



Environmental Vulnerability Index

A vulnerability index for the natural environment, the basis of all human welfare, has been developed by the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and their partners. The index was developed through consultation and collaboration with countries, institutions and experts across the globe. This index is designed to be used with economic and social vulnerability indices to provide insights into the processes that can negatively influence the sustainable development of countries.

The reason for using indices for this purpose is to provide a rapid and standardised method for characterising vulnerability in an overall sense, and identifying issues that may need to be addressed within each of the three pillars of sustainability, namely environmental, economic and social aspects of a country's development. Development is often achieved through trade-offs between these pillars. Therefore, in order to promote sustainability, it has become increasingly important to be able to measure how vulnerable each aspect is to damage and to identify ways of building resilience. With this information to hand, the outcome for countries could be optimised for their unique situations and development goals.

The natural environment is unequivocally the life support system for all human endeavours. Far from being a luxury available only to those countries that can 'afford' it, successful environmental management will increasingly become the basis for the success or failure of the economies and social systems. Environmental management now occurs within countries in response to individual development projects and at a global scale through international agreements. The approaches being used are largely concerned with pressure being applied to the environment by humans, or the state of the environment. They concentrate on improving practices through the development of guidelines for action, the use of protection, or by limiting exploitation, degradation and pollution. These approaches are critical to our efforts at environmental management, but are insufficient on their own to ensure a sustainable future. They do not always focus on optimisation or the cumulative outcome of our many actions and management approaches over different scales of time or space. Even countries with a good current state of their environment can be highly vulnerable to future damage.

The Environmental Vulnerability Index (EVI) is among the first of tools now being developed to focus environmental management at the same scales that environmentally significant decisions

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are made, and focus them on planned outcomes. The scale of entire countries is appropriate because it is the one at which major decisions affecting the environment in terms of policies, economics and social and cultural behaviours are made. If environmental conditions are monitored at the same time as those concerning human systems, there is better opportunity for feedback between them. Without exception, the environment is the life-support system for all human systems and therefore an integral part of the developmental success of countries.

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[Background](#)

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[Mechanics](#)

-

[Indicators](#)

-

[Results](#)

-

[Country Profiles](#)

-

[Calculator](#)

-

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-

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