

GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT - THE FULL ARGUMENT, 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. University of Kentucky (Sept 11-13). This House regrets the use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary metric of a nation's success. HMDC Forensics Team

WHY THIS DOCUMENT EXISTS

The evidence packet gives us cards. This document gives us the round. For every argument on both sides it sets out the claim we make, the evidence that carries it, the mechanism that turns the evidence into harm or into help, the strongest answer the other side will give us, and the reply we give back to that answer.

We are prepared on both sides because the sides switch between Rounds One and Two, which means every argument written here will at some point be argued against us by a team that has read the same research we have.

THE MOTION, READ CAREFULLY

The motion regrets the use of Gross Domestic Product as the PRIMARY metric of a nation's success. Three words in that sentence decide the round, and a team that misses them will spend eight minutes arguing something nobody asked about.

Regrets. We are not asked to abolish the number, to ban it, or to legislate anything at all. Regret is a backward-looking judgment about a practice that has already happened, which means the Proposition wins by showing harm that has already occurred rather than harm that might occur later.

Primary. The motion does not say only. Nobody in this debate believes that GDP is the single number any government looks at, and a Proposition team that argues against that position is arguing against nobody. What the motion attacks is primacy, meaning the practice of letting one number rank countries, sort them for lending, and stand in public for whether a country is succeeding.

Metric of success. The measure is not being judged as economics. It is being judged as a scoreboard, which is a different job from the one it was built to do, and that gap is where the Proposition lives.

WHAT EACH SIDE MUST PROVE

The Proposition must prove that treating this number as the main score has caused real harm to real people, and that the harm is traceable to the primacy of the measure rather than to the politics around it.

The Proposition does NOT have to prove that GDP is useless, that it should be abolished, or that any particular replacement would be superior. Every minute spent defending a replacement is a minute spent on the Opposition's ground.

The Opposition must prove either that the harms described were not caused by the measure, or that every available replacement would cause more harm than the measure does. The Opposition is allowed, and is strongest when it is willing, to concede that the number is imperfect.

The Opposition does NOT have to prove that GDP is a complete picture of human life. No serious source claims that, and a team defending that position is defending something indefensible for no gain.

HOW THIS ROUND IS WEIGHED

Both sides here are supported by serious institutions, which means neither side will win by producing a better fact. The round is decided on three questions, and a team that answers all three explicitly will beat a team that answers none of them while sounding confident.

First, scale against certainty. The Proposition harms are large but diffuse. The Opposition harms are smaller but far more certain, because the Opposition can point at replacements that have actually been tried and have actually disappointed. A judge asked to choose between a large maybe and a small certainly will follow whichever side names the trade openly.

Second, who is counted. Almost every Proposition argument is about people the average leaves out, and almost every Opposition argument is about the average being reliable. That is the true clash of this motion, and it should be stated in those words in the summary speech.

Third, comparison. Regret is comparative whether either side admits it or not. A judge will ask compared to what, and the team that answers before being asked controls the second half of the round.

PROPOSITION ARGUMENT ONE - THE LENGTH OF A LIFE

THE CLAIM. A country can lead the world on this number and trail it on how long its people live.

THE EVIDENCE. According to the Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker, March 31 2026, life expectancy in the country with the largest economy on earth reached a record 79.0 years in 2024, which is still 3.7 years below the comparable-country average of 82.7 years, and this occurs while that country spends nearly twice as much per person on healthcare as those comparable countries do.

WHY IT MATTERS. This argument matters because it separates the score from the thing the score is supposed to stand for. If the purpose of measuring a nation's success is to know whether life there is going well, and a country can be first on the measure while being last among its peers on the length of a life, then the measure and the purpose have come apart.

That is not a claim about healthcare policy, which is why it survives contact with an Opposition team that wants to argue about healthcare policy.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that life expectancy is determined by healthcare systems, diet, road deaths and firearm deaths rather than by which statistic a government publishes, and that no measure other than GDP is being blamed for outcomes it does not cause.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that we are not claiming the measure caused the deaths. We are claiming that a scoreboard which reports a country as succeeding while its people die younger than their peers is failing at the one job a scoreboard has, which is to tell us whether things are going well. A thermometer that reads normal in a fever is not blamed for the fever, and it is still replaced.

