The Social Progress of Nations Revisited

Richard J. Estes
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The Social Progress of Nations Revisited

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Abstract
Social progress and well-being throughout the world has arrived at a critical turning point. Following decades of social losses among the world’s poorest developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the majority of these and other nations now are experiencing significant social gains. Using the Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP18), the author traces the net social gains and social losses experienced by most the world’s nations over a 50-year time, ranging from 1970 to the present. The data reported draw on the author’s extensive data base of historical and contemporary social indicators and links the current study to his and other reports of social progress and well-being that have been published this period. Data are reported at four levels of analysis, i.e., that of the world-as-a-whole, regional (continental) data, subregional data using the preceding and, finally, for selected countries for which the changes have been most remarkable. The net social gains on the WISP18 and earlier version of the WISP portray very positive outcomes for the 162 countries included in the study (representing 95% of the world’s total population) for both the near- and long-term.

Keywords
International · Comparative · Social indicators · Quality of life · Well-being · 50-Year time-series study · Management Institute of Quality of Life Studies (MIQOLS)

1 Introduction
Nations are dynamic entities that are constantly changing in response to the needs of their populations as well to the many stresses that are placed on their often-strained socio-economic-political systems (Acemoglu and Robinson 2013; CIA 2018; Rawlinson 1881/2018). Such stresses may be either acute or recurrent and reach especially high levels during periods of either internal conflicts or major threats to their borders integrity or political leadership from without (CIA 2018). Some nations, such as Israel, experience chronic threats to the integrity of their right to exist while others confront especially severe challenges associated with diversity-related social conflict (the contemporary situation in Iraq and Syria), environmental stresses (Bangladesh), the slow pace of technological innovation (island nations of the Pacific) as well as underdevelopment of both

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their human capital or natural resources, or both as is the situation within many of the poorest nations of developing Africa, Asia, and Latin America (International Monetary Fund 2018b; UNDP 2018; World Bank 2018).

Social progress is an outcome that emphasizes the changing capacity of nations to satisfy at least the basic social and material needs of their typically increasing growing populations (Estes and Morgan 1976). Ideally, nations, especially those that are rooted in ancient cultures, focus well beyond the basic needs of their populations and emphasize the attainment of steady advances over time in the political, economic, technological, and environmental needs of both their peoples and their nations-as-a-whole (Tiliouine and Estes 2016). The world’s most successful nations emphasize the attainment of these basic and advanced objectives through resolution of diversity-related social conflict within their borders and peaceful relations with their neighboring states. Many nations can accomplish these nations at a rapid pace, but others require more time and both financial and technical assistance from other nations (UNDP 2016). Countries with ancient cultures have more to build on as they see to achieve development through peace, but these outcomes also can be attained by new or recently autonomous nations that have freed themselves from colonialism or domination by other occupying or controlling nations. The recently independent countries of North Africa and Central Asia offer exemplars of these dynamics (Shaikin and Estes 2018).

Weak social, political, and social welfare infrastructure also challenge the internal and external capacity of many of the world’s nations (Freedom House 2018; Fund for Peace 2017a, b, c; International Social Security Association 2018 in 4 volumes). Net social gains or losses in the health, education, and income security sectors have proven to be especially predictive of the capacity of nations to satisfy not only the basic human needs but also their more advanced social, political, economic, technological, environmental, and related sectors of development (United Nations Development Programme 2018; World Bank 2018). The significance of these patterns is reflected in the recently concluded United Nations’ Millennium Development Campaign—2000–2010 (MDGs) and its ambitious successor initiative of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched in 2015 (Hanson et al. 2017).

This paper reviews the extent of 50 years of social challenges and progress that have occurred in 162 of the world’s nations representing 95% of the world’s total population. The paper builds on an extensive body of empirical literature previously reported by the author using five levels of analysis: (a) the world-as-a-whole (Estes and Morgan 1976; Estes 1984, 1988, 1998b, 2010a, b, Estes 2015a); (b) major world regions and continents (Estes 1987, 1995, 1996a, b, 1997, 1998a, 1999, 2004, 2007a, b, 2012a; Inoguchi and Estes 2017); (c) major subregions of these continents (Estes 2012b, 2015a; Estes et al. 2017); (d) selected countries (Estes 2015b, c; Estes et al. 2002); and, (e) socially vulnerable population groups with a special focus on income disparities and poverty (Estes 2014, 2018). Other reports of net national and global social progress have been presented in extensive analysis of the history of social progress, quality of life, and human well-being (Estes and Sirgy 2017, 2018a). A related body of empirical research using this study’s methods has focused on the social, political, economic, and ideological challenges confronting the 54 predominately Islamic societies including the emergence within a subset of these countries of Jihadist-inspired terrorism (Estes and Sirgy 2014; Estes and Tiliouine 2014; Tiliouine and Estes 2016).
This paper has four inter-related objectives:

1. Briefly review the extensive history of international and comparative research on changing patterns worldwide of social development, quality of life and well-being;
2. Summarize the major changes that have occurred in the objective conditions leading to subjective well-being over the 50-year period since 1970 to the present;
3. Make recommendations to consolidating and, where possible, further strengthening the drivers of well-being policies in all regions of the world but special attention given to the widening gap in wealth disparities even in increasingly larger number of absolute poor can move from poverty to at least work-class status; and, finally,
4. Making recommendations concerning the additional contributions that well-being researchers and scholars can make in accelerating the pace of social development, quality of life, and well-being at all levels of socio-political organization.

2 Methods

As stated above, the present study is one in an extensive series of analyses of worldwide, regional, and national social development and well-being trends. The purpose of these studies has been: (1) to identify significant changes in the “adequacy of social provision” occurring throughout the world and within specific continental and geo-political regions; (2) to assess national progress in providing more adequately for the basic social and material needs of the world’s growing population; and (3) to contribute to the creation of a comprehensive policy framework designed for use by governments, nongovernmental organizations, and people themselves for improving the material needs and subjective well-being attainments.

This paper, then, reports a time-series analysis of the social development performances of 162 nations over a near 50-year period since 1970. Particular attention is given in the paper to human-well-being at four levels of analysis: (1) for selected countries; (2) by major geo-political subregions and regions including for North America (N = 2), Oceania (N = 4), Europe (N = 35), Latin America (N = 26), Asia (N = 45), Africa (N = 50). The paper also reports major time-series well-being trends data for the world-as-a-whole. Data also are reported for countries organized by the World Bank’s major economic-political groupings of nations, i.e., development market economies (DMEs, N = 34), member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, N = 21), developing countries (DCs, N = 67), and officially designed by the United Nations least developed countries (LDCs, N = 40). Countries grouped by these international geographic and socio-political levels of development are reported in Table 1.

