

MEASURING A NATION - BOTH SIDES

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

HOW TO USE THIS

Five arguments for each side. Every argument comes with the claim we make, the reason it holds, the evidence that proves it, and the answer we should expect back. That last part is the one most teams skip, and it is the reason they are surprised in the round.

We do not memorize these. We choose the ones that suit us and then say them in our own words, because a memorized argument collapses the moment a judge asks something slightly different.

PROPOSITION - WE REGRET LEANING ON THIS NUMBER

1. The richest country does not live the longest.

We claim that if GDP measured success, the country with the largest economy would be the country living best, and it is not.

This holds because health is the plainest test of whether a country is doing well, and money is supposed to buy health. When a country spends the most and still lives the fewest years, the number and the reality have come apart.

Our evidence is the Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker, which reported in March 2026 that life expectancy in the United States reached 79.0 years in 2024, while the average across comparable wealthy countries was 82.7 years. The same tracker reports that the United States spends nearly twice as much per person on healthcare as those countries.

Expect this answer: that health depends on diet, guns and drugs rather than on how success is measured. Our reply is that a country which measured success by how long its people lived would have treated those problems as failures years ago, and it did not, because its scoreboard kept saying it was winning.

2. The work done at home counts for nothing.

We claim that GDP leaves out an enormous amount of real work, and that the work it leaves out is mostly done by women.

This holds because cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and elderly parents are all work that somebody would otherwise be paid to do. The moment that work moves inside a home it disappears from the measurement, even though the effort and the benefit are identical.

Our evidence is the United Kingdom's own Office for National Statistics, which in December 2025 valued unpaid household services in 2023 at 1.7 trillion pounds, about 61 percent the size of GDP, and stated that these activities are not reflected in GDP.

Expect this answer: that statistics offices already measure this separately, so nothing is truly missing. Our reply is that measuring something in a side account nobody reads is not the same as counting it, and that the number governments actually steer by is still the one that leaves it out.

3. The measurement rewards destruction.

We claim that GDP rises when things go badly, which is the clearest sign that it is measuring the incorrect thing.

This holds because GDP counts activity rather than benefit. A wildfire that destroys a town produces demolition work, construction work and new furniture sales, and every one of those raises the number, even though the town is worse off than before.

Our evidence is three professors writing in *The Conversation* in August 2022, including Diane Coyle of the University of Cambridge, who list inequality, unpaid work, care work, and the loss of natural resources and biodiversity as things that simply go missing from this account.

Expect this answer: that no measurement is perfect and that people understand this already. Our reply is that people do not understand it, because governments still announce growth as though it were unambiguously desirable, and a number that can be raised by disaster should not be the one we celebrate.

4. Countries are running down what they own.

We claim that GDP measures income while ignoring whether a country is using up the natural wealth that income comes from.

This holds because a family that sells its furniture to pay for dinner looks wealthy on any measurement that counts only what came in this month. Nations do the same thing with forests, fisheries and clean water, and GDP records only the income.

Our evidence is the Yale School of the Environment in October 2024, reporting on the World Bank's *Changing Wealth of Nations* work. Between 1995 and 2020, real GDP per person rose about 50 percent globally, while renewable natural capital fell more than 20 percent and marine fish stocks per person fell more than 45 percent.

Expect this answer: that wealthier countries protect their environment better, so growth eventually solves this. Our reply is that the figures cover the same period in which the world grew wealthier, and the depletion happened anyway.

5. The number decides who gets help.

We claim that this is not merely a description of countries but a gatekeeper, and that the gate is closing on the countries that need help most.

This holds because international lending and aid depend on income per person, and income per person is an average. A small island nation with one profitable industry can cross an income line, lose access to easier borrowing, and still be unable to rebuild after a storm.

Our evidence is the United Nations policy brief of May 2023, written by the Secretary-General, which states that GDP continues to be used, or misused, as the benchmark for national and international policy settings, particularly in development financing.

