



# The Promise of Global Indices

In an era of heightened global competition and interdependence, countries are under increasing pressure to enhance their performance across key sectors to remain competitive, attract investment and improve the quality of life for their citizens. International indices have become essential tools for assessing performance and progress and comparing achievements in areas like education, healthcare, economic performance and environmental sustainability.

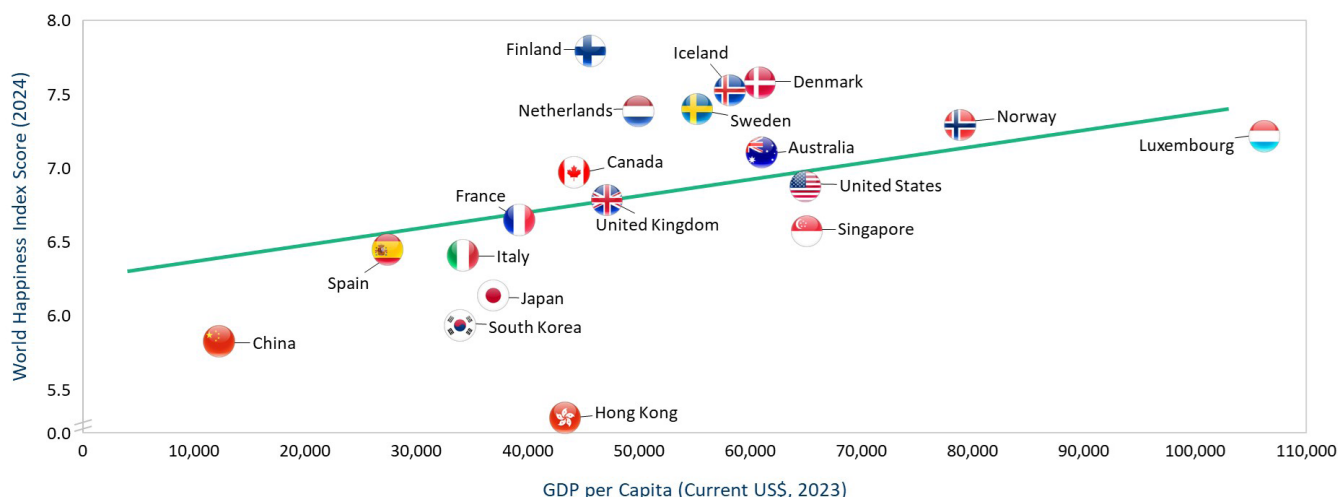
These benchmarks significantly impact a nation's reputation, economic development and citizens' wellbeing. They also signal a nation's credibility on the issues and empower it to weigh in on and shape global policies, as seen in Denmark's prominent role in climate change negotiations (e.g. COP29) due to its strong performance on the Environmental Performance Index ("EPI").<sup>1</sup>

Excelling in some of these global metrics is often linked to economic growth and investment appeal (see figure 1). Countries with high scores on the Corruption Perceptions Index, like Singapore, tend to garner investor trust and attract foreign capital. Similarly, South Korea's emergence as a global technology leader coincides with its rise in innovation rankings, reflecting how strong performance on key indices can align with economic transformation and increased global influence. In fact, South Korea, named the world's most innovative country in the 2021 Bloomberg Innovation Index, climbed four spots to sixth in the 2024 Global Innovation Index ("GII"), surpassing Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark. Moreover, top-performing countries may gain greater access to global resources, development funding and partnerships, further accelerating their growth.

Beyond economic benefits, prioritizing improvements on global indices often leads governments to invest in public services, enhancing citizens' quality of life and fostering societal stability. These efforts build public trust in institutions and contribute to a resilient and sustainable society. Success on global metrics not only elevates a country's international standing but also lays the foundation for long-term prosperity and collaboration.



FIGURE 1 — CORRELATION BETWEEN GDP PER CAPITA AND WORLD HAPPINESS INDEX



Source: Happiness Report 2023, Trading Economics, FTI Consulting Analysis

## Hard Work Pays Off: How Countries Have Improved Their Performance on International Indices.

Several countries have adopted national frameworks to target and improve their performance on specific international indices.

### Saudi Arabia's Journey to Improve the EGDI

Saudi Arabia has made significant progress in improving its score and rank on the UN E-Government Development Index ("EGDI"), a composite indicator used by the United Nations to assess the effectiveness of digital government services around the world. Improving the EGDI score was a key part of Vision 2030, driving initiatives for a comprehensive digital government.

In 2018, Saudi Arabia ranked 52nd on the EDGI, with a score of 0.7119. Challenges included fragmented digital services, limited connectivity, and low citizen engagement. Driven by Vision 2030's emphasis on digital transformation, the Kingdom sought to streamline services, bridge the digital divide and enhance global competitiveness, promising efficiency, inclusion and a stronger international standing.