2.1 Index of Social Progress (ISP)

The primary instrument used in this study is the author’s extensively pre-tested Index of Social Progress (ISP) and its statistically weighted version, the Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP) (Table 2). In its present form the ISP consists of 40 social indicators that

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1 “Adequacy of social provision” refers to the changing capacity of governments to provide for the basic social, material, and other needs of the people living within their borders, e.g., for food, clothing, shelter, and access to at least basic health, education, and social services (Estes 1988: pp. 199–209; Estes and Morgan 1976).
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Countries officially classified by the United Nations as “least developed countries” (United Nations 2018)

*CIS* Commonwealth of Independent States, *DC* developing countries, *DME* developed market economies, *LDC* least developed countries
Table 2  Indicators on the Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP18) by subindex (40 indicators and 10 subindexes). \textit{Source}: Estes (2018, Appendix B)

Index of Social Progress, 2018 (ISP2018, WISP2018) (40 indicators, 10 subindexes)

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{p{10cm}}
\textbf{Education subindex (N = 4)}
Public expenditure on education as percentage of gross domestic product, 2015–2017 (+)  
Primary school completion rate, 2015–2017 (+)  
Secondary school net enrolment rate, 2015–2017 (+)  
Adult literacy rate, 2015–2017 (+)  
\textbf{Health status subindex (N = 6)}
Life expectation at birth, 2015–2017 (+)  
Infant mortality rate, 2015–2017 (−)  
Under-five child mortality rate, 2015–2017 (−)  
Physicians per 100,000 population, 2015–2017 (+)  
Percent of population undernourished, 2015–2017 (−)  
Public expenditure on health as percentage of gross domestic product, 2015–2017 (+)  
\textbf{Women status subindex (N = 4)}
Female adult literacy as percentage of male literacy, 2015–2017 (+)  
Maternal mortality ratio, 2015–2017 (−)  
Female secondary school enrolment as percentage of male enrolment, 2015–2017 (+)  
Seats in parliament held by women as percentage of total, 2015–2017 (+)  
\textbf{Defense effort subindex (N = 1)}
Military expenditures as percentage of gross domestic product, 2015–2017 (−)  
\textbf{Economic subindex (N = 5)}
Per capita gross national income (as measured by purchasing power parity), 2015–2017 (+)  
Percent growth in gross domestic product, 2015–2017 (+)  
Unemployment rate, 2015–2017 (−)  
Total external debt as percentage of gross domestic product, 2015–2017 (−)  
GINI Index score [most recent year (most available year available)] (−)  
\textbf{Demography subindex (N = 3)}
Average annual rate of population growth, 2015–2017 (−)  
Percent of population aged < 15 years, 2015–2017 (−)  
Percent of population aged > 64 years, 2015–2017 (+)  
\textbf{Environmental subindex (N = 3)}
Percentage of nationally protected area, 2015–2017 (+)  
Average annual number of disaster-related deaths, 2015–2017 (−)  
Per capita metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions, 2015–2017 (−)  
\textbf{Social Chaos subindex (N = 6)}
Strength of political rights, 2015–2017 (−)  
Strength of civil liberties, 2015–2017 (−)  
Number of internally displaced persons per 100,000 population, 2015–2017 (−)  
Number of externally displaced persons per 100,000 population, 2015–2017 (−)  
Estimated number of deaths from armed conflicts (low estimate), 2015–2017 (−)  
Perceived Corruption Index, 2015–2017 (+)  
\textbf{Cultural diversity subindex (N = 3)}
Largest percentage of population sharing the same or similar racial/ethnic origins, 2015–2017 (+)
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
are divided among 10 subindexes: Education (N = 4); Health Status (N = 7); Women Status (N = 4); Defense Effort (N = 1); Economic (N = 5); Demographic (N = 3); Environmental (N = 3); Social Chaos (N = 5); Cultural Diversity (N = 3); and Welfare Effort (N = 5). All 40 of the ISP’s indicators in 2018 have been established to be valid indicators of social development and are used regularly in a broad range of development-focused studies conducted by other well-being policy-focused scholars.

## 2.2 Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP)

Owing to the volume of data gathered for the analysis only statistically weighted index (WISP70, WISP80, WISP90, WISP00, WISP10/11, WISP17/18) and subindex scores

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2 Nations characterized by higher level of cultural homogeneity can attain higher levels of social development and quality of life more rapidly than are nations characterized by higher levels of cultural heterogeneity (Binns and Dixon 2012; CIA 2018; Estes 1990; Rowntree and Lewis 2017). This driver of the pace of change in national well-being over time, however, should not be viewed negatively given the enormous richness that cultural diversity adds to the distinctiveness and social richness of countries.
are reported in this paper. The study’s statistical weights were derived through a multi-stage principal component and varimax factor analysis in which indicator and subindex scores were analyzed separately for their relative contribution toward explaining the variance associated with changes in social progress over time (Table 3).

As summarized in the rotated factor loadings reported below, this analysis confirmed the expected multidimensional nature of the ISP2018 and identified the four principal components of the ISP, i.e., those factors with eigenvalues of at least 0.70, which, separately, explained at least 10% of the variance contained in the ISP but which, when considered together, accounted for at least 75% of the total variance. As expected, the four principal components of the ISP2018 were found to be most closely associated with the following:

1. Changes over time in the adequacy of the national social provision (Factor 1 = WISP1);
2. National resources (both environmental and the cultural diversity of the national population) (Factor 2 = WISP2);
3. Expenditures on defense relative to world average military expenditures (which beyond the average point of world expenditures for military and defense purposes represents a major drain on available and future fiscal and even human capital resources) (Factor 3 = WISP3);
4. Economic resources and stresses associated with their resources (Factor 4 = WISP4).

Taken together, these four factors account for 82.4% of the total variance explained by the ISP2018.

Standardized indicator scores (N=40) were multiplied by their respective factor loadings, averaged within their subindex, and the average subindex scores (N=10), in turn, were subjected to a second statistical weighting. A statistically constant of +50 was added to the formula to eliminate the many negative values that resulted for the world’s socially least developed countries (SLDCs) while, at the same time, keeping the scaling system consistent with that used during earlier decades or reporting. The resulting values from this two-stage statistical weighting process formed the basis for computing the composite Weighted Index of Social Progress (WISP) scores as summarized in Table 4.

A fuller explanation of the process leading to the identification of these four factors and the resulting system of subindex statistical weights is available on the website developed in support of the 50-years of research covered in this article (Estes 2019, Appendix A). In additional to providing additional major discussions of the study’s methods, the site all provides index and 10 subindex scores for 162 countries included in the analysis. The site also permits readers to apply their own system of statistical weights to the subindex forms used to form the composite measures.

Table 4 Application of factor loadings to create the WISP18 (N=162). Source: Estes (2018, Appendix A)

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<th>Source: Estes (2018, Appendix A)</th>
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Final statistical weights used in constructing the Weighted Index of Social Progress WISP18

WISP2018 = \((0.456 \times \text{Factor 1}) + (0.169 \times \text{Factor 2}) + (0.128 \times \text{Factor 3}) + (0.245 \times \text{Factor 4})\) + 50

where:

- Factor 1 = \((0.90 \times \text{Health18}) + (0.90 \times \text{Woman18}) - (0.89 \times \text{Demographic18}) + (0.73 \times \text{Education18}) + (0.55 \times \text{Welfare19})\) +
- Factor 2 = \((0.81 \times \text{Cultural Diversity18}) - (0.84 \times \text{Environmental18})\) +
- Factor 3 = \((0.97 \times \text{Defense Effort18})\) +
- Factor 4 = \((0.92 \times \text{Social Chaos18}) + (0.75 \times \text{Economic19})\) + 50
2.3 Data Sources

The majority of the data used in the analysis was obtained from the annual reports supplied by individual countries to specialized agencies of the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme (2018), the World Bank (2018), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018), the International Social Security Association (ISSA 2018), the International Labour Organization (2018), the International Monetary Fund (2018a, b) and other major international data collection and reporting organizations. Data for the Environmental subindex were obtained from the World Resources Institute (2018) and the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (2018). Data for the Social Chaos subindex were obtained from Amnesty International (2018), Freedom House (2018), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2018), the Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute (2018) and Transparency International (2018). Data for the Cultural Diversity subindex were gathered from the CIA World Factbook (2018) and from the work of independent scholars in the fields of comparative language, religion and ethnology. Data sources for the individual demographic, economic, and political indicators reported in paper’s tables.

