

**The American Society, Social Culture and Human Development**

**Margot Gotzmann, Ph.D.**

***'The things that will destroy us are  
politics without principle, pleasure without conscience,  
wealth without work, knowledge without character,  
business without morality, science without humanity'***  
**Mahatma Gandhi**

***'The necessity to unite with other living beings,  
to be related to them, is an imperative need  
on the fulfillment of which man's sanity depends.'***  
**Eric Fromm**

***'It is a world where many ethnic minorities still live  
like a separate nation within their countries,  
creating potential for ethnic explosions'***  
**Mahbub ul Haq**

The history of mankind and the history of ideas, and that of human development ideas in particular, indicates that the different groups of the human species have experienced very divergent external living conditions, modes of activities, cultural ideo-orientations and identities that shaped their physical appearances as well as intellectual, social, political, economic and spiritual beliefs and habits. Clearly, people – wherever they are – do not look the same, do not think and believe identically, do not share the same values and customs. But all such distinctions apart, we are all the same as members of the *homo sapiens* species. Clearly, no representative of our species, no sober-minded person would nowadays suggest that humanity revert to animal-like brutal behavior typical of the barbaric past, to hatred, bestiality and obsession with violence and unconstrained power. No human person can tolerate savage neglectance of an individual's sanctity of life, bloody tribal revenge, humiliation, harassing and enslavement of women, men, children, the poor, the disabled and physically different human beings. Mankind has passed through those cruel lessons and sufferings. Modern societies of the East and of the West bear responsibility for transforming these negative experiences and erroneous paths of expansion into new generations of human development, into new global, regional and local ideas and policies. Universal ideas, principles and values are not the exclusive product of Western civilization or Western culture. Our young Western world has been built on selected multicultural, multiethnic experiences and concepts of our diverse ancestors.

Here in the Western country with undeniable multiethnic roots, no one can build social unity or successful social integration ensuring the dominance of only one of many ethnic groups inhabiting America. The American society is a good sample of the whole humanity, rich in every sort of distinction but parallelly manifesting the same basic qualities of human beings. What one can and should do, is trying to build on those similarities a sustainable social unity. Raimond Panikkar maintains that no contemporary religion, no culture, is fully self-sufficient. He suggests that we are starving with the full ideo-stomach because of the absence of some vital nutrients in our ideo-diet. Thus, we are forced to supplement our ideo-meals by taking some vitamins and microelements from other cultural products.

In this contemporary global era, a restless strive to get a properly balanced ideo-diet, has reached another edge. Richard E. Nisbett, a cognitive psychologist, in his latest book 'The Geography of Thought' demonstrated a ground-breaking work that is surprising for many universalists and even for some culturalists. The book's subtitle reads: 'How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... and Why?' Presumably those universalists who are surprised and disappointed must be the Westerners, as they are maintaining that their type of reasoning and cognitive methodologies is universal just because they are Western. R. Nisbett admits '*I have been a life-long universalist, concerning the nature of human thought. Marching in step with the long Western line, from the British empiricist philosophers, such as Hume, Locke and Mill to modern-day cognitive scientists (...) but research had led me to a conviction that two utterly different approaches to the world, have maintained themselves for thousands of years.*'<sup>1</sup> The epilogue bears a title in a form of a question: 'The end of Psychology or the Clash of Mentalities'. The author ponders in this chapter the possibility of Western-Eastern convergence based not solely on Westernization but also on Easternization and some new cognitive forms constructed and based on blending social systems and values. He admits that there are very evident indicators of mutual attraction between the East and the West. For example, students in Beijing declare their interest in so-called Western values such as individualism, individual independence, imagination, creativity, individual success and uniqueness, while American students reveal their attachment to the so-called Eastern values like family, social loyalty, harmonic cooperation and tradition. '*Many Americans who find individualism to be alienating, look to Eastern forms of*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard E. Nisbett (2003) '*The Geography of Thought. How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... And Why*' New York, London, Toronto, Sydney; Free Press, p. XIII, XX