PROPOSITION ARGUMENT TWO - THE WORK COUNTED AT ZERO

THE CLAIM. The work that holds a country together is counted at zero.

THE EVIDENCE. According to the Office for National Statistics, December 5 2025, unpaid household service work in Britain was worth 1.7 trillion pounds in 2023, which is about 61 percent the size of the whole economy, and the same publication states plainly that these activities sit outside the production boundary and so are not reflected in GDP.

WHY IT MATTERS. This argument matters because the omission is not random. The cooking, the caring and the cleaning that are left out are done disproportionately by particular people, which means every policy built on the figure is built on a picture in which those people's work does not exist. A country that moves that work from home into the paid economy records growth without a single extra hour of anything being done, which shows the measure is tracking the transaction rather than the work.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that Britain measures this work already, that the Household Satellite Account exists precisely because statisticians know about the gap, and that a gap which is measured and published every year is a known limitation rather than a harm.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that measuring something in a satellite account is exactly our point, because a satellite account is where a country puts the things it has decided are not part of the score. The figure is published and then excluded, deliberately, every year, and the people whose work it describes stay invisible to every decision made on the headline number.

PROPOSITION ARGUMENT THREE - THE ISLANDS THAT ARE REFUSED HELP

THE CLAIM. The measure decides who is rescued.

THE EVIDENCE. According to the United Nations, May 2023, in the Secretary- General's Our Common Agenda policy brief, GDP continues to be used, and the United Nations own word is misused, as the benchmark for important national and international policy settings, in particular in respect of development financing. The World Bank confirms the mechanism from the other

direction, stating on July 1 2025 that its income classifications, which are built from income per person, shape lending terms and development policy worldwide.

WHY IT MATTERS. This is the strongest Proposition argument available to a young speaker, because it is the one place where the measure does not merely describe the world but decides an outcome inside it. A small island state whose income per person looks comfortable on paper is placed in a category that removes its access to concessional finance, and it is placed there while a storm is destroying it. The harm is specific, it is current, and it happens to people who cannot vote in any of the countries that built the rule.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say, correctly, that lending institutions must sort countries somehow, that any sorting rule will produce hard cases at its boundaries, and that the alternative of sorting by a wellbeing index would simply move the boundary rather than remove it.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that we are not asking for a world without categories. We are asking why the category is set by the one measure that is known to be blind to vulnerability, when the sorting decision is precisely the moment vulnerability matters most. Their answer defends having a rule. It does not defend this rule.

PROPOSITION ARGUMENT FOUR - DAMAGE THAT READS AS GROWTH

THE CLAIM. A country can be harmed and appear to improve.

THE EVIDENCE. According to The Conversation, August 18 2022, three professors, Diane Coyle of the University of Cambridge, Paul Allin of Imperial College London and Tim Jackson of the University of Surrey, write that numerous aspects of our lives simply go missing from this conventional account, naming inequality, unpaid work, the labour of those who care for the young and the elderly, and the depletion of natural resources and biodiversity.

WHY IT MATTERS. The mechanism is arithmetic rather than opinion. Rebuilding after a fire is production, and production is added. The forest that burned was never on the books, so its loss is subtracted from nothing. The measure therefore records destruction followed by repair as a country doing better than it was doing before either happened.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that nobody has ever claimed GDP is a welfare measure, that national accountants say so themselves, and that criticising a production measure for not measuring welfare is criticising a ruler for not telling the time.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that this is our case rather than an answer to it. The motion regrets the use of the number as the primary measure of SUCCESS, and their reply concedes that the number does not measure success. If the tool does not do the job, the practice of using it for the job is what we are asking the judge to regret, and they have just agreed with us about the tool.

PROPOSITION ARGUMENT FIVE - GROWTH WHILE THE FISH DISAPPEAR

THE CLAIM. The score can climb while the thing that feeds people shrinks.

THE EVIDENCE. According to the Yale School of the Environment, October 22 2024, reporting the work of Eli Fenichel, between 1995 and 2020 real income per person rose about 50 percent while renewable natural capital fell more than 20 percent and marine fish stocks per capita fell more than 45 percent.

