to success.

"Many countries have done well in the long term by emphasizing health and education; others have strived for rapid economic growth, though sometimes with a high cost to environmental sustainability."

In six sub-Saharan African countries and three in the former Soviet Union, life expectancy is now below 1970 levels. Mainly because of HIV and tougher conditions for adults in former communist nations.

And even though incomes have grown dramatically, the poor nations are not necessarily making the same economic strides as they are in health and education.

"On average rich countries have grown faster than poor ones over the past 40 years.

"The divide between developed and developing countries persists: a small subset of countries has remained at the top of the world income distribution and only a handful of countries that started out poor have joined that high income group," the report concluded.

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