*the community as possible cures for social anomie*,<sup>2</sup> writes Nisbett and adds: *'I believe the twain shall meet by the virtue of each moving in the direction of the other'*.<sup>3</sup> Representing a very heuristic in nature and a very practical approach to the issue of a new – enlarged version of universalism, C. Hampden-Turner and F. Trompenaars in their book *'Building Cross-Cultural Competence. How to Create Wealth from Conflicting Values'* write: *'We discover that what we see so clearly, some foreigners miss, what they see so clearly, most of us miss. (...) The ideal we seek in this book is to perceive and think in both directions. This is another way or arguing that we must learn to think in circles or cybernetically. (...) Not only must individuals justify themselves by building families, companies and communities, but communities and the social units within these must justify themselves by nurturing individuality among their members'*.<sup>4</sup> The above-mentioned authors point out that individualism supplements communitarianism and *vice versa*. This observation is smart but to be practical as well, one should somewhat transform those terms to obtain a pro-communitarian version of individualism and pro-individualistic version of communitarianism. Thus corrected concepts will be able to create the demanded wholeness. The proposed method of connecting seemingly contradicting values can become a precious tool in constructing a new, integrating type of an enlarged Eastern-Western universalism. While some individuals and communities restlessly fight their inhuman, racial and ethnic wars, human-development-oriented-communities and their leaders try to promote multiethnic, multireligious societies yet characterized by the monochromic , universal in nature human development philosophy and social culture. In my definition social culture is a complex structure composed of many subcultures including political, economic, organizational and communal culture.

Human development as a paradigm is an inspiring concept designed by the Pakistani economist and global social leader Mahbub ul Haq in close collaboration with an excellent team of social scientists and economists headed by Noble prize winner Armatya Sen and Paul Streeten. Here they are defining the human development as a process of widening people's choices. P. Streeten wrote in his foreword to M. ul Haq's *'Reflections on Human Development'*: *'Human development puts people back at center stage after decades in which a maze of technical concepts had obscured this fundamental vision (...). Human development*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 225

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 229

<sup>4</sup> Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars (2000) *'Building Cross-Cultural Competence. How to Create Wealth from Conflicting Values'*, New Haven and London; York University Press, p. 225

*is a concern not only for the poor countries and poor people, but everywhere. In the high-income countries, indicators of shortfalls in human development should be looked for in homelessness, drug addiction, crime, unemployment, urban squalor, environmental degradation, personal insecurity and social disintegration.*<sup>5</sup> Discussing the present and the future shape of the American society and American social culture this powerful message should not be ignored. M. ul Haq has stressed on many occasions that the human development idea is much wider and much more comprehensive than its predecessor i.e. the basic needs concept or other versions of the socio-economic development theory. *'Rather than the residual of development, human beings could finally become its principle objects and subject – not forgotten economic abstraction, but a living operational reality not helpless victims or slaves of the very process of development'*.<sup>6</sup>

Until July, 2008 this concept has been adopted exclusively by the developing countries or countries in transition, encouraged by the guidance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UNDP's technical and financial support in preparation of the Human Development Reports and elaboration of Human Development Indexes. UNDP mandate does not allow supporting advanced countries. High-income nations can play the exclusive role of donors and cannot become recipients of their own donations. Fortunately, an independent group of outstanding scholars led by Sarah Burd-Sharps decided to fill this gap and write the first-ever Human Development Report for the United States entitled 'The Measure of America. Human Development Report 2008 and 2009'. How does the American society look like in the light of this historic work? Well, in comparison with the rest of the developed countries, and from the point of view of the basic features of human development, America is doing rather poorly. A. Sen puts it clearly in his foreword to the report: *'If the human development approach has done a great deal across the world to reduce the artificial gap between what people really worry about and how their lives are assessed in the national statistics, the approach has been remarkably neglected in the U.S. in particular. (...) The U.S. is in most ways of counting, the wealthiest nation in the world, and yet its accomplishments in longevity, secure health, fine education and other such basic features of good living are considerably below*

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Streeten, in: Mahbub ul Haq (1995) *'Reflections on Human Development'*, New York, Oxford; Oxford University Press, p. VIII