WHY IT MATTERS. This argument matters because it is about the future rather than the present, and it shows the measure rewarding the consumption of the thing that produces future income. A country that sells its stock and records the sale as income appears to be succeeding at exactly the moment it is becoming poorer, and no signal in the primary measure tells anyone that this is happening.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that natural capital accounts already exist, that the United Nations System of Environmental Economic Accounting is an agreed international standard, and that the answer is to publish both rather than to regret the first.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that publishing both is not the practice under discussion. The motion is about primacy, and a supplementary account that no newspaper prints and no lending decision uses is not competing for primacy with anything. Their answer describes a world we would be content with, which is a world where this measure is not primary.

PROPOSITION ARGUMENT SIX - THE TYPICAL FAMILY LEFT BEHIND

THE CLAIM. The average can rise while most families feel nothing.

THE EVIDENCE. According to the University of Oxford, in the Review of Income and Wealth, 2018, Brian Nolan, Max Roser and Stefan Thewissen document a yawning gap between cumulative growth in income per person and growth in the income of the median household across wealthy countries. The World Inequality Lab adds, in the World Inequality Report 2022, that national average income levels are poor predictors of inequality, since among high-income countries some are very unequal while others are relatively equal.

WHY IT MATTERS. An average is a single number describing many different lives, and two countries with identical averages can be built completely differently underneath. When the headline measure rises and the household in the middle does not move, the country is told it is succeeding by a number that describes somebody else.

A WARNING BEFORE ANYONE USES THIS. The Oxford paper concludes that shrinking household size, rather than inequality, is the largest single cause of the gap. We claim the divergence, which the paper establishes. We never claim the cause, because a prepared Opposition team will have read the same paper and will read that conclusion aloud, and a team caught overstating one card loses credibility on all of them.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will read that conclusion aloud and say the gap is a demographic artifact rather than a failure of the measure.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that the cause does not matter to the person living it. Whether the middle household is falling behind because of inequality or because households are smaller,

the headline number is still reporting a rise that the median family does not experience, and a measure whose headline diverges from the typical life is not describing the typical life.

OPPOSITION ARGUMENT ONE - IT ALREADY CARRIES WHAT THEY SAY IT MISSES

THE CLAIM. The broad measure they ask for has been built, and it says almost the same thing.

THE EVIDENCE. According to Stanford University, February 10 2016, Charles Jones and Peter Klenow built a welfare measure from consumption, leisure, mortality and inequality, and found that it correlates with income per person at 0.98 in logs, concluding, in their own words, that "per capita GDP is a good proxy for welfare under our assumptions." That phrase is quoted exactly because it is theirs, and our own vocabulary rule stands unchanged everywhere else.

WHY IT MATTERS. This is the single most powerful card in the entire pack, on either side, because of who wrote it and what it concedes. Two economists took the Proposition's own list of omissions, which is exactly consumption, leisure, mortality and inequality, built the measure the critics asked for, and found it tracks the plain figure almost perfectly. It is not a defence of GDP written by a defender of GDP. It is the critics' own instrument returning the critics' own answer.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that a correlation across whole countries can be extremely high while still concealing everything that happens inside a country, that a measure which matches on average is exactly the measure that misses the people at the edges, and that the islands, the unpaid work and the median household all live inside that remaining margin.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that 0.98 is not a rough agreement, it is near identity, and that a two percent margin cannot hold the enormous harms they have described. If the entire list of things GDP omits is worth two percent of the picture, then replacing the measure buys almost nothing while costing the comparability, the frequency and the agreed method that the current one has.

OPPOSITION ARGUMENT TWO - GROWTH IS HOW PEOPLE LEAVE POVERTY

THE CLAIM. Without measured growth the poorest countries have no route out.

THE EVIDENCE. According to Our World in Data, 2021, Max Roser writes that economic growth is not enough to get people out of poverty, that fighting inequality matters too, but 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.

WHY IT MATTERS. This argument is strong precisely because it concedes half the Proposition case in its first sentence. It does not claim growth is sufficient. It claims growth is necessary, which is a much harder claim to attack. If the measure of growth is demoted, the thing being demoted is the tracking of the one process that has lifted the largest number of people out of poverty in history.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say we are conflating growth with the measurement of growth, that nobody proposes to stop economies growing, and that the motion is about which number sits on top rather than about whether growth is desirable.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that measurement drives attention and attention drives policy, and that a poor country told to optimise a composite wellbeing index rather than income per person is a poor country being advised by wealthy countries to skip the step those wealthy countries took first. The distinction they draw is real in theory and disappears in a finance ministry.

