

## Environment to benefit from global comparison

(The Nation, Bangkok, 21st March 2001)

If the new government's recent policy statement about "environmental sustainability" seems vacuous and feeble, it is in no small part because it is such a hard thing to measure. The concept of sustainability encompasses a wide range of issues, for many of which there are simply no standardised indicators of good or bad, progress or decline.

But to its credit, the government's statement claims that setting environmental standards is one of its goals, and a recent US study might provide some guidance. The study was a collaborative effort involving the World Economic Forum and teams from Yale and Columbia universities. It draws on data from 67 variables, rolled into a single "Environmental Sustainability Index" (ESI), for a total of 122 countries.

The ESI is not perfect. No attempt to measure such a complex issue can be. The report describes it as a "work in progress" that will gradually be refined. But even in its present form, its authors say, "it creates a series of comparative benchmarks of environmental conditions in different countries and the possibility of shifting environmental decision-making onto a more fact-based and analytically rigorous foundation."

The 67 variables are grouped into 22 "key indicators" that range from technical measures of air quality and water quality, to more fuzzy concepts such as the availability of information about environmental issues and commitments to international agreements and organisations. Indicators have been calibrated in such a way that higher scores mean higher levels of sustainability.

So how has Thailand performed? Of the 122 countries included in the study, Finland has the highest overall score, followed by Norway, Canada and Sweden. Haiti is bottom of the list, below Saudi Arabia, Burundi and Ethiopia. Thailand ranks 74th. Perhaps more meaningfully it is seventh of 17 Asian countries, behind Japan, Malaysia and Nepal, for example, but ahead of Indonesia, South Korea and China.

South Korea? In general, countries with higher levels of development and income tend to emerge from this index as having higher levels of sustainability. The



Smoke free zone?

study as a whole supports the "Porter Hypothesis", that high levels of environmental protection are compatible with high levels of economic growth. But there are exceptions and South Korea is one of them. With an average income level more than double Thailand's, it ranks a lowly 95th according to the ESI, let down by poor measures of biodiversity, air pollution and several other indicators.

The main blots on Thailand's environmental record, according to the study, should come as no surprise. Regardless of income levels, only a handful of countries come out worse for the destruction of their soil resources, emissions of carbon dioxide and ozone-destroying chloro-fluorocarbons (CFCs), plus threats to birds and other wildlife. Although the study gives equal weight to all its indicators, many would claim that these are among the most critical measures of sustainability.

Other variables included in the study suggest some possible reasons for the country's environmental problems. Relative to the size of its population and economy, Thailand has fewer scientists and engineers than poorer neighbours such as India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, and spends less of its



**Too much of this ..**

national income on research and development. And contrary to popular belief, Thailand's gasoline prices are among the world's lowest, which is nice for the trucking industry but hardly an incentive to reduce consumption and protect the atmosphere.

The study might provide a few glimmers of hope for optimists. As has been widely acknowledged for many years, Thailand has done well at controlling the rate of growth of its population, and this achievement has implications for many other aspects of sustainability.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the private sector appears to have responded to environmental challenges better than might be expected for countries with similar levels of income and development. Relative to the size of its economy, only seven countries have more companies certified under the ISO 14001 environmental standard. Thailand also scores relatively highly on the Dow Jones Sustainability Group Index and for membership of the World Business Council on Sustainable Development, both of which are private initiatives and focus on business rather than the public sector.

Yet the study finds contradictions even among measures focusing on the private sector. According to a survey, few Thai business leaders compared to those in other countries believe that complying with environmental standards has a positive influence on competitiveness. This suggests that whatever environmentally progressive steps they might be taking, they are doing so reluctantly, or perhaps for cosmetic reasons, rather than treating them as serious business opportunities.



**Not enough of this**

Some findings are hard to believe. Pedestrians attempting to cross Silom Road will be surprised to learn that Thailand ranks as high as 25th for the quality of its air. And environmentalists will raise an eyebrow when they read that Thailand scores relatively well for stringency and consistency in enforcing environmental regulations. Such apparent lapses serve to emphasise that in its present form the ESI is not yet a finished, refined yardstick.

But the study is an important step towards measuring the slippery concept of environmental sustainability, arguably the most fundamental of all issues. It provides a basis for discussion and for setting up a comprehensive range of meaningful, measurable indicators. Those indicators can in turn strengthen policy and focus the efforts of those in the front line on the areas where performance is weakest.

And indicators can serve as powerful weapons in the battle to hold politicians and civil servants accountable for their actions, or lack of them. Perhaps they would encourage our leaders to spare us the empty platitudes that have come to pass for policy statements.

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 The government's policy statement (in English):  
<http://www.thaigov.go.th/index--eng.htm>

The report of the study is at: <http://www.ciesin.columbia.edu/indicators/ESI>