2.4 Country Selection

The 162 countries selected for inclusion in the study satisfied at least three of the following four criteria: (1) a population size either approaching or exceeding one million people; (2) a reasonable degree of political stability such that timely and reliable data collection could be undertaken by governmental or non-governmental bodies, or both; (3) the availability of comprehensive, reliable, and time-series social indicator data; and (4) the country’s inclusion in the author’s earlier studies of international comparative social development and well-being. Countries with missing, inadequate, incomplete, or distorted data on three or more of the ISP’s 40 indicators, and for which reasonable estimates for the missing data could not be calculated, were excluded from the analysis. This latter group of countries consist primarily of ocean-locked island nations situated in the Pacific Ocean with their substantially fewer than one million people (UN News 2014). Individual country Index and Subindex scores for all 162 countries studied for each of the six-time periods reported between 1970 and 2018 have been uploaded to the following website (Estes 2018, Appendix B of this volume).

2.5 Levels of Analysis

Throughout the paper data are reported for four levels of analysis: (1) development trends occurring for the world-as-a-whole (N = 1); (2) development trends occurring at the at the continental (N = 6) and sub-continental levels (N = 19); (3) development trends occurring within socio-economic-political grouping (i.e., DMEs, CIS, DCs, LDCs) (N = 4); and, (4) development trends occurring within each of the 162 countries, including the study’s 40 socially least developing countries (SLDCs).

2.6 Time Frame

Index and subindex findings are reported separately for each of the study’s six-time periods, i.e., 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010/2011, and 2017/2018. Thus, this analysis reports
both archival and original cross-sectional analysis of the “state of well-being” reflective of
development trends for approximately 95% of the world’s population over a 50-year time

3 Findings

3.1 Part 1

3.1.1 World Social Development and Well-Being Trends

The most dramatic findings on the WISP over the entire 50-year period reported on in
this study are summarized in Figs. 1 and 2. Figure 1 reports average WISP scores for each
decade since 1970. Figure 2 reports the percentage changes in WISP scores from each dec-
dade to the next and, in the last date line of the figure, the percent change in WISP score
value over the full 50-year time 1970–2018. Space limitations do not permit us to go into
depth on all the data reflected in these figures, five general trends emerge on even cursory
inspection:

1. The world’s two most socially developed regions are Europe (N = 35, WISP18 = 90.7),
   and North America (N = 2, WISP18 = 88.6). This pattern has existed since 1970 and
   reflects the very high level of economic wealth and technological innovation that char-
   acterizes these regions. The patterns also reflect high attention to the special needs of
   financially vulnerable populations that exist within their societies. These social trends
   also indicate a strong and, increasing, commitment to environmental protection, the crea-
   tion of green spaces and public parks as well as significant commitments to national and
   regional foreign aid and development assistance to socially less developed countries. Of
   some interest, too, is that most of the countries among the leadership nations (Table 5)
in these regions is that they are at least culturally predominately Protestant and, many

Fig. 1  Average WISP scores by continents, 1970–2018 (N = 162)
consist primarily of the children or grandchildren of former political and economic migrants.

2. The world’s two least socially developed regions are Africa (N = 50, WISP18 = 58.4) and Asia (N = 45, WISP18 = 71.9). These regions have consistently been the least socially developed since 1970 but today, 2018, reflect tremendous social achievement as a result of the laser-sharp activities associated with the United Nations’ Millennium Development Campaign (2000–2016) and, in the case of Asia, a combination of the MDC and dramatically increased financial investments in the region, but especially in the People’s Republic of China, and India (see Table 6). More than 100 million people have been lifted out of abject poverty in China since 2000 alone. The expectation is that that number again will be lifted out of poverty each decade over at least the near-term so long as China retains its status as “manufacturer to the world.” (The reader need only examine the origin of many of the items on his/her desk to determine how many of those items originated in China [or other economically emerging East Asian economies] including the cell phone, tablet, computer(s), and other electronics on which all of us depend).

The very positive enhancements in well-being in South Asia have resulted from high levels of foreign direct investment in the region, impressive advances in technological development and innovation, as well as their beginning successes in the health, education, social welfare sector. Environmental challenges remain a problem for South Asia as is the improvement of fresh water and solid waste disposal throughout the region South Asian region’s rural communities in which at least 65% of South Asia’s population continue to reside.

3. Though currently in a major “take off” phase in Latin America today, as in the past, social development and well-being is progressing very slowly in the region, albeit its average WISP18 scores approach those of its neighbors to the North (N = 26, WISP18 = 77.6 vs. 49.8 in 1970). Ironically, and despite the impoverished conditions under which many of the people of Latin America reside, their reported levels of subjective “happiness” are among the highest in the world (Helliwell et al. 2017). These latter measures depend primarily on polling data and, in the main, reflect people’s views of their own life quality at specific moments in time. Missing are the much-needed in-depth analyses of chang-
ing levels of happiness and well-being of the same population of the same individuals, families, and households over an extended time (a single year would work just fine initially). Tonon (2016) and Rojas-Herrera (2016) and the teams of scholars associated with them are beginning to fill in this critical data gap, the outcomes from which likely will emerge over the next several years.

Even so, the people of Mexico, Central America, and South America are experiencing significant increases in their objective conditions of life that are contributing to increases in years of average life expectancy, infant and child survival, maternal survival, and advances in income security, protection of vulnerable population groups, impressive protections of their precious forests, air, water, and other critical environmental resources.

4. The situation among the four nations of Oceania (Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji) differ appreciably from that reported for the other groups of nations discussed above. These differences are reflected in the fact, for the first 30 years of data reporting, the WISP focused on the well-being status of just two of the region’s largest economies, i.e. Australia and New Zealand. WISP data for Fiji and Papua New Guinea were added after 1990 given two realities: (a) Australia and New Zealand invested heavily and with success in the development of Fiji and Papua New Guinea; and (b) reliable
data are now available from both governmental and nongovernmental sources for Fiji and Papua New Guinea and, now, meet all four of the criteria needed for their inclusion in the analysis. Further, WISP scores for all four nations, on average, have begun to approximate those of the region’s other nations (N = 4, WISP18 = 78.0 vs. 81.0 for Australia and New Zealand alone in 1970).

Viewed from a well-being perspective, all four countries of Oceania are moving forward steadily in assessed levels of well-being, often substantially. The economies of all four countries are vibrant albeit their products differ appreciably, i.e., that of Papua New Guinea depend on agricultural, fishing, and mineral extraction, Fiji’s on both the preceding plus light manufacturing, and those of New Zealand and Australia are post-industrial societies whose economies are dominated by a wide range of human and related services.

Unfortunately, the most basic needs of many of the region’s ancient aboriginal peoples are satisfied very imperfectly. One critical indicator of this reality is reflected in the extraordinarily disproportionate numbers of indigenous men and women who are either incarcerated or functioning under direct court supervision (STATISCA 2017).


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*Officially designated “Least Developed Country” (LDC)
This highly negative pattern of human well-being is extraordinary and has greatly interrupted the family lives of these thousands of men and women who have only marginal access to their families in addition to having poor educations, weak jobs skills, and high dependencies on welfare services that came into being to serve the income security needs of entirely different populations—children and youth, the sick and elderly, persons with severe disabilities, unemployed and injured workers and, in some cases, families with very large number of children (ISSA 2018). There is, however, no indication that the prevailing pattern of social marginalization of Oceania’s large number of poor and socially disenfranchised people will be significantly altered over either the short- or near-term despite the fact that the majority of the ancestors of the region’s non-indigenous people settled there either as former prisoners of the British Crown or as political refugees, but most often economic, migrants.

In all, the data and trends just reported, and the percentages changes in WISP70 through WISP18 scores summarized in Fig. 2, reflect an optimistic view of advances that have take place among 95% of the world’s population between 1970 and the present. The trends often are dramatic and emphasize the very high levels of national, regional, and world investment that have taken place during this long expanse of human history following the end of the Second World War, especially among the devastatingly poor nations of developing Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. These gains are to be applauded and every effort must be made to sustain them into the future. The decline in global poverty has been especially significant in East, South, Southeast Asia where nearly 70% of the world’s absolute poor lived prior to 2000. At the same time, years of average life expectancy increased appreciably between 2000 and 2018 while rates of infant, child, and maternal mortality declined in every region worldwide and did so at a steady pace. Welfare, health, education, income security and improved housing, public transportation and environmental protection reached unparalleled levels of advances in human well-being (Estes and Sirgy 2018a, b).

