

The Best Countries in the World; [Atlantic Edition]

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Abstract (Article Summary)

For years the U.N. Development Program has measured human progress by including measures of literacy and life expectancy alongside per capita income. On the combined Human Development Index, Norway and Sweden ranked first and second in 2004 out of 175 countries, with the United States coming in eighth, and the larger countries of continental Europe ranked in the teens. Nordic health and wealth build on high-quality governance. These are also the countries where corruption finds zero tolerance. The global- corruption watchdog Transparency International ranks Finland, Iceland and Denmark right at the top of the list of the world's "cleanest" governments. France and Spain are tied for 23rd.

Full Text (555 words)

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Every place on the planet has something of unique beauty and significance to contribute to the "good life" on earth. Africa's open savannas awaken our sensibilities as do few places on the planet. Manhattan, Shanghai and Paris transport us to the heights of urban achievement. The verdant, terraced paddy fields of Southeast Asia show us life in rural areas of unsurpassed beauty. We would search in vain, therefore, for a single "best" spot on the planet.

Yet within this priceless diversity, certain places have solved problems of health, wealth and social cooperation more effectively than others. In some places the population boasts a life expectancy of 80 years, while in others a newborn can expect to survive only half that long. The top sixth of humanity boasts high incomes unprecedented in history, while the bottom sixth struggles for daily survival.

What makes a country work? The question is more pressing than ever, with Iraq and Afghanistan in the middle of wrenching transitions. While big countries like the United States like to tout their achievements, it is the smaller nations of northern Europe that can boast the greatest success in solving the problems of balancing competition and cooperation, capitalism and social security. Consider just about any social indicator--income per capita, health, democracy, economic competitiveness, environmental consciousness, honesty--and the Nordic world of Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland is sure to shine. These are small countries with homogeneous populations. Their incredible successes are sometimes easily put aside as "special cases." Yet they have much to tell bigger nations about paths to the good life.

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Broadly speaking, the Nordic region took three basic decisions. First, it prioritized education, study and science. Second, it decided that it would leave no countryman behind. Social insurance-- pensions, public health care, public education--became a basic shared commitment in each of these countries. And third, the region built a vigorous private sector. Ericsson and Nokia are not government creations. Outsiders predicted that the Nordics' high tax rates would stifle their private sectors, but the region has an enviable record not just of innovation but of wringing profits out of high-tech breakthroughs. And while these countries benefit from natural resources--fish, oil and gas, timber, iron ore--they do not rely on these resources for their long-term economic future. Iceland does not merely sell fish to the world. It sells know-how about sustainable fisheries management.

The beauty of globalization is that every corner of the world can learn from the others. A little less ideology, and a little more openness to the ideas adopted by the Nordic states, would do us all a world of good.

[Illustration]

Caption: Providing the good life is every country's goal, but some soar higher