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 20

those of many other often much poorer countries.<sup>7</sup> Authors of the report reveal, as they put it, some awkward truth about the unprecedented scale in America of negligence in the social sphere. It follows from the report that other affluent countries have been much more effective in translating their economic progress into their citizens' well being. Spending less money *per capita*, they have achieved better outcomes in many fundamental areas of social life like health, longevity or infant mortality. While America's score on the global Human Development Index increased over the last twenty years, other advanced countries have progressed much faster. The U.S. has lost its second position gained in 1980 and dropped dramatically to 12th place in 2005, as shown on graph on page 11, presenting top-ranking countries in human development, 1980-2005. American Human Development Index, similarly to the Global HDI, is a complex indicator composed of three sub-measures covering health, education and income indexes<sup>8</sup>. The table on page 10, pictures significant differences between the American states with regards to their accomplishments in human development. This data indicate remarkable disparities between ethnic groups and between men and women. As a result of this relatively low performance, the United States ranks 24<sup>th</sup> in life expectancy. Inner disparities within the American society are even more shocking and shameful. The capitol city, Washington D.C., has the shortest life span in the country amounting to 73.8 years, nearly ten years less than the State of Hawaii (with the average 81.7). Today, African Americans have a shorter life span than the average American in the late 1970's. African American males live nearly 20 years shorter than Asian American females who attain an average age of 88.8. It is noteworthy, however, that according to recent findings, African Americans' overall trends in many aspects of life are evidently positive and that is reflected in the high rate of college graduation, less barriers in professional careers, higher standard of living. Regretfully, the situation in this social group is still very disturbing and unsatisfactory in terms of life expectancy and health.

Numerous pathologies of social policy and worrisome social weaknesses of American social culture, total lack of preventive programs and inexistence of effective public health care system are the main reasons accounting for the

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<sup>7</sup> Armatya Sen, Foreword in: Sarah Burd-Sharps, Kristen Lewis, Eduardo Borges Martins (2008) *The Measure of America. American Human Development Report 2008-2009*, New York; Social Science Research Council & Columbia University Press, p. XI-XII

<sup>8</sup> This index is measured by life expectancy at birth, education index measured by school enrollment for population three years old and older and educational degree attainment for the population 25 years old and older as well as the income index accounted with the use of median earnings of all full and part-time workers of 16 years old and older.

serious decline in human development in the U.S. There are also other serious societal abnormalities and shortages causing a high level of social disintegration. These include in particular such painful and intolerable phenomenon as the still unrestrained and nearly omnipresent discrimination against people of color and immigrants. Our public discourse is still dominated by language oriented on race and ethnicity. On many occasions, the American society is defined in terms of competing minorities. The permanent emphasis on ethnic differences and distances diminishes our chances to strengthen national unity and integration. A rising number of people complain of being forced to lie while asked about their ethnic (racial) origin. Despite the growing number of cross marriages, official questionnaires do not include a multi-racial category. Frank H. Wu makes significant remarks about some public utterances praising in reality strongly exaggerated 'overachievement' of Asian Americans especially juxtaposed against African Americans and Latinos. Such sort of social message provokes thinking in racial terms and fuels American ethnic antagonisms. Stereotypes, especially those painted in ethnic colors, reflect a dangerous rising tendency and ignorance. F. Wu suggests in his book 'Yellow Race in America. Beyond Black and White' that we should seek other possibilities, for '*Assimilation says everyone must convert to Anglo-conformity and multiculturalism that nobody can do.*'<sup>9</sup> Many 'old' and 'new' Americans still perceived as strangers face the same pervasive humiliating challenge, trying to avoid social isolation, exclusion and even segregation directly related to their 'secondary' ethnic status. Many others suffer from the so-called 'identity crisis' or 'identity confusion'. James N. Rosenau in his 'People Count! Networked Individuals in Global Politics' notices that increasing globalization creates people lacking a sense of territoriality. They are immigrants and citizens – they are 'hybrids' who legally belong to a concrete country but their legal status has no personal meaning to them. Ever more young people with multiethnic background suddenly rediscover the unexpected collision between different kinds of national loyalties. Apart of millions of 'legal ghosts' suffering from the lack of legal status and work permit in America, there is also a much bigger number of 'social ghosts', people living in lonely islands, the inner cities, the ethnic and social ghettos. This gloomy phenomenon of racial discrimination is the one undeniably main reason to blame, but another one slips very often away from our observations and scientific analysis. It happens in a quite natural manner that newly arrived immigrant seeks help from their diaspora members. What they can eventually find within some of the communities is a misconception of loyalty