Diversity-related social conflict in the nations of Middle East and North Africa, however, continued to persist after 2000 and, of the writing of this article, there is no reason for believing that these centuries-old animosities will end any time soon…instead, only more death, more permanently incapacitating injuries, and destruction of important historical urban sites and monuments are likely to continue. Further, elements of these conflicts have now taken the form of terrorism including Jihadist terrorism, suicide bombings, and other organized and independent acts of aggression directed at Western cities and major centers of financial activity. The author, along with a group of eminent social scientists, is at work attempting to understand more fully the root causes of devastating acts and, where possible, to reduce their numbers (Rhatz and Estes 2019; Sirgy and Estes 2018a; Sirgy et al. 2018b, c).

The following section reports some general trends by major subregions for several of the studies major regions and continents.

### 3.1.2 Selected Subregional Analysis (N = 155)

The following section reports an analysis of the development and well-being trends of the following regions that have multiple subregions: Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. This analysis reports development trends for one economically advanced region, Europe (N = 35), and three developing regions, i.e., Africa (N = 50), Asia (N = 35) and Latin
America (N = 25). The analysis covers the entire 50-year period of the larger analysis with a major emphasis on the 20-year period beginning 2000.

### 3.1.3 European Social Development Trends (N = 35)

The WISP data reported in Figs. 3 and 4 reflect scores for each decade from 1970 to the present. The data report scores by major European subregion and for the region-as-whole. The European region, for example, consists of 35 countries located in North (N = 10), East (N = 10), South (N = 8) and Western (N = 7) subregions. Countries that make up each of the subregions are identified in Table 1. All 35 of the European countries have been included in the WISP database since 1970, hence, we have very rich data set that consists of European regional social development for the full 50-years of social indicator and social reporting data included in this paper. Note, too, that the author has published many articles and book chapters on a variety of aspects of European social development (and well-being) over the entire 50-year time period, a period that captures the maturation of Europe into a region characterized by comprehensive welfare states that are the envy of many non-European societies (Estes 1990, 1987, 2004, 2010a, b, 2012a). Further, much of the data reported in this paper focuses on both the average WISP scores by subregion and time as well as the percentage changes in WISP scores at the different time intervals reported in Fig. 4.

Europe, as reported earlier in this paper, is the most socially developed of the world’s regions (Figs. 3, 4, and 9). Of the 25 most socially developed regions and subregions worldwide, for example, 21 of these most socially progressive nations are European, especially those 17 countries of Northern and Western Europe. Rates of infant, child and maternal mortality are remarkably low in the region whereas years of average life expectancy are among the highest in the world (only the economically advanced nations of East Asia have slightly longer years of average life expectancy). Years of age appropriate primary and secondary school education are just slightly short of reaching 100% enrollments, whereas, post-secondary education is available to all qualified student’s at virtually no cost to themselves. Technological innovations among the European states compete favorably with the
patentable accomplishments of North America which, indeed, have developed technologies rooted in European science and technology, e.g., the theoretical and applied science of innovations first created by French and German and other Northern European scientists that inspired the scientific work of North American scientists, e.g., the contributions made by Louis Pasteur (France 1822–1895), Marie and Pierre and Curie (France 1864–1934), Albert Einstein (Germany 1877–1955), Niels Bohr (Denmark 1885–1962), and Wernher von Braun (Germany 1912–1977) among others.

The social status of women during the modern era has reached a zenith in Europe. The social, economic, corporate, and political status of European women equals or exceeds that of men and every indication is that this pattern will continue well into the future (Roth 2008). Indeed, the status of contemporary European women has become the standard by which women everywhere in the world is judged. Today, in Europe, women exceed the number of men enrolled in higher education, own and operate complex businesses of their own, enjoy universal suffrage, and are represented in large numbers as elected officials in national parliaments and the major bodies of the institutions of both the European Union and within their own countries of origin. And the region’s women are fully aware that they are the successors of the remarkable women in each country that have preceded them...a lesson that men frequently have minimized for forgotten altogether.

Europeans also enjoy access to a full spectrum of publicly-financed social welfare schemes that commence well before birth and continue throughout the entirety of the life cycle to the point that personal savings levels among work class Europeans are among the lowest of economically advanced societies (Trading Economics 2018a, b). The origins of the “welfare state”, for example, is attributed to the German Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), Chancellor of the German Empire (1871–1890), who sought to use the “give them bread” function of welfare to quell the high levels of social conflict associated with long-term unemployment and hunger occurring in the German Empire over a period of several decades. And the approach succeeded in achieving its goals. Today, commonly referred to as “social security,” these programs have proven to be the most successful

![Fig. 4 Percentages change in average WISP scores for the European region by subregion, 1970–2018 (N = 35)](Image)
publicly-adopted approaches to income security for vulnerable populations worldwide. Indeed, these wide expanses of income security programs for highly vulnerable populations has been adopted by virtually all nations worldwide (ISSA 2018).

Finally, the European region is known for its careful attention to environmental protection, both of fauna and flora. This priority takes the form of complex interventions intended to conserve water and energy, the efficient recycling and repurposing of liquid and solid waste, as well as a rich array of policies that prevent the use of none biodegradable products, mandatory consumer separation of waste into discrete containers, and the setting aside of large expanses of land as public parks. In the main, the city streets of European cities are mostly free of litter and, in most public spaces, the use of tobacco products in public spaces is strictly prohibited. Extensive research, however, is being undertaken to identify more efficient approaches to energy production (including the repurposing of waste materials) and, in the main, the use of nuclear generation of energy is prohibited virtually nearly everywhere in the region given the problem of managing the waste products associated with the use of nuclear fission materials.

Within Europe as a region, its Northern and Western subregions are both the most developed (Fig. 3) and have high rates of socio-political development (Fig. 4). Even so, Europe’s Southern and Eastern subregions have attained WISP scores closely approximating those of the other two regions but are achieving comparative improvements in overall well-being as measured by the WISP than those reported for Northern and Western Europe, especially when one examines the net social gains achieved by all four subregions from 1970 to the present. Almost certainly, the WISP scores for the entire European region will reach full parity on all the WISP’s 40 social indicators and 10 subindexes in the decades just ahead.

3.1.4 Latin American Social Development Trends (N = 26)

Social progress in the Latin America region is best characterized as “start and stop” given the slow to negative changes in development and well-being that characterized the region for the first 30 years of this analysis (Estes 1996b; Rojas-Herrera 2016; Tonon 2016). This pattern is reflected in Figs. 5 and 6 which summarizes the region’s subregional performances on the WISP since 1970. Many of these negligible changes are concentrated across all three regions in which people have struggled under difficult circumstances to meet their basic needs but especially those associated with access to quality housing, continuity of health care, basic literacy, and a modicum of income security during periods of serious illness or injuries. Meeting the income and social security needs of children and youth, the aged and disabled, and those of other historically disadvantaged population groups has proven to impose very difficult challenges for the highly unstable governments and administrative bureaus through which these services typically are provided (ISSA 2018) (Figs. 7 and 8).

The education of children at both the primary and secondary school levels has, however, been a consistent priority of the region’s 25 national and 75 subregional governments. These critical investments in the future of children and young people have had a highly positive impact on the region’s development as has the creation of a broad spectrum of specialized programs of post-secondary higher education and vocational/professional training. Among the results of these investments also has been the formation of appreciably high levels of human capital reserves which, in turn, have contributed to the region’s development of a technologically-prepared workforce, greater gender equality for women, increased opportunities for geographic and social mobility, and significantly
improved systems of social provision that, each year reach a progressively higher number of previously unqualified people.