OPPOSITION ARGUMENT THREE - THE REPLACEMENTS RANK COUNTRIES INCORRECTLY

THE CLAIM. Swapping one number for another buys a less reliable score.

THE EVIDENCE. According to Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, November 23 2023, Petra Raudenska of the Czech Academy of Sciences analysed nearly two million survey responses and found that correlations between latent and observed country rankings on happiness ranged from 0.1 to 0.3, concluding that several observed scores should not be used for comparison and that using them could lead to erroneous conclusions about country rankings.

WHY IT MATTERS. The Proposition asks the judge to regret a measure. That request only makes sense if something else could hold the position instead. This card shows that the most popular candidate produces rankings that are, on the study's own finding, unsafe to compare. It converts the Proposition's criticism into a choice between an imperfect measure and an unreliable one.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that happiness surveys are only one candidate, that the Human Development Index and natural capital accounts are built from administrative statistics rather than opinion, and that defeating the weakest replacement does not defend the incumbent.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that the burden here is theirs rather than ours, because regret is comparative. If they will not name the replacement they want, they are asking the judge to regret a practice without knowing what follows it, and the one candidate they most often gesture at fails on its own numbers.

OPPOSITION ARGUMENT FOUR - CHOOSING WEIGHTS MEANS CHOOSING VALUES

THE CLAIM. The replacement hides a political choice inside what looks like a measurement.

THE EVIDENCE. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, September 2025, in its own Guidelines on Measurement of Well-being, explicit weights of the components may be interpreted as value judgements about the relative importance of the different dimensions, and the guidance goes further, noting that while equal weighting avoids

overestimating or underestimating any component, the allocation of equal weights is in itself a choice.

WHY IT MATTERS. Every composite index must decide how much health counts against income, and how much leisure counts against safety. Someone has to make that decision, and once it is made the index carries that person's values while wearing the appearance of a statistic. GDP has the opposite property. It is narrow, it is transparent about being narrow, and it does not smuggle a view of the desirable life inside a decimal point.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that choosing to count only market production is itself a value judgement, that a measure which values a cleaner's paid hour and not the same hour done at home has already decided what matters, and that the current measure hides its values better rather than having fewer of them.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that there is a difference between a measure with a declared boundary and a measure with a concealed weighting. Anyone can read the production boundary and see what is outside it. Nobody reading a composite index can see how much of the result came from whoever decided that education counts a third.

OPPOSITION ARGUMENT FIVE - ONE STANDARD THE WHOLE WORLD SHARES

THE CLAIM. It is the only measure that lets us compare anywhere with anywhere.

THE EVIDENCE. According to Eurostat, April 9 2025, the 2025 System of National Accounts and the seventh Balance of Payments Manual are fully aligned, ensuring consistency in economic reporting worldwide, and as international standards they allow countries to compile macroeconomic statistics in a consistent way, providing relevant, consistent, comprehensive and comparable data across countries.

WHY IT MATTERS. Comparability is not a technical detail, it is the entire function of a scoreboard. A number that is built the same way in every country, published quarterly, and revised under an agreed rulebook can be used to compare a small economy with a large one and this year with last. No wellbeing index has anything approaching that reach, which means demoting the comparable measure demotes the ability to compare at all.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that comparability is worthless if the thing being compared is not success, and that a perfectly consistent measurement of the incorrect quantity is precisely the harm the motion describes.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that comparability is what makes any measure usable for the decisions that matter, including the aid decisions they complain about, and that their preferred alternatives cannot make those decisions at all because they do not exist for most of the world on a common basis.

OPPOSITION ARGUMENT SIX - GROWTH PAYS FOR THE HOSPITALS

THE CLAIM. The number is tied to the services the other side wants protected.

THE EVIDENCE. According to the World Bank, November 2024, in its Government Health Spending Outlook, economic growth increases the capacity of countries to raise domestic revenues whereas revenues often fall during periods of economic contraction, and all income groups saw falls in real government revenue per person during the contraction of 2020 before growth resumed in 2021.