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<sup>9</sup> *Beyond Black and White*, New York; Basic Books, a Member of the Perseus Books Group, p. 58

towards their previous country preaching that every immigrant's patriotic duty requires refusal to integrate with the new society and with the adopted country. Some diaspora leaders even argue that the appearance of a new national loyalty and new social engagements will be an act of betrayal of their real and the only one home. To my judgment, such a dangerous approach fuels identity confusion and aggravates identity crisis, discouraging newcomers to take the necessary effort to create their new home while existing in their each day reality. Instead of the support of the comfortable but irresponsible tendency to marginalize the 'diaspora' syndrome and other identity concerns, let's try to consider a potential solution to this vital problem. I propose a multi-layer model of identity comprised of subidentities set in a well-ordered identity structure, in which each layer fulfills a particular function and does not conflict with other layers.

Successful design and management of this complicated mindset would require a lot of individual work – a kind of a self-socialization process – a good task and a test for a new sort of personality described by psychologist Kazimierz Obuchowski and called by him a 'self-author personality'.

According to Obuchowski, we witness a global revolution of subjects characterized by a revolutionary transformation of people's identities and their roles within the society. In his opinion, Alvin Toffler's agrarian, industrial and informational waves of civilizational development have been accompanied by respective types of personalities: a role-player, a personality of learning and a self-author personality. The current informational era formed the first-ever totally subjective human being, capable of freeing itself from being a sheer product of socio-cultural conditioning. The role-player was treated simply as an object with no chance to survive without total dependency on society. The learning personality acquired a status of a 'forced subject' with limited ability to go beyond the social description but not to a degree of becoming a self-aware subject. In this revolutionary realm it has become important whether the tasks to be performed by the individual were externally set for him/her or whether he/she created them for himself/herself. *'There are fewer and fewer possibilities of achieving people's well-being through changing the organization of their lives. Now there is room for the independent activity for autonomous persons, creating themselves from the inside and on the basis of their own initiatives'*, says the K. Obuchowski, the author of 'The Revolution of Subjects'.<sup>10</sup> He expresses interesting, though controversial opinions on traditional cultures that ceased to serve contemporary

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<sup>10</sup> Kazimierz Obuchowski (2006) *'The Revolution of Subjects'*, Lodz; School of Humanities and Economy, p. 36

living people from the moment of the appearance of the 20<sup>th</sup> century era of knowledge. In addition to that political democratic elites are missing on an opportunity to satisfy people's expectations by adopting new, increasingly inclusive organizational structures of lives of their voters. Self-author personality could definitely help out immigrants and other 'hybrids' to reshape or create their own multi-layer identities, but it does not obviously solve political, economic and administration problems. Post-modern societies could not avoid living the life of their organizations. Governments could not avoid being efficient in deliverance of basic social security systems and other legal and administrative structures and processes. Sound and efficient markets are irreplaceable but of course not sufficient to meet every need of a human being, not only of a citizen or of a client. Clearly, no political or economic force or structure can make people happy. While those forces or structures might help to free people from their material miseries, human indignities or insecurities, it ultimately depends on the people themselves how they are going to use their resources and freedoms. In another thought-provoking work Greg Easterbrook provides surprising facts and figures concerning the development and dilemma of progress : *'The percentage of Americans who describe themselves as 'happy' has not changed since the 1950's though the typical persons' real income has more than doubled through that period. Happiness has not increased in Japan or Western Europe in the past half-century neither though daily life in both those places has grown fantastically better (...). President Bill Clinton declared that Western society had <never before enjoyed at once so much prosperity combined with so much 'social progress'>. (...) Nevertheless the citizens of the United States and the European Union almost all of whom live better than almost all of the men and women of history, entertain considerable discontent',*<sup>11</sup> writes G. Eastbrook. Many of us are feeling even worse experiencing a widely spread clinical melancholy or 'unipolar permanent depression'. It disables Westerners to really enjoy their civilizational achievements. Does it mean that the material and social progress produces psychological discomfort and unhappiness? Certainly not. Do our personal and social knowledge, our personal, social culture and competence support us sufficiently? It does not seem that they do.