Since the year 2000, the Latin American region and each of its three major subregions have experienced significant advances in: (a) years of average life expectancy; (b) dramatically reduced rates of infant, child, and maternal mortality; (c) significantly higher numbers of age appropriate children attending government-financed and private schools; (d) improved housing, sanitation, and solid and liquid waste disposal; (e) improved occupational and health standards; and, (f) improved pension and other

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**Fig. 5** Average WISP scores for Latin America by subregion, 1970–2018 (N = 26)

**Fig. 6** Percent change in average WISP scores for Latin America by subregion, 1970–2018 (N = 26)
fiduciary arrangements focused on helping retired workers enjoy post-employment lives of dignity.

Families, the quality of family life, and family solidarity has been the rock on which all other advances in the social well-being of the region’s residents have depended. In recognition of the importance of these third of four legs of social policy, people, working through their governments are gradually weaving more secure social safety nets that focus on the aged and families with large numbers of children—many of which go unsupervised for long periods of time given that both parents must work to support and enrich the socioeconomic status of the family-as-a-whole. Thus, governments and private NGOs are carrying increasing responsibility for developing programs of child social, emotional, and recreational support for increasingly larger numbers of the region’s...
children and their families (especially in situations in which members of the region’s multilayered extended kinship systems are not available to perform these functions).

In short, Latin America is a major world region that is “on the move” toward progressively higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, quality of life, and well-being (Helliwell et al. 2017; UNDP 2018). This forward-looking trajectory is the result of the removal of major obstacles to person, collective, and community development that characterized the region during its earlier three decades of competitive lethargy in providing more completely for the needs of its rapidly expanding population. Today, the future of Latin America’s one in which people themselves have been placed at the center of development.

3.1.5 Asian Social Development Trends (N = 35)

Asia is the world’s largest and most culturally diverse region. Asia is made up of four distinct subregions in which its population of 4500 million people reside (vs. 2120 million people in 1970). The region contains three of the world’s “population super giants”: China (1400 million people); India (1300 million people) and Indonesia (275 million people). The United States, because its Western coastline of more than 1500 land miles also is along the Pacific Ocean is a “Pacific power” but is not part of Asia (population in 2018 = 330 million people).

Advancements in the objective conditions of life and well-being have been among the most rapid and impressive worldwide (UNDP 2018). Life expectancy in the region ranges from the mid-70 years on average to the world’s longest living nation (Japan, average years of life expectancy = 80.5 years for both genders). Infant, child, and maternal mortality have dropped dramatically since the year 2000 and, today, exceed world average gains. Social gains in these critical areas of well-being is especially impressive (World Bank 2018).

The region’s gains in child primary and secondary school education since 2000 also are impressive—sectors that require the investment of significant national resources to achieve. Most of the “social laggards” along these dimensions are the small island nations of the South Pacific and within the poorest countries of South and Southeast Asia, including Bangladesh, India, and Indonesia. Asia also is one of the world’s major centers of higher learning. Costs, though, prohibit many young people from availing themselves of the services of these institutions which, as a result, seek to attract increasing numbers of foreign students into their student bodies. Also, and nearly everywhere in East and Southeast Asia, families spend inordinate sums of money on informal tutoring for their children, especially in the physical sciences, mathematics, and at least colloquial English. These latter forms of education are very expensive to the families and results in these students allocating as much as 10–12 h daily on education alone.

The granting of full social, political, and economic parity to the regions girls and women has been slow. This pattern is especially surprising among Asia’s most economically advanced countries which recognize the importance of the contribution made by women to their development, but overtly discriminate against women of child-bearing age and those 40 years of age and older. Indeed, Asia’s social profile would be significantly enhanced were full equity and administrative power be granted to that half of their extraordinarily well-educated population.

The Asian region also is making steady gains in technology, environmental protection, and the safe and efficient disposal of liquid and solid wastes. Significant gains also are being made in the elimination of Asia’s long-standing slums and temporary housing and, in their place, cleaner, more spacious, and family-friendly housing is becoming increasingly
more available. The region’s social safety nets are more secure than those of the past but, still, large numbers of the poor, self-employed, and independent merchants have been left out of these systems. Income security services for chronically poor families, individuals, and communities remain weak, especially among these persons and communities located in Asia’s extensive rural areas. But progress in this sector is being made, if only gradually (Estes 2015a).

Poverty alleviation has become a major hallmark of the Asian region and its subregion (UNDP 2018). In China alone, for example, since 1990 more than 100 million chronically poor individuals and households have been lifted out of poverty due to a wide range of government investments and international development assistance. This initiative has been nothing short of remarkable given the complex dynamics that contribute to policy formation. The fact that these persons are now part of China’s tax-paying working class is a significant net social gain for the country. And China’s new Five-Year Plan (2015–2020) calls for the lifting of yet another 100 million people out of extreme poverty during the current era. Comparable, but somewhat less far-reaching initiatives in reducing national and region poverty, have been adopted by India and Indonesia and every reason exists for believing that these countries, too, will achieve the complex goals associated with poverty alleviation. All three of these nations must be acknowledged for their substantial investments in working to bring about such a dramatic level of social and economic development among people who are typically left out of major national and regional development initiatives.

Asia is one of world’s leaders in technology, especially in the miniaturization of electronic devices developed elsewhere. This accomplishment is especially notable in China and India and selected countries of Southeast Asia. Further, many of the codes for software on which most of the world’s corporations, scholars, and other depend also is written in Asia. Book production, apart from their actual printing, including this article, also is a major Asian export owing to the availability of complex coding, related software, and the high levels of human capital found within the region. Unfortunately, though, selected Asian nations also are major violators of intellectual property agreements and have been the targets over decades of lawsuits by many international businesses who own the software (Microsoft most notably) and retain licensing authority for the legal uses of its property. In the main, however, these lawsuits have not prevented the continued illegal copying and sales of most software for use at the level of individual consumers (Clark and Hagan 2018).

Unfortunately, the Asia region also is besieged by chronic levels of diversity related social conflict. The emergence of Jihadism in West Asia and, with it, terrorism, has become a major negative feature of the region despite its many successes (Estes and Sirgy 2018a, 2014; Sirgy and Estes 2018a; Sirgy et al. 2018b)

3.1.6 African Social Development Trends (N = 50)

The African region consists of 50 that are home to approximately 1400 million people, or 18.4% of the world’s total. The 50 nations are divided among five subregions and are among the world’s most rapidly developing countries (Figs. 9 and 10). Even, rapid rates of social development and well-being have been the situation for the past 20 years and is expected to continue well into the future, especially as the fullness of the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Fig. 11) are realized. The 17 SDGs build directly on the accomplishments associated with goals of the 10-year long Millennium Development Campaign (MDC) that was launched by the General Assembly in 2000. One of the unique features of the MDC was that, for the first time in history,
government, inter-governmental bodies, non-governmental, families and households, and people into a working partnership to reduce poverty and, at the same time, promote the general well-being of societies themselves. Substantial sums of money were invested in the launching of the MDC with the promise that even more money would be made available, from both governments and NGOs, on an as needed basis.
The eight goals of the MDC were: Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education; Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women; Goal 4: Reduce child mortality; Goal 5: Improve maternal health; Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability; and, Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development. Other goals were specified as “objectives” in the detailed body of the MDC’s foundational documents but were of no less importance as these outcomes formally identified as goals (UNDP 2016).