Expect this answer: that lenders need some objective test and this is the fairest available. Our reply is that we are not asking them to lend blindly, only to stop letting one average decide a question that averages cannot answer.

OPPOSITION - WE DO NOT REGRET IT

1. The broader measure agrees with GDP anyway.

We claim that when economists build the wider measurement the critics ask for, it tells them almost exactly what GDP already told them.

This holds because the things the critics want included, such as how long people live and how leisure and inequality are distributed, tend to move together with production. Adding them changes the picture far less than anyone expects.

Our evidence is Charles Jones and Peter Klenow of Stanford University, who built a welfare measure including consumption, leisure, mortality and inequality, and found it correlated with GDP per person at 0.98.

Expect this answer: that a correlation is not the same as a match, and the gap is where the harm lives. Our reply is that a correlation of 0.98 leaves very little room for that harm, and the burden falls on the other side to show what fits inside it.

2. Nothing else lifts people out of poverty.

We claim that growth is the only route out of poverty ever observed, so the number that tracks growth deserves its place.

This holds because a country cannot share what it does not produce. Fairer distribution helps, and it cannot by itself raise a nation where average income is very low.

Our evidence is Our World in Data, which states plainly that without economic growth there is no chance at all to leave poverty behind, and that for poverty to decline in Madagascar the average income must increase.

Expect this answer: that we can pursue growth while measuring something else. Our reply is that governments chase what they are judged on, and removing growth from the scoreboard removes the pressure that poor countries most need applied.

3. The replacements can be built to say whatever we want.

We claim that every wellbeing index requires somebody to decide what matters more, and that whoever decides controls the answer.

This holds because combining health, education, income and environment into one score requires weighting them, and weighting is a value judgement rather than a measurement. Change the weights and the rankings change.

Our evidence is the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's own guidance of September 2025, which states that explicit weights may be interpreted as value judgements, and that even choosing to weight everything equally is itself a choice that may omit information.

Expect this answer: that GDP also embeds choices about what to count. Our reply is that GDP's choices are written into an international standard that every country follows and can be checked against, while an index's weights are chosen by whoever built it.

4. Happiness surveys cannot be compared between countries.

We claim that the softer measurements proposed as replacements are not reliable across borders, which is precisely the job we need them to do.

This holds because asking people how satisfied they are produces answers shaped by language, culture and what people feel able to admit. Two countries can answer the same question differently without living differently.

Our evidence is a study published in Humanities and Social Sciences Communications in November 2023, which tested large international surveys and concluded that using observed scores could lead to erroneous conclusions about country rankings on happiness.

Expect this answer: that the methods are improving. Our reply is that we are being asked to replace a working standard now, on the strength of measurements that the researchers themselves say cannot yet be compared safely.

5. The alternatives have been tried and have not changed much.

We claim that this is not a thought experiment, because several countries have already done what the other side proposes, and the results do not support them.

This holds because a decade is long enough to judge. If replacing the scoreboard transformed decisions, a country that legislated for it in 2015 would show that transformation by 2025.

Our evidence is the Auditor General for Wales, writing in April 2025 about the Well-being of Future Generations Act, who found energy and enthusiasm and some changed decisions, and concluded that the Act is not driving the system-wide change that was intended.

Expect this answer: that ten years is early and culture changes slowly. Our reply is that the motion asks about regret today, and a reform whose defenders must ask for more time has not yet earned the removal of what it replaces.

THE TWO SENTENCES WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SAY WITHOUT NOTES

Whichever side we are given, these are the sentences that carry the round.

For Proposition: the country that produces the most does not live the longest, does not count the work done in its homes, and can raise its score by burning down a town, which tells us the scoreboard has stopped describing the game.

For Opposition: when economists actually built the broader measure the other side asks for, it agreed with GDP almost perfectly, and the countries that replaced their scoreboard have not been able to show us what changed.