The concept of sustainable human development has been designed as an ideological framework and practical, technical toolkit for enlightened governments and international elites to help transform their national and global

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<sup>11</sup> Greg Easterbrook (2003) *'The Progress Paradox'*, New York, Random House Fraude Paperbacks, p. XVI



policies into people-oriented ones. However, no policy will succeed without not only a general acceptance by the society but also without this society's active and creative involvement aimed at achieving the same objective. There is a saying that new situations and new challenges require new approaches, new methodologies and tools to address them.

American politics and policies ought to and definitely can be much more focused on its people – citizens, residents and newcomers. Health, education, social integration, decent standard of living and environmental protection, those ABC's of a comprehensive good governance and human development – should top the list of national, regional and local priorities. Former US President Bill Clinton has recently appealed for a new model of citizenship that releases people's hidden potentials and employs everybody in new, numerous forms of civil society initiatives.

Amitai Etzioni also speaks up for more balanced and responsive society. In his 'The Spirit of Community. The Reinvention of American Society' he quotes the 'People for American Ways' report saying: *'Young people have learned only half of America's story. Consistent with the priority they place on personal happiness, young people reveal notions of America's unique character that emphasize freedom and license almost to the complete exclusion of service or participation. (...) they fail to perceive a need to reciprocate by exercising the duties and responsibilities of good citizenship.'*<sup>12</sup> These days, we are experiencing a difficult and threatening period of an American and global economic crisis. In the light of this crisis, one can clearly discern other national and social weaknesses. But this is also a perfect time to rethink and reshape our views of ourselves, of our society, our institutions and systems. Perhaps this is a good time to try to get to a new level of individual and social awareness and competence to be able to foster American multiethnic, multireligious society with, I do hope, monochromic human-development-based social culture.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Reinvention of American Society*, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore; A Touchstone Book