The MDC was a major success as reflected in the extraordinary social gains attained by many of Africa’s poorest nations which could not fund the complex and expensive human service and technological programs that the MDC made possible. On its completion and building on the remarkable success attained by the MDC, the United Nations authorized a successor initiative intended to continue and deepen the critical successes achieved by the MDC, i.e., what is now referred to as the SDGs or SDC Campaign. This SDG campaign was launched in 2015 and, once again, identified as their primary beneficiaries the poorest of the poor nations located in developing Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Hanson et al. 2017). The initial successes of this campaign are reflected in the WISP scores reported in Figs. 5 and 6, especially among the desperately poor nations of Middle, Southern, and Western Africa. The predominately Islamic nations of North Africa, most of which have direct access to the Mediterranean Sea were already comparatively advantaged African nations at the time the series of studies began as were the countries of East Africa that had direct access to other trade routes.

The SDGs consist of 17 closely intertwined goals (actually “aspirations”), all of which impact directly advancing development and well-being in Africa: Goal 1: no poverty; Goal 2: zero hunger; Goal 3: good health and well-being; Goal 4: quality education; Goal 5: gender equality; Goal 6: clean water and sanitation; Goal 7: affordable and clean energy; Goal 8: decent work and economic growth; Goal 9: industry, innovation and infrastructure; Goal 10: reduced inequalities; Goal 11: sustainable cities and communities; Goal 13: climate action; Goal 14: life below water; Goal 15: life on land; Goal 16: peace, justice, and strong institutions; and, Goal 17: partnerships for the goals.
3.2 Subregional Rankings Based on Subregional Average WISP 18 Scores and Changes in WISP Scores 2000–2018

Figure 10 summarizes both WISP18 scores by major geopolitical subregions as well as the percentage changes that have taken place in these scores between 2000 and 2018. The data presented in the figure report average subregional group scores, and via the use of bars in the figure, report the percentage changes for each subregion that occurred between the two-time periods. The rankings also provide us with a clear picture of the extent to which the public and private policy makers of the countries included in each subregion (Table 1) are succeeding in meeting at least the basic needs of their populations and, at the same time, in promoting a sense of collective well-being. The data reported in the figure are quite striking.

3.2.1 Subregional Rank Performances on the WISP18

Figure 10 identifies a total of 19 major geopolitical regions around the world. The countries included in each of these subregions are detailed in Table 1 which also reports (in parentheses) the socio-economic level of each country within the subregions. As revealed in the group averages reported in the figure, there are five subregions in the top five ranked group of socially most developed subregions are: North Europe (N = 10, WISP18 = 93, Rank = 1), West Europe (N = 7, WISP18 = 93, Rank = 2), Australia and New Zealand (N = 2, WISP18 = 93, Rank = 3), South Europe (N = 8, WISP18 = 89, Rank = 4), and East Europe (N = 10, WISP18 = 88, Rank = 5). (The first three subregions shared the same two-point score but minor differences on the WISP18 when a third integer is added results in small differences between these regions. Thus, there are three clusters of nations that share the top five positions on the WISP in 2018. Minor differences also distinguish the remaining subregions as well when a third number is added to the composite score—in much the same way that it is often the third number on the Human Development Index that reflect the annual changes that take place in nations and, by inference, major subregions (UNDP 2018: pp. 26–30).

By contrast with the world’s 9 are: Middle Africa (N = 7, WISP18 = 53, Rank = 19), West Africa (N = 15, WISP18 = 56, Rank = 18), East Africa (N = 15, WISP18 = 57, Rank = 17), Melanesia (N = 2, WISP18 = 63, Rank = 16), and Southern Africa (N = 6, WISP18 = 64, Rank = 15).

Important, too, are the percentage changes in WISP values that took place between 2000 and 2018. As expected the percentage change in WISP score values over this period are comparatively small for the most socially advanced subregions and highest for the socially least developed subregions. These positive, often dramatic, subregional shifts in WISP score values have been reported and commented upon throughout the paper. These changes in subregional composite WISP scores for the world’s poorest subregions are among the most rapid and significant worldwide vis-à-vis the positive, in some cases negative, changes in WISP score values occurring in selected world subregions. These changes in both the objective and subjective conditions of life and living are the result of the dramatic fiscal, human, and technological investments made by governments themselves in their own development as well as very substantial investments made in the countries by inter-governmental bodies (the United Nations, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, among others) and hundreds of major national and international nongovernmental organizations.
The above patterns also are reflected in the remaining nine middle performing regions which, taken together, had a combined subregion WISP18 score range of 68–80. All nine of these subregion experienced substantial gains on the WISP over the 18-year period since 2000. Like other subregions, these impressive social gains for the middle performing subregions resulted from the rich public–private partnerships at all levels of social organization (Estes and Zhou 2015).

Every indication, as of the writing of this paper, is that the positive trajectory confirmed by Fig. 10 and those patterns reported in the other figures reprinted in the paper are expected to continue well into the future. This is the goal toward which people themselves are working and which governments, international development assistance organizations, and private philanthropists are investing at historically unparalleled levels (Koob et al. 2018; UNDP 2018; World Bank 2018). And the outcomes of these multilayered investments are yielding equally unparalleled positive outcomes.

4 World Social Leaders (SLs) and Socially Least Developing Countries (SLDCs)

The final section of this paper focuses on the net social gains or net social losses that have occurred within countries for the past two decades. The data reporting these social performances on the WISP are reported in Tables 5 and 6 and Figs. 12 and 13. Tables 5 and 6 identify the worlds’ 25 Social Leaders (SLs, N = 25) as measured by WISP and, in Table 6, the world’s 25 Socially Least Developing Countries (SLDCs, N = 25). The tables report both WISP scores and WISP ranks for all 50 of SLs and SLDCs identified in these tables for the years 2000, 2010/2011 and 2017/2018. The data are quite intriguing and represent a “social report card” of the social changes that have taken place since the beginning of this still young century. Figures 12 and 13 summarize national WISP scores for the two-decade period 2000–2018 and, in doing so, identifies the WISP rank position of individual nations relative to the complete universe of all 162 countries included in the study. The figures also report the number of rank changes on the WISP since 2000 and are rank ordered in terms of overall WISP performance. The data reported in these tables and figures, however, are composite WISP scores only and not national performances scores on the WISP’s 10 component subindexes, i.e., for the health, education, welfare, women and six other sectors. These detailed data are reported elsewhere (Estes 2019).

3 Because of their length of an already long paper, I, with my colleagues at the Management Institute of Quality of Life Studies (MIQOLS), are creating a richly embellished website that focuses just on the content of this paper. The website addresses all the methodological issues identified above and does so in considerable detail. The site also reports 50-year data trends at the national, regional, and international levels of analysis that can be disaggregated reaggregated using the reader’s own system of statistical weights. Many calculators appear on the website to make the task easy for readers. The author believes other content related to these issues also will be easily identifiable on the website. I think you will be very pleased by the design and inclusiveness of the many measurement tools that make up the many analytical tools that make up the website. See the following working page on the website as illustrative of the overall richness of the larger website. The page reports composite and subindex scores for all 162 countries included in the analysis for each 10-year period studied. We have used color coding to distinguish between different clusters of nations. The website will provide lengthy discussions of the methodology used to identify the four factors as well as each of the WISP’s 10 subindexes. The first of the many detailed tables that will part of this site can be found at: http://www.miqols.org/toolbox2/isp/table-3.html. The major site, however, will be located as part of the TOOLBOX tab of MIQOLS opening website: http://www.miqols.org/toolbox/.
4.1 World Social Leaders (SLs)

Not all the world’s nations are leaders. Indeed, the list of world development and well-being leaders, even as reported by this author, has changed over time—sometime dramatically, but always in response to social, political and economic shifts occurring within their societies. That having been said, Table 5 identifies those countries that consistently have outperformed others with respect to their composite WISP scores over time. These changes, and the earlier rank order positions ascribed to these nations, are deeply associated with their values, norms, and traditions. All three of these factors, in turn, are deeply steeped in the histories of these societies and in the contemporary political, economic, technological, and environmental pressures with which they are confronted.4

