New index reveals unexpected leaders in water, sanitation progress

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El Salvador, Niger, and Pakistan are performing better in improving water and sanitation for their citizens than industrial giants like Russia and Brazil according to the new WaSH Performance Index developed by The Water Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Gillings School of Global Public Health. The new index to be released Friday, May 8 during a live webcast shows which countries are leaders in improving access to water and sanitation for their citizens. Sub-Saharan Africa countries including Mali, South Africa, and Ethiopia are also among the top performers world-wide in spite of modest resources.

The WaSH Performance Index evaluates country performance in improving access to water and sanitation and in eroding inequalities in access. High-performing countries for 2015 are those that achieved significant improvement in recent years compared to their peers. These include El Salvador, Niger, Egypt, Maldives, and Pakistan. Low-performing countries are those that showed stagnation or decline in recent years compared to their peers, including the Dominican Republic, the Gambia, Ghana, Samoa, and Timor-Leste.

Among the most populated countries in the world, Pakistan, China, and Nigeria were top performers (ranked 5, 11, and 18 respectively). Conversely, Russia, the Philippines and India were bottom performers (ranked 72, 83, and 92). India's ranking as a bottom-performer predates the recent launch of the "Clean India Mission" by Prime Minister Modi.

The Index is the first measure to compare countries according to the human rights principle of "progressive realization"—the obligation of every country to take appropriate measures towards the full realization of economic, social and cultural rights to the maximum of their available resources. De Albuquerque, a human rights lawyer, says the Index brings together technical analysis of water and sanitation progress and human rights. "This Index uses data to look at progress in water and sanitation in a new way," she said. "Though we routinely measure water and sanitation coverage worldwide, this is the first use of the data to fairly rank and compare how countries are fulfilling their obligation to progressively improve these services or, in other words, the efforts they are making compared to their peers."

The Index compares countries of all sizes and income levels. By comparing how they are improving water and sanitation compared to best-in-class countries at similar levels of development, the Index provides a fair comparison of progress on water and sanitation. Using this method, the report revealed that a country's Gross Domestic Product did not determine performance in improving water and sanitation for its citizens. Jamie Bartram, director of The Water Institute at UNC and co-author of the report, says that gives him a great deal of optimism.

"This means that even countries with limited resources can make great strides if they have the right programs in place," Bartram said. "National governments, NGOs, and aid agencies can direct their resources toward building systems and capacity for action in countries that are lagging, and toward implementation where those capacities are in place and performing."

Ryan Cronk, a UNC-Chapel Hill PhD student in environmental sciences and engineering, who co-authored the report, says the Index helps identify strengths and weaknesses to spur response.

"Many countries can and should do better," Cronk said. "By providing this fair comparison, we can laud top performers and help others get on track to improve the health and quality of life of their population."

The research team, which also includes Kaida...
Liang, project manager at The Water Institute, Jeanne Luh, post-doctoral scholar at The Water Institute, and Dr. Ben Meier, assistant professor in the department of public policy, developed the Index with funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to identify opportunities to increase country performance and inform policy development. De Albuquerque says it will be a useful tool for the UN's human rights machinery, as the treaty bodies. "These rankings should be reviewed by treaty bodies, Special Procedures of the UN's Human Rights Council, and at the UN's Universal Periodic Review of countries' human rights performance to evaluate the true state of progressive realization of the human right to water and sanitation in countries world-wide."

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill


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