**The country aimed to achieve a score of 0.915 on the EGDI by 2030; remarkably, it surpassed this target by 2024, achieving a score of 0.9602 and improving its rank from 52 in 2018 to 6 in 2024 – rising 46 places in just six years.**

To reach this goal, Saudi Arabia pursued efforts across various sub-indices of the EGDI: the Online Service Index ("OSI"), Telecommunications Infrastructure Index (TII), Human Capital Index (HCI), and E-Participation Index. Investments in digital infrastructure, skills

development and citizen engagement collectively led to significant improvements in the EGDI score.

The country's digital transformation focused on enhancing access to government services through developing user-friendly platforms. For example, the National Platform for Government Services became a central hub, allowing users to access a wide variety of government services across multiple sectors, significantly boosting the OSI score. Additionally, continuous enhancements to Absher, a digital government services platform focused on individual services, expanded the range of offerings to improve accessibility and efficiency. These improvements included services like e-visa applications and vehicle registration, making it easier for citizens and residents to manage personal documentation and authorizations.

Investments in telecommunications infrastructure have also been crucial to Saudi Arabia's progress in digital transformation. A key initiative, the 5G Taskforce, brought together public and private sector stakeholders to address technical challenges, optimize network infrastructure and position Saudi Arabia as a regional leader in 5G connectivity. Additionally, the Smart Government Strategy 2020-2024 reinforced this progress by enabling the usage of advanced technologies across the Kingdom.

Developing digital skills among the population was crucial for Saudi Arabia's e-government advancement. The Future Skills Program, launched by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology ("MCIT"), equipped citizens with essential digital skills through specialized training programs in areas such as coding, cybersecurity and AI – boosting digital literacy and preparing a digitally skilled workforce. Encouraging

public engagement in decision-making was another important part of Saudi Arabia's EGD I improvement. The national E-Participation initiative provided a channel for citizens to offer feedback on proposed regulations and policies, fostering transparency and inclusion.

### Singapore's Global Excellence in Programme for International Student Assessment ("PISA")

**Before Singapore's education system achieved global recognition, it faced challenges that included limited resources, a focus on rote learning and a curriculum that did not adequately prepare students for a rapidly changing world.**

To address these challenges, Singapore has strategically aligned its education system with international indices to drive improvements. Foundational initiatives, such as the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore ("CDIS") begun in 1980, laid the groundwork for a curriculum tailored to national needs. Subsequent reforms, like the "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" ("TSLN") initiative in 1997 and the "Teach Less, Learn More" ("TLLM") policy in 2004, emphasized critical thinking, creativity and student engagement. Singapore's participation in the 2009 PISA assessment provided an opportunity to benchmark its progress, with students ranking among the top globally in reading (**5th**), mathematics (**2nd**) and science (**4th**). These results affirmed the effectiveness of its reforms and demonstrated alignment with PISA's focus on students' ability to apply their knowledge to real-world situations in problem-solving, critical thinking.

Using PISA findings as a roadmap, Singapore continued to refine its strategies to strengthen its global standing in education. Initiatives like the National Reading Movement ("NRM") in 2016 encouraged nationwide reading to enhance literacy and critical thinking, aligning

with skills measured by international assessments. Programs such as the Applied Learning Programme ("ALP") connected academic knowledge to real-world applications through inquiry-based and project-based learning, particularly in STEM and the humanities. Additionally, the Character and Citizenship Education ("CCE") program emphasized social-emotional development, further aligning with indicators that value holistic education and adaptability.

By leveraging PISA assessments to evaluate and adjust its strategies, Singapore achieved exceptional results in the 2022 PISA domain of creative thinking, **ranking 1st among 64 participating education systems. This achievement reflects the success of its long-term focus on innovation and adaptability.** At the same time, the Ministry of Education used international benchmarks to identify areas for improvement, such as parental support and physical activity, demonstrating Singapore's commitment not only to excel in global rankings but also to ensure sustainable and balanced development in its education sector.

### The UAE's Path to Global Innovation Index Leadership

**Before the UAE became a global leader in innovation, it faced challenges that included gaps in intellectual property laws, infrastructure limitations for a knowledge-based economy and a workforce lacking alignment with emerging skills needs.**

The UAE's Vision 2021 emphasized innovation as a cornerstone under the theme "United in Knowledge", which focused on empowering Emiratis to drive a competitive, knowledge-based economy. Launched in 2010, it aimed to position the UAE among the most innovative nations, nurturing a culture of research,





development and technological advancement to stimulate economic growth and diversification.

In 2014, building on this foundation, the UAE launched its National Innovation Strategy, using the GII to lay the strategy's baseline and set corresponding objectives. The GII, published by the World Intellectual Property Organization ("WIPO") in collaboration with INSEAD and Cornell University, is a comprehensive tool for evaluating the innovation performance of countries around the world. The UAE's strategy laid out specific objectives, like enhancing the regulatory environment for innovation, advancing technology infrastructure and promoting high-quality education systems to foster a skilled workforce – objectives aligned with various components of the GII.