The current list of the highest (and lowest) net social performers, however, are closely associated with the lessons learned from the last Great War which significantly influenced the shift toward peace and enhanced social welfare provision for people situated

4 Unfortunately, the United States is not among the group of most socially developed countries. This unfortunate reality results from the country’s wide spread poverty (1:5 children are officially classified as poor), the country’s very high crime and violence rates—especially that associated with gun violence, the high rates of legal incarceration and, (USDOJ 2018) and, using the WISP’s rich bank of social indicators, lower year of average life expectancy combined with high rates of infant, child, and maternal mortality relative to other socially advanced nations (USDHHS 2018). The country’s social safety net has very large holes in it including high levels of income insecurity among the nation’s aged (USNIA 2018). As a nation, these realities sadden the study’s author who has spent many years in attempting to close these gaps that place the US at nearly the bottom of economically advanced nations where the wealth gap is extraordinary great and obvious to anyone who is willing to see it (USIRS 2018).
everywhere within their societies. The major lesson learned, of course, is that steadily progressive social and economic development are preconditions to the attainment of peace; war, in turn, is the product of social, political, and economic chaos in combination with limited opportunities for access to well-paying jobs and social mobility (for at least their children and communities-at-large).

A careful review of the nations identified in Table 5 that 21 of the 25 countries listed are European nations, many of which are members states of the European Union (EU) and/or the European Commission (EC) or both and all of which are economically advanced member states of the Paris-based Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2018). The remaining four are located either in Asia (Japan), North America (Canada), or Oceania (Australia, New Zealand). The United States, as has been the case for longer than two decades, retained its rank order position relative to all 162 countries studied on the bottom half of the WISP. The advanced status of these countries function as role models for other nations that seek to attain and achieve progressively higher levels of social development and well-being for their already highly advantaged populations (Estes 2019).

All 25 of the world’s identified Social Leaders (SLs) are major sponsors of both unit- and multi-lateral programs of international foreign assistance and, in most cases, operate their own “in the field” programs of international development assistance like the purposes and structure of the American Peace Corps. The SLs, in turn, also are sponsors of major international exchange initiatives between scholars as well as between undergraduate and graduate students with the ability to compete successfully in rigorous programs of international study. Innovative and highly productive programs of international research cooperation also is one hallmark of this remarkable list of nations which includes countries that award the most sought after and honorific awards including those given by the Swedish Academy of Science (https://www.nobelprize.org/) and, in the case of peace and the
abolition of nuclear weapons, by the Norwegian Academy of Science (https://www.nobel prize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/).

Many of the world’s SLs tend to have comparatively small populations and, with exceptions, are predominately white and Protestant, albeit all these demographic patterns among the SLs are changing rapidly (CIA 2018). Further, SLs distinguish themselves based on their sustained high levels of social, political, and economic development over time. In comparison with other countries, SLs enjoy consistently lower population growth rates, longer average life expectation, very low rates of infant and child deaths, high levels of child and adult literacy, and remarkable levels of technological innovation including robust patent and copyright programs (UNDP 2018; UNESCO 2018).

Most SLs also have strong and dynamic economies. Unemployment rates are high in some of the European SLs even in the presence of large scale, often unwanted immigration. In general, inflation patterns within these nations tend to be comparatively low even as the rate of economic expansion is comparatively high. As a result, SL per capita income levels are high and nearly all SLs have access to more favorable exchange rates for their domestic currencies. In addition, SL per capita debt levels, though high for some countries, are substantially lower than those which exist for most of developing countries (OECD 1995).

4.2 World Socially Least Developing Countries (SLDCs)

The world’s least socially developed countries (SLDCs) are identified in in Table 6, all but two all of which are deeply impoverished African nation. Only two of the world’s SLDCs are not located in Africa–both of which are Asian nations (Afghanistan and Yemen).

Of the 162 countries included in this analysis, the world’s countries that are least able to provide for at least the basic needs and well-being of their populations are: The Central African Republic* (WISP18 = 41, Rank = 162), Chad* (WISP18 = 47, Rank = 161), Sierra Leone* (WISP18 = 48, Rank = 160), Yemen* (WISP18 = 48, Rank = 159), Somalia* (WISP18 = 48, Rank = 158). Other similarly situated SLDCs are Nigeria* (WISP18 = 48, Rank = 157), Uganda* (WISP18 = 49, Rank = 156), Sudan* (WISP18 = 49, Rank = 155), Niger* (WISP18 = 50, Rank = 154), and Afghanistan* (WISP18 = 51, Rank = 153). All ten of these countries are desperately poor and experience high levels of internal or external migration of persons are seeking improved economic opportunism and, access to higher levels of health care, education, technology, and income security program which are financed in part by their own labor.

The composition of nations that make up the group of SLDCs, as reflected in the 20-years of rank order data summarized in Table 6, has remained stable despite the dramatic increases in levels of social progress and well-being summarized for Africa by sub-region in Figs. 9 and 11. The reason for these failures in social progress relative to the majority of the African region’s 50 countries, is that the national social performances of these countries, relative to all 162 countries included in the study, remained more or less the same from one period of time in the series to another.

The majority of the world’s SLDCs are characterized by lower levels of life expectancy relative to the gains achieved by other African nations and still high, but appreciably

5 (*) indicate countries officially designated by the United Nations as “least developed countries” (LDCs), many of which are either landlocked or ocean-locked nations with a very limited array of products for sale on international markets (UN 2017). Rounding of decimals to whole numbers account for some countries being assigned a whole number score on the WISP18.
lowered, rates of infant, child, and maternal mortality. Technological innovation, even within their all important agricultural sector, remains low (especially in storage and shipping of valued products) which significantly interferes with their ability to bring their goods for sale on international markets. Though many children receive primary school level credentials, substantially fewer of these countries facilitate moving children toward secondary and, even less, post-secondary education.

The world’s SLDCs are the primary recipients of the generous amounts of international development assistance provided by the United Nations and its specialized agencies (the UNDP, the World Health Organization, etc.), other inter-government bodies such as the OECD, as well as through the flow of bi- and multi-national development assistance bodies and the generous amount of financial aid provided by philanthropists and the charitable foundations they have created. Much of this aid is provided as part of the public–private partnership reflected in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals campaign ((United Nations 2018). Despite some limited, but important, gains by a few SLDCs since 1970, the pace of social progress occurring in most remains painfully sluggish. Their situation continues to be much the same as that described by the Brandt Commission in 1980 (Brandt 1980),

Many hundreds of millions of people in the poorer countries are preoccupied solely with survival and elementary needs. For them work is frequently not available or, when it is, pay is very low and conditions often barely tolerable. Homes are constructed of impermanent materials and have neither piped water nor sanitation. Electricity is a luxury. Health services are thinly spread and in rural areas only rarely within walking distance. Primary schools, where they exist, may be free and not too far away, but children are needed for work and cannot be easily spared for schooling. Permanent insecurity is the condition of the poor. There are no public systems of social security in the event of unemployment, sickness or death of a wage-earner in the family. Flood, drought or disease affecting people or livestock can destroy livelihoods without hope of compensation.

The poorest of the poor…will remain outside the reach of normal trade and communication. The combination of malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, high birth rates, underemployment and low income closes off the avenues of escape… (p. 49).

