

HMDC Presents...

WORLD SCHOOLS · UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY · SEPTEMBER 2026

The Background

THE MOTION

‘This House regrets the use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary metric of a nation’s success.’

WHAT THE NUMBER IS

It adds up everything a country produces in one year.

One total, one country, one year. That total is then used to say how well the country is doing.

It was built in the 1930s, to measure a disaster.

Governments needed to see how much damage the Great Depression had done, so they built a number that could show it.

The world shares one accounting framework for it.

Because countries follow the same rulebook, the figures can be lined up against one another.

WHAT THE NUMBER DECIDES

It ranks countries against each other.

News reports, governments and lenders all use the ranking to say who is succeeding and who is falling behind.

It helps decide who is offered cheap finance.

The United Nations reports that some highly vulnerable countries are left without access to concessional financing.

It leaves out work that nobody is paid for.

Care at home, cooking and childcare are real work, and none of it is counted in the total.

THE TWO QUESTIONS A JUDGE IS LISTENING FOR

Is the number measuring the right thing?

Both sides agree the number measures production. The argument is whether production is a fair stand-in for success.

Would anything else be better?

A side that only attacks the number has not won. It has to show that the alternative would help more people.

Neither side has to prove the number is useless or perfect.

The Proposition shows that leaning on it this heavily causes harm. The Opposition shows that it still helps more than it harms. The team that measures the harm wins the round.

The Proposition Case

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WHAT WE HAVE TO PROVE

That the harm is real, and that people carry it.

Not that the number is imperfect. Every measure is imperfect. We show who is hurt by leaning on this one.

That the harm follows from using it as the primary metric.

The motion is about primacy. We win by showing what goes undone because this number is the one that counts.

That something better is available.

Wellbeing accounts and natural capital accounts already exist, and one state has already measured both.

Proposition

We argue that leaning on this number as the measure of national success is undesirable, because it hides harm that is happening to people and to the planet right now.

1 Americans live 3.7 years less than people in comparable countries, while the number says the country is succeeding.

Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker, March 31 2026.

They will answer... That a high average still buys better medicine. We reply that the medicine exists and the years are still missing.

2 £1.7 trillion of unpaid work at home was left out of the number in 2023.

Office for National Statistics, December 5 2025.

They will answer... That unpaid work is hard to price. We reply that a government priced it, and then left it out anyway.

3 The same number leaves some highly vulnerable countries without access to cheap finance after a disaster.

United Nations, Policy Brief 4, May 2023.

They will answer... That the rule is being reformed. We reply that the islands are refused help now, not after the reform.

4 War, pollution, crime, congestion, wildfires and the destruction of nature can all push the number up.

The Conversation, August 18 2022.

They will answer... That rebuilding is real work. We reply that a measure calling a wildfire growth is not measuring success.

5 Between 1995 and 2020 the number rose about 50 percent in every region while renewable natural capital fell by more than 20 percent.

Yale School of the Environment, October 22 2024.

They will answer... That the loss is being reversed. We reply that fish stocks per person fell more than 45 percent in the same period.

6 Hawai’i measured its genuine progress as well as its production, and progress came out at 55 percent of the headline figure.

Oleson and Ostergaard-Klem, University of Hawai’i, February 23 2022.

They will answer... That one state is not the world. We reply that it is the only state that measured both, and the gap was almost half.

Our strongest ground is the same period measured twice.

The number rose while the natural wealth underneath it fell. Reading those two figures from one source, in one breath, is the moment the judge sees the harm.

The Opposition Case

THE MOTION

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WHAT WE HAVE TO PROVE

That the number still tracks what people care about.

A measure that moves with welfare at 0.98 is tracking something real.

That the replacements are not ready.

We do not defend the number as perfect. We show that swapping it out today would make decisions worse, not better.

That growth is what funds the services people need.

Hospitals, schools and clean water are paid for out of the economy the number measures.

Opposition

We argue that keeping this number as the primary measure is desirable, because it still tracks how people actually live, and because nothing available today would do the job better.

1 A broad measure of welfare tracks income across countries at a correlation of 0.98.

Jones and Klenow, Stanford University, February 10 2016.

They will answer... That the gaps behind the average are large. We reply that no rival measure comes close to 0.98.

2 A world with substantially less poverty needs an economy at least five times bigger than today’s.

Our World in Data, March 15 2021.

They will answer... That growth can be unequal. We reply that without the growth there is nothing to share out at all.

3 One shared set of international standards is what lets countries be compared consistently at all.

Eurostat, April 9 2025.

They will answer... That the standard is still being revised. We reply that a shared framework beats no framework.

4 Government health spending is projected from the size of the economy, so growth is what pays for hospitals.

World Bank, Government Health Spending Outlook, November 2024.

They will answer... That spending could be redirected instead. We reply that redirection has a ceiling and growth does not.

5 Happiness scores can only be compared between a few countries, because the survey items behave differently in each one.

Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, November 23 2023.

They will answer... That happiness data is improving. We reply that our opponents need a measure that works today.

6 Ten years after one country put a wellbeing measure into law, its own auditor found it is not driving the change intended.

Audit Wales, April 29 2025.

They will answer... That ten years is early. We reply that the only country to legislate the alternative is our opponents’ best case.

Our strongest ground is that the alternative has been tried.

One country wrote a wellbeing measure into law, and ten years on its own auditor says the system-wide change has not arrived. That is the case against replacement, made by the people who attempted it.

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THE MOTION

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WHAT THE NUMBER IS

It adds up what a country produces in a year.

We use that total to compare how different countries are performing.

It was built in the 1930s to help governments plan.

It was created to measure the damage of the Great Depression.

Countries follow one shared accounting framework.

That shared rulebook is why the number can be compared across borders.

Proposition

The side that argues using GDP is undesirable, because it causes harm to people and to the planet.

Americans live 3.7 fewer years than people in comparable countries.

Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker, March 31 2026.

£1.7 trillion of unpaid household work is left out of the number.

Office for National Statistics, December 5 2025.

The number decides which islands are refused cheap finance after a storm.

United Nations, Policy Brief 4, May 2023.

Wildfires and pollution can push the number up, not down.

The Conversation, August 18 2022.

Opposition

The side that argues using GDP is desirable, because it tracks progress and pays for services.

A broad wellbeing measure tracks income at a correlation of 0.98.

Jones and Klenow, Stanford University, February 10 2016.

Ending poverty needs an economy at least five times bigger.

Our World in Data, March 15 2021.

One international standard lets every country be compared fairly.

Eurostat, April 9 2025.

Growth is what pays for the hospitals people depend on.

World Bank, November 2024.

Both sides are supported by serious institutions, so the debate is decided by who shows the larger harm.

We must use evidence from these sources to prove our points to the judge.