In 2014, the UAE was ranked 36 globally on the GII, marking it as the top performer in the Middle East and North Africa region. **By 2022, the UAE had made significant strides, reaching 31 globally.** The GII assesses several components that contribute to a country's innovation capacity, such as institutions, infrastructure, market sophistication, business sophistication, knowledge and technology output, and creative output. Between 2014 and 2022, the UAE made notable improvements in nearly all of these areas: enhancing its regulatory framework with an updated patent law and the Research and Development Governance Policy, equipping the workforce with skills essential for a rapidly advancing economy through the Advanced Skills Strategy, developing the roadmap to early deployment of fifth-generation ("5G") networks, launching Dubai Digital Park, a smart district designed to attract foreign direct investment in high-tech industries, implementing the Dubai Future Accelerators ("DFA") program to connect innovative companies with top government officials and private sector leaders, and offering through the Science in Progress program a series of virtual scientific sessions hosted by the Emirates Scientists Council and the Mohammed bin Rashid Academy of Scientists ("MBRAS").

## Room For Improvement: How Governments Can Enhance Their Performance on International Indices.

To improve international rankings, governments need a structured and comprehensive framework that aligns national objectives with global indices, addressing sector-specific weaknesses through strategic planning and execution. Key steps include:



- **Identifying and Prioritizing Indicators:** Governments should identify global indicators that align with their development goals, such as economic growth or environmental sustainability. Prioritization involves managing trade-offs between competing goals, potentially using tools like Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis ("MCDA") to ensure a balanced approach that fosters both short-term and long-term sustainability.
- **Developing Actionable Strategies:** Detailed, sector-specific plans should target key areas like education, healthcare or the environment, with measurable objectives that align with national goals. Strong governance and coordination mechanisms, such as a central performance unit, are essential to oversee cross-sectoral efforts and ensure alignment across national, regional and local levels.
- **Ensuring Data-Driven Performance and Resilience:** Robust data systems are critical for



tracking progress and making evidence-based adjustments. Governments should focus on transparent communication with international organizations, capacity building for public officials and proactive risk management to address potential disruptions while maintaining momentum.

By following this focused framework, governments can strengthen their global standing, achieve balanced national development and ensure sustainable progress across key indicators.

### The Road Ahead: What Are the Key Risks?

Implementing a national framework to enhance international rankings can yield significant benefits but comes with various risks at every stage, from strategy development to execution and impact measurement. In the design phase, the primary risks include an overemphasis on rankings that can lead to short-term policies focused on optics rather than addressing structural issues. This approach may neglect meaningful progress, undermining long-term development. Additionally, resource allocation conflicts can arise as prioritizing one area may divert essential resources from others, threatening a balanced and holistic approach to national development.

During the execution phase, challenges such as limited

institutional capacity, inefficient governance, and weak expertise can hinder reform efforts, making it difficult to achieve intended improvements. Public institutions and officials may face excessive pressure to deliver quick results, which can lead to burnout, inefficiency and reduced public service quality. Moreover, political and bureaucratic resistance may obstruct reforms, requiring strong leadership and transparent communication to overcome entrenched opposition.

The performance measurement and impact assessment stage introduces risks related to data accuracy and integrity. Governments may struggle with flawed or incomplete data collection, making it hard to monitor progress effectively. Furthermore, the temptation to manipulate data for better rankings can damage credibility and trust, both domestically and internationally. External factors, such as global economic conditions, can also influence rankings, leaving governments vulnerable despite internal efforts.

Lastly, governments must consider the broader social implications of reforms aimed at improving rankings. Rapid changes can inadvertently result in unemployment or inequality, leading to public dissatisfaction and social instability. Neglecting these social dimensions can undermine the success of reforms, highlighting the importance of a balanced, sustainable approach to national development that aligns with both international and domestic priorities.

## Final Thoughts

The significance of a comprehensive national plan aimed at improving a country's performance on international indices cannot be overstated. Such a plan not only elevates a nation's global standing but also may serve as a powerful driver of socioeconomic development, attracting foreign investment and enhancing the wellbeing of its citizens. By drawing inspiration from the success stories of countries like Saudi Arabia, Singapore and the UAE, governments can craft frameworks that skilfully balance competing priorities, engage diverse stakeholders and effectively generate impactful progress.

However, it is crucial for governments to recognize that this process comes with inherent challenges at every stage. To mitigate these risks, governments must adopt a balanced, holistic approach, ensuring that their strategies for enhancing international rankings are sustainable and closely aligned with both long-term national development objectives and the welfare of their citizens.

Ultimately, global rankings are a reflection of real satisfaction and progress on the ground, and if a nation pursues superficial gains without achieving genuine advancements, the eventual exposure of these shortcomings may have a more damaging effect than the original rank. Therefore, the true focus of such frameworks should always be on converting improvements in global rankings into tangible, meaningful progress for the people they serve.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The EPI is a method of quantifying and numerically marking the environmental performance of a state's policies, with Denmark ranking 10 <https://global-reports.23degrees.eu/epi/root>

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