

Widening the debate about what social progress should look like



Brendan Jennings Opinion

The success of a country does not just come down to GDP figures

We work in an economy but we live in a society. It was easy to forget that over the last few years as economic numbers dominated public discourse. But with repair work on the economy well under way, there is evidence our society needs some repair work too.

After all, they are inherently linked – a sustainable and prosperous society needs thriving businesses and for business to thrive, it needs to operate in a robust society.

New research points to broader areas of public policy that need attention to ensure the country is a great one to live in.

Indeed, while Ireland has a GDP per capita rank of 5, it is

ranked 15th out of 132 on the Social Progress Index. This new index, designed by a non-profit, the Social Progress Imperative, along with leaders in academia and private business, measures things that really matter to the public under three broad headings – basic human needs, foundations of wellbeing and opportunity.

Innovative measure

It is an innovative measurement tool which serves to widen the debate about what progress should look like. It recognises that a country's success is not just measured in GDP figures. The index measures social progress beyond GDP to provide a more holistic understanding of

countries' overall performance and wellbeing. Building a robust society is not a job for government alone. For those of us in business, the index can serve as a guide to help us determine where we can leverage our skills and expertise and direct investment. The complexity of big societal challenges demands collaboration. This index can help in bringing all relevant parties together to address the issues identified and build a stronger, and more robust, society.

Ireland scores highly in the index's opportunity category. This covers areas such as tolerance, inclusion and personal rights. We also have great strength in terms of access to basic knowledge and third-level education. Our

universities remain highly focused on improving their position in global rankings, and we are a reasonably respectable 12th of 132 countries in terms of the number of universities currently ranked.

We rank first in terms of the percentage of children enrolling in secondary school. With regard to the adult literacy rate, Ireland achieves 99 out of 100, ranking us 21st overall. This reflects both the positive inroads already made but also highlights that further work can be done, particularly to increase the understanding of written information.

Ireland ranks 20th in terms of life expectancy and a poor 102nd in our obesity rate, an area of increasing concern in relation to our children. With

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regards to ecosystem sustainability we are worse still, ranked 111th. The most glaring gap between our wealth and social progress is our level of protection of biodiversity and habitat. We rank a poor 117 in this area. On the positive side in the area of environment, we ranked second overall with regard to greenhouse gas emissions.

Based on the percentage of the population who have used an internet device within 12 months, Ireland received the

lowest rank in its group of 15 comparator countries. Our internet usage has grown steadily from 17.85 per cent in 2000 to 79 per cent in 2012.

However, we rank just 22nd among the 132 countries measured, well below what our GDP per capita should indicate.

Broadband

A particular challenge for Ireland is access to Next Generation Broadband, which is generally only available in the Dublin area.

In the area of water and sanitation, the index shows a comparative weakness in sanitation facilities compared to other countries and the difference between rural and urban access to an improved

water source. In these categories, 13 of the 15 countries closest to us in GDP per capita scored higher than us. The opportunity with the establishment of Irish Water is surely to address some of these issues.

We have grown comfortable measuring our performance in economic terms.

Now is the time for us all to come together and agree on our social progress objectives, and measure performance against these as well.

Brendan Jennings is managing partner of Deloitte, which collaborates with the Social Progress Imperative, producers of the index. The report for 2014 has just been published and is available at www.deloitte.com/social-progress.