WHY IT MATTERS. This argument turns the Proposition's own values against its conclusion. Every harm the Proposition names, the shorter lives, the unfunded care, the islands without help, is answered with public money, and public money rises and falls with the measure they want demoted. A country that stops tracking growth as its primary indicator does not stop needing the revenue that growth produces.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that revenue follows the underlying economy rather than the choice of headline indicator, and that no hospital has ever been funded by a statistic.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that budgets are written against forecasts, forecasts are built on the primary measure, and a finance ministry that has demoted that measure has demoted the instrument its own spending plans are built on.

OPPOSITION ARGUMENT SEVEN - THE REPLACEMENTS HAVE BEEN TRIED AND HAVE STRUGGLED

THE CLAIM. We are not arguing against a theory, we are arguing against a record.

THE EVIDENCE. According to Audit Wales, April 29 2025, Adrian Crompton, the Auditor General for Wales, reported ten years after the Well-being of Future Generations Act that while there is energy and enthusiasm for the Act and public bodies are having different conversations, the Act is not driving the system-wide change that was intended.

WHY IT MATTERS. This is the hardest card in the pack to answer, and the reason is who is speaking. It is not an opponent of wellbeing measurement. It is the government auditor of a government that legislated for wellbeing measurement, reporting on its own country's flagship attempt after a full decade. A friendly witness testifying against the alternative cannot be dismissed as motivated.

SUPPORTING MATERIAL. European Commission researchers, writing in Humanities and Social Sciences Communications on January 16 2026, describe the European Union's own wellbeing monitoring as a fragmented landscape that reduces coherence and limits the effectiveness of policy guidance. The United Nations Development Programme reported on May 6 2025 that progress on the Human Development Index has stalled in all regions across the world.

WHAT THEY SAY BACK. They will say that ten years is a short time to change a system, that the auditor reports changed conversations and changed practice alongside the shortfall, and that the stalled Human Development Index shows the index working as a diagnostic rather than failing as a measure.

HOW WE ANSWER. We answer that ten years is precisely the horizon the legislation set for itself, and that a reform judged insufficient by its own auditor at its own chosen milestone is the strongest available evidence about what replacement actually delivers. Their reply asks the judge for patience. Ours offers the judge a result.

WHERE THE ROUND IS ACTUALLY DECIDED

Three clashes carry this motion. Everything else is decoration, and a summary speech that names these three and resolves them will beat a summary speech that lists eight arguments again.

THE FIRST CLASH IS THE 0.98. The Proposition says that a measure matching on average is the measure that misses the people at the edges. The Opposition says that near identity leaves no room for enormous hidden harms. Whoever explains what a correlation of 0.98 does and does not tell us, in plain words, in front of a judge who has not read the paper, wins this exchange and probably the round.

THE SECOND CLASH IS COMPARED TO WHAT. The Proposition would prefer this question never to be asked, and the Opposition will ask it in the first minute. The Proposition answer that works is that regret is about a practice rather than about a successor, and that a country can stop treating one number as the whole score without having settled which combination replaces it. The Opposition answer that works is Audit Wales.

THE THIRD CLASH IS WHO IS COUNTED. This is the honest heart of the motion. The Proposition case is a list of people the average leaves out, being the islands, the unpaid carers and the median household. The Opposition case is that the average is reliable, comparable and tied to the revenue those same people depend on. Both are true at once, and the round goes to the team that shows its version of who is counted matters more.

THINGS THAT WILL LOSE US THE ROUND

Recorded so that nobody has to learn them in front of a judge.

Arguing that GDP was never meant to measure welfare, as a Proposition point. It is an Opposition point, and it concedes their framing while sounding clever.

Claiming the Oxford paper proves inequality caused the divergence. It does not, it says the opposite, and a prepared team will read that sentence aloud.

Naming a replacement in the first Proposition speech. It moves the round onto Opposition ground before anyone has asked us to go there.

Disputing the science of any card. Both sides here are sourced from serious institutions, and a team that spends time doubting the other side's evidence has stopped making its own case.

Saying the number is wrong. The word for a claim that does not hold is incorrect, and in this round the honest position is that the number is accurate about what it measures, which is exactly why its primacy is what we regret.