Approximately 20% of the world’s population—about 1000 million people in 2018—currently reside in SLDCs. Their numbers are expected to continue to increase until at least the year 2025 by which time an even larger percentage of the world’s population will reside in these deeply impoverished nations. To resolve the challenges imposed by this reality will require substantial and a combination of public and private resources. DMEs and CIS will need to redirect their foreign assistance, both money and human resource, to help move these countries toward a fuller sense of need satisfaction and well-being for these countries. All these investments are warranted in the interest of reducing conflict and promoting peace and positive development within and between these nations. Without these more substantial well-being investments by Western countries and those of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the SLDCs can be expected to continue their slide downward in socio-economic-political development and high levels of internal and external dysfunction associated with their low levels of development and sense of collective well-being.
5 Dramatic Social Gains and Losses

Figures 12 and 13 report WISP scores and WISP rank positions for 20 countries each that have experienced the most rapid social changes and social losses since 2000. Rank scores on the WISP are presented separately for the periods 2000, 2018, and for the 20-year period 2000–2018 and have been converted into rank order positions based on the WISP scores. The data differ appreciably from those summarized in Tables 5 and 6 and Figs. 12 and 13 which identify global social leaders (SLs) and socially least developed countries (SLCs) using the WISP score values appropriate to 2000, 2010, and 2018.

5.1 Positive Social Change

Figure 13 identifies the 20 countries whose WISP scores increased by at least 25% between 2000 and 2018. WISP scores for these countries averaged 37 in 1970, 44 in 1980, and 52 in 1990. The WISP values for these countries differed appreciably by 2018 for which national WISP score rank positions increased by an average of 40 ranks and higher. And these increases in both WISP scores and WISP score rank positions also have changed dramatically in a discrete period time (changes that should be assessed as very rapid considering the complexity of the social, cultural, and political systems that characterize these countries.

A history of European colonization for many of these nations also has had an impact on the well-being scores for each country since several the forces associated with are directly reflected on the WISP. The presence of corrupt governments (Transparency International 2018), the scarcity of new technologies, as well as the absence of critically needed quality health care, education, and income security programs (ISSA 2018) are direct components of the WISP itself.

Even with all the preceding qualifications to the impressive rates of social growth occurring in the study’s 162 countries, the data reflect in Fig. 13 reinforce the patterns previously reported. Net social gains for the following 5 countries are especially impressive given their population size (either very small or very large), political and cultural complexity, and income security programs associated with the WISP (which measures the age and comprehensiveness of such programs: Brazil (Net Social Gain = 39 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Cape Verde (Net Social Gain = 38 ranks between 2000 and 2019), Lebanon (Net Social Gain = 35 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Lithuania (Net Social Gain = 33 ranks between 2000 and 2018), and Algeria (Net Social Gains = 33 ranks between 2000 and 2018).

Just the five countries listed above are among countries distributed across nearly all the world’s major continents. The fuller list identified in Fig. 13 reflects the same pattern. These findings add substantially to the impressive nature of the dramatic social gains for socially developing countries presented throughout this paper. Further, all 20 of these countries are on the verge of moving into a more advanced socio-economic cluster of countries given the broad-based nature of the social advances that already have taken place.

5.2 Negative Social Change

The 10 countries with the most significant net social losses on the WISP between 2000 and 2018 are identified in Fig. 13. These country scores range from very large countries to nations with very small, some of which are land- or ocean-locked countries (United Nations 2017), but all are characterized by weak health, education, income security, technology development, environmental, and community development systems (UNDP 2018;
World Bank 2018). Many also struggle with problems associated with diversity-related social conflict and, a few are engaged in intraregional wars (SIPRI 2018).

The majority of these of these countries have been included in the WISP database since at least 2000, most since as early as 1970. Numerous reports on the unique well-being challenges confronting these nations have been issued by this author (Estes 2012b, 2014, 2015a) and, have been the subject of important national reports prepared by major international development research units (World Bank 2018) as well as by individual scholars (Helliwell et al. 2017).

Nineteen of the 20 countries (Luxembourg has been excluded) have been major recipients of international development assistance (OECD-DAC 2018), including preferential development assistance from the United Nations, the Work Banks and other international inter-governmental bodies such as the OECD and the European Commission (EC 2018). The levels of this aid provided to these countries has been substantial and, likely, has slowed, perhaps halted, their gradual decline over time. In any case, the following 10 countries lost substantial social ground, as represented in changes in their WISP rank positions, over the past 20 years: Turkmenistan (Net Social Loss = −36 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Taiwan (Net Social Loss = −32 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Zimbabwe (Net Social Loss = −32 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Tajikistan (Net Social Loss = −29 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Swaziland (Net Social Loss = −28 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Zambia* (Net Social Loss = −22 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Luxembourg (Net Social Loss = −21 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Kazakhstan (Net Social Loss = −21 ranks between 2000 and 2018), Philippines (Net Social Loss = −21 ranks between 2000 and 2018), and Niger* (Net Social Loss = −21 ranks between 2000 and 2018).

6 Discussion and Conclusions

Following decades of only modest social improvements, once again, most of the world’s countries are strengthening their capacity to meet at least the basic needs of their still increasing populations. Most countries can meet needs beyond a minimal level especially some of the socially least developing countries (SLDCs) of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Many countries are developing at a rapid pace. This process is expected to continue and in time at least some of the SLDCs are expected to move into the group of more socially advanced countries (to the DCs). especially since 2000, a 20-period of time during which many nations were able mobilize themselves to attain progressively higher levels of development and well-being. Other countries, however, remain outside the range of social progress and, today, nearly one billion people worldwide continue to be entrapped in cycles of poverty, despair, and human degradation. More common in slower developing countries are seemingly intractable problems of poverty, ill health, high population growth, inadequate housing, unstable governments, civil conflict, economic uncertainty, and substantially weakened traditional family and kinship systems.

At the outset of a new century, the need is apparent for new, more dramatic, initiatives that will transform all the world’s nations into more caring and socially productive societies (ISSA 2018; UNDP 2018; World Bank 2018). At a minimum, these initiatives must be informed by a renewed commitment to the three goals on which the world’s leaders already agree: (1) the elimination of absolute poverty everywhere; (2) enhanced popular participation at all levels of political organization; and, (3) a more equitable sharing of the planet’s abundant resources (Estes 2019). The pursuit of these goals is achievable in the context, the major accomplishments that nations around the world already are achieving.
The social changes implied by these goals are complex and they will not yield easily to quick or simple solutions. Rather, sustained investments will be required over the long-term to reverse the social, political, and economic conditions that have trapped such a large portion of the world’s population in grinding poverty. At the heart of these change efforts, though, must be a commitment to strengthening the capacity of local people to provide for their basic social and material needs within the realities of their own environment. No other approach to social development can hope to help the world’s poorest countries appreciably reduce the deeply entrenched patterns of mal-development that have held their populations hostage for more than five decades. In addressing a meeting of the G-20\(^6\) in 2013 in St. Petersburg, Russia, former Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-Moon (2013) stated the significance of these goals in the following way.

Sustainable development is the pathway to the future we want for all. It offers a framework to generate economic growth, achieve social justice, exercise environmental stewardship and strengthen governance.

…we need to set a more ambitious agenda beyond 2015 (when the Millennium Development Campaign would end).
The new agenda should place sustainable development at its core and make the eradication of poverty its top priority.
The new agenda will need a renewed, broad-based global partnership, particularly to mobilize finance and technology.
The new agenda will need to be supported by a single post-2015 UN development framework containing a single set of goals applicable to all countries but adaptable to different national realities.
Financing needs for sustainable development are enormous. ODA and domestic resources remain crucial. But I also welcome the G20’s focus on long-term investment financing, including the regulatory environment, incentives and risk-sharing to leverage private resources with public funds.
The new agenda must be tuned to the leading challenges we face, including the need for decent jobs, inclusive growth, improved governance, peace, and action on climate change.
The G-20 should lead by example.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of interest**  The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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\(^6\) The 20 members of the G-20 are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, and the multi-state European Union.


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