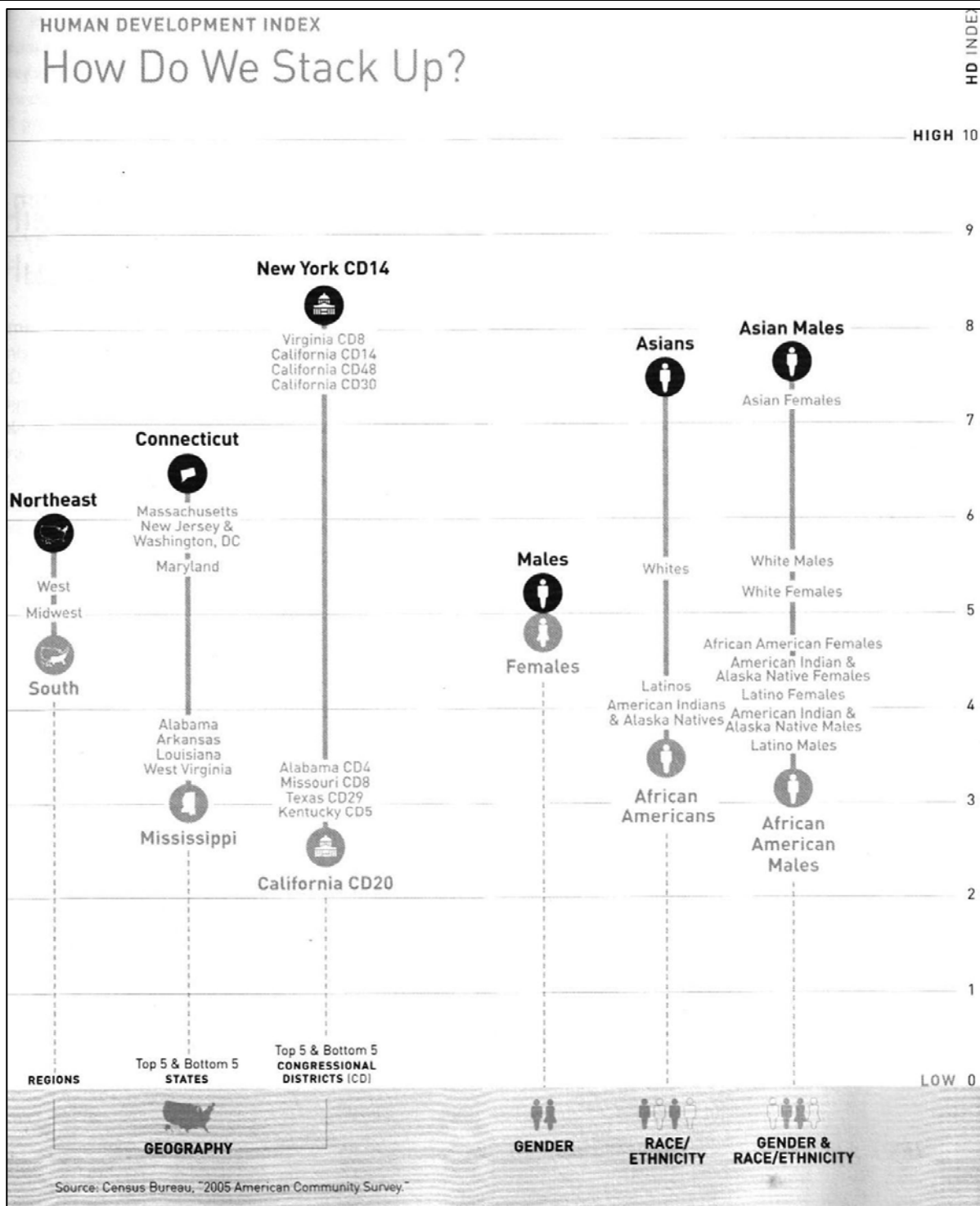
**FIGURE 1.2 Top-Ranked Countries in Human Development, 1980–2005**

1 Switzerland	1 Canada	1 Canada	1 Norway	1 Norway	1 Iceland
<b>2 U.S.</b>	<b>2 U.S.</b>	<b>2 U.S.</b>	2 Canada	2 Sweden	2 Norway
3 Iceland	3 Switzerland	3 Iceland	3 Sweden	3 Australia	3 Australia
4 Norway	4 Norway	4 Japan	4 Netherlands	4 Netherlands	4 Canada
5 Canada	5 Iceland	5 Switzerland	5 Australia	5 Iceland	5 Ireland
6 Japan	6 Japan	6 Netherlands	<b>6 U.S.</b>	6 Canada	6 Sweden
7 Netherlands	7 Netherlands	7 Norway	7 Belgium	7 Switzerland	7 Switzerland
8 Denmark	8 Sweden	8 France	8 Japan	8 Belgium	8 Netherlands
9 Sweden	9 Denmark	9 Finland	9 UK	<b>9 U.S.</b>	9 Japan
10 France	10 France	10 Sweden	10 Switzerland	10 Japan	10 Finland
11 Belgium	11 Finland	11 Belgium	11 France	11 Finland	11 France
12 Australia	12 Belgium	12 Austria	12 Iceland	12 France	<b>12 U.S.</b>
<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>

America's score on the global Index increased steadily over the last twenty-five years but other countries have progressed more quickly. As a result, the United States dropped from **number 2** in 1980 to **number 12** in 2005, falling behind peer nations that have been more efficient in transforming income into positive health and education outcomes.

Source: UNDP, *Human Development Report 2007/2008*.

Sarah Burd-Sharps, Kristen Lewis,  
 Eduardo Borges Martins (2008) *The  
 Measure of America. American  
 Human Development Report 2008-  
 2009*. New York; Social Science  
 Research Council & Columbia  
 University Press. p. 13



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University Press. p. 29