

MEASURING A NATION - THE BACKGROUND

World Schools, Rounds One and Two, prepared • University of Kentucky (Sept 11-13)

HMDC Forensics Team (Grades 3-6)

World Schools, Rounds One and Two, prepared. This House regrets the use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary metric of a nation's success. HMDC Forensics Team

WHY WE READ THIS FIRST

We are given a side in Rounds One and Two, and the sides switch between them, so we will argue this motion both ways before the day is over. That means we cannot simply learn one set of arguments. We have to understand the subject well enough that we could speak for either side if the ballot told us to.

This background does not contain arguments. It contains the facts underneath them, which is what lets us think on our feet when a judge asks a question we did not expect.

WHAT GDP ACTUALLY IS

Gross Domestic Product is one number. It adds up the value of everything a country produces in a year, and then people compare that number between countries, or compare this year's number with last year's.

If the number rises, we say the economy grew. If it falls, we say the economy shrank. Almost every government in the world reports this number, and almost every newspaper repeats it, which is how one measurement came to stand for whether a whole country is doing well.

There is a second version we will hear in rounds, called GDP per person. That one takes the same total and divides it by how many people live there, which makes it fairer for comparing a country of nine million with a country of nine hundred million.

WHERE THE NUMBER CAME FROM

This part matters more than it looks, because it gives us a piece of history that almost no opposing team will know.

GDP grew out of work done in the 1930s by an economist named Simon Kuznets, who was asked to help the United States understand how much damage the Great Depression had done. His measurement worked, and governments kept using it.

Here is the part worth remembering, and it is worth saying out loud in a round because it is short and it is startling. In 1934, in a report to the United States Senate, Kuznets warned that these statistics did not measure the welfare of a nation. They measured what a nation could produce and consume, which is a different question. The man who helped build the number told the government that made it official not to use it this way, and it was used this way anyway.

HOW COUNTRIES USE IT TODAY

We need to be able to name real practices rather than speaking in general terms, because a judge believes a debater who can say who does what.

The World Bank sorts every country in the world into income groups, and it uses income per person to do the sorting. Those groups then affect which countries can borrow money on easier terms and which countries receive development aid. So this number does not only describe a country. It decides things for that country.

Governments also promise growth at election time, newspapers report the quarterly figure as though it were a report card, and international organizations use it to rank nations against one another.

WHAT THE MOTION IS ACTUALLY ASKING

The motion uses the word "regrets," and that word does a specific job. It is not asking whether GDP is a perfect measurement, because everyone already agrees that it is not. It is asking whether leaning on it this heavily has been undesirable.

That gives each side a clear task.

The side that agrees with the motion has to show that treating this one number as the measure of success has already caused harm to real people. Not harm that might happen one day. Harm we can point to.

The side that disagrees has to show one of two things, and it may show both. It can show that the number works well enough for the job it does, or it can show that everything we might replace it with is worse.

Notice that the second one is often the stronger path, and we should expect a skilled opposing team to take it. A team that only attacks GDP, without being ready to defend what comes next, loses the moment it is asked what it wants instead.

WHAT PEOPLE WANT TO USE INSTEAD

Because the motion implies a replacement, we have to know the replacements. Each of these is real, and each has a record we can be questioned about.

The Human Development Index comes from the United Nations and combines income with health and education, so that a country cannot look successful on money alone. It is published every year and it is widely respected.

Gross National Happiness comes from Bhutan, which built its national planning around measures of wellbeing rather than production, and which screens its policies against those measures before adopting them.

The Genuine Progress Indicator tries to subtract the costs of economic activity, such as pollution and lost free time, from the benefits. Several American states have calculated it, including Maryland, Vermont and Hawaii.

New Zealand built a Wellbeing Budget in 2019, which meant deciding government spending against wellbeing goals rather than against growth alone. Wales passed a law in 2015 requiring public bodies to consider future generations. Scotland, Iceland, New Zealand, Wales and Finland now work together as a group of wellbeing economy governments.

THE PART THAT WILL DECIDE ROUND TWO

We should know the difficulty inside our own case before an opposing team finds it for us, because a team that already knows the weakness can answer it calmly.

Wales passed its wellbeing law in 2015, and in 2025 the auditor for the Welsh government reported that the law had not produced the change across the system that had been intended. He found enthusiasm, and he found some improved decisions, and he still concluded that the wider change had not arrived.

That report is difficult for the side arguing against GDP, because it does not come from an opponent of wellbeing measurement. It comes from inside the country that tried hardest. Researchers at the European Commission reached a similar conclusion about the European Union's own wellbeing frameworks, which they described as scattered enough to weaken the guidance they were meant to provide.

We do not hide from this. We prepare an answer to it.

VOCABULARY WE WILL NEED

These words will appear in our evidence, and speaking them confidently helps a judge trust us.

Metric means a measurement used to judge something.

Per capita means per person, which we get by dividing a total by the population.

Welfare, in economics, means how well people are actually living, which is not the same as how much a country produces.

Natural capital means the forests, fish, clean water and minerals a country has, which can be used up without GDP ever recording the loss.

Unpaid work means the cooking, cleaning and caring done inside homes, which is real work that GDP does not count.

Proposition and Opposition are the World Schools names for the two sides. We use those words rather than saying pro and con, because that is the language of this format and judges notice.

HOW WE PREPARE FROM HERE

Reading this once is not preparation. Here is what we do next.

We read the evidence pack and choose the three cards we can each say most naturally out loud, because a card we stumble over is a card we should not carry into a round.

We practise explaining GDP in two sentences without notes, since almost every round on this motion begins with somebody having to define it.

We each write one answer to the Wales problem, in our own words, and we compare them, because the team that has already thought about its weakest point is the team that stays calm when it is raised.