

First World

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Glossary

Global Governance Forms of rule making and policymaking at a global level which involve a range of institutions, including national governments, nongovernmental organizations, and multilateral organizations, among others.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) The value of all goods and services produced within a country regardless of who produced them.

Gross National Income (GNI) The value of all goods and services claimed by the residents of a particular country regardless of where those goods and services were produced. It includes income from abroad, such as remittances and profits repatriated by companies from overseas subsidiaries.

Introduction

'First World' is widely used as an umbrella term for the countries of Western Europe, as well as the United States of America, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. The term's origin was political and dates from the Cold War period. Despite the collapse of the Communist bloc, the rise of the so-called 'newly industrializing countries' (NICs) and the growing interconnectedness of many parts of the world due to processes of globalization, the idea of the First World continues to be used as a shorthand for economically rich capitalist countries that have liberal democratic political systems.

This article discusses the changing meaning of the term First World and considers the usefulness of categorizing many countries and millions of people in this way. In particular, issues of economic and human development diversity will be considered, both between the countries of the First World and within these countries. Changing global political power relations and new forms of global governance at the start of the twenty-first century will also be considered, including the rise of China and India as potential global superpowers in both economic and political terms.

Origins of the First World

As with the terms 'Second World' and 'Third World', the concept of the First World only makes sense when related to other categories. Rather than being a self-ascribed

identity, the concept of the First World came to the fore at the meeting of the nonaligned countries at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955. This conference of largely newly independent African and Asian countries sought to lay out a development path which would follow neither the capitalist route of the First World, nor the communist strategies of the Second World. The threefold categorization was therefore not meant as a hierarchy, but rather a division between different forms of political system. Based on this definition, the First World of the 1950s consisted of Canada, the United States of America, the countries of Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand (see [Figure 1](#)).

Despite its original use as a political term, First World soon became synonymous with countries with high levels of economic development, high levels of urbanization, low mortality rates, widespread access to basic services, and high levels of consumerism. In other words, based on Eurocentric ideas of 'development' the First World was 'developed' and First World status became a goal for many countries in the Global South. Even though Japan had been one of the countries at the Bandung Conference, its rapid post-World War II economic development along noncommunist lines led to its inclusion in many classifications of the First World from the 1960s onward.

The End of History

The collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s/early 1990s marked the end of the Second World and what Francis Fukuyama termed the 'end of history', as the Cold War framing of world events had come to an end with the perceived victory of capitalism and liberal democracy. The collapse of the Second World should have, in theory, meant the end of the ideas of the First World and the Third World as they only made sense as part of a tripartite division of the world. However, the terms had become so embedded in common usage that they continue to be used, although other divisions, such as Global North/Global South and Developed/Developing countries, have become popular.

Most research which considers the regional groupings, focuses on defining or problematizing the Third World or Global South, rather than considering the First World. This reflects a common process within categorization whereby what is viewed as 'normal' or 'desirable' is not interrogated, despite the fact that it is as socially constructed as any other category. Eurocentric ideas of 'development' and 'progress' have often meant that the First

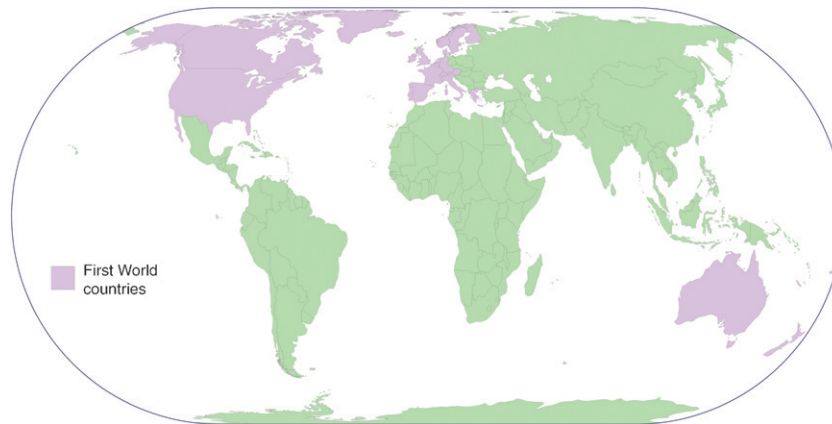


Figure 1 First World c. 1950. From map data © Maps in minutes™ (1996).

World is taken as the norm and other parts of the world are contrasted with it.

The countries which emerged from the Soviet bloc, both through the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the move toward capitalism of the Eastern European countries, are sometimes referred to as ‘transitional’ economies. However, within this category, there are countries such as the Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan which have levels of economic and human development similar to many countries in the Third World, while others such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Russia are much more similar to the First World nations. Politically, ten of the ex-communist states or republics are now members of the European Union (EU).

Economic Diversity

As with all attempts to classify countries, there are vast differences between countries within one category, not to mention major differences within countries. In 1987, for example, Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDP p.c.) in the First World ranged from US\$5500 in Greece and US\$5597 in Portugal to US\$17 615 in the USA and US\$16 375 in Canada.

High levels of national income per capita are still used as a form of classification, but this does not necessarily just encompass the countries which are usually referred to as First World. The World Bank classifies countries into four categories based on Gross National Income per capita (GNI p.c.) (see [Table 1](#)). In 2007, the high income country classification included the long-standing First World countries, but also included other countries, most notably South Korea, Singapore, Israel, and a number of the oil-rich states in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (see [Figure 2](#)). Thus, the countries with First World levels of national

Table 1 World Bank country classification criteria 2007

<i>Classification</i>	<i>Gross National Income per capita (GNI p.c.)</i>
Low income	US\$935 or less
Low middle income	US\$936–US\$3705
Upper middle income	US\$3706–US\$11 455
High income	US\$11 456 or more

From [World Bank \(2007\)](#). World development report 2007, *Report of the World Bank*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

economic wealth vary greatly in terms of the structure of their economies, and also their political systems. They are also involved in different political groupings and alliances. Coherence within this group of countries is therefore unlikely and demonstrates the problems with classification systems.

Within countries there can also be significant differences. The First World classification was, and continues to be, based on national level indicators, but in many cases wealth does not ‘trickle down’ equally to all members of the population. This may be related to spatial differences, for example, between rural and urban areas, but there may also be social differences, between men and women, between different classes, and also income distinctions based on ethnicity. The term ‘Fourth World’ has sometimes been used to refer to economically and socially marginalized indigenous groups in the First World. These included First Nations peoples in Canada and aboriginal populations in Australia. Income inequalities are often measured using the Gini Index which runs from 0 to 100 with 0 being absolute equality in expenditure or income and 100 being absolute inequality. Thus, the higher the index, the more unequal the wealth distribution within that country. Among the World Bank classified ‘high income countries’ in 2007, Gini Index figures ranged from 24.7 for Denmark and 24.9 for Japan to 42.5 for Singapore and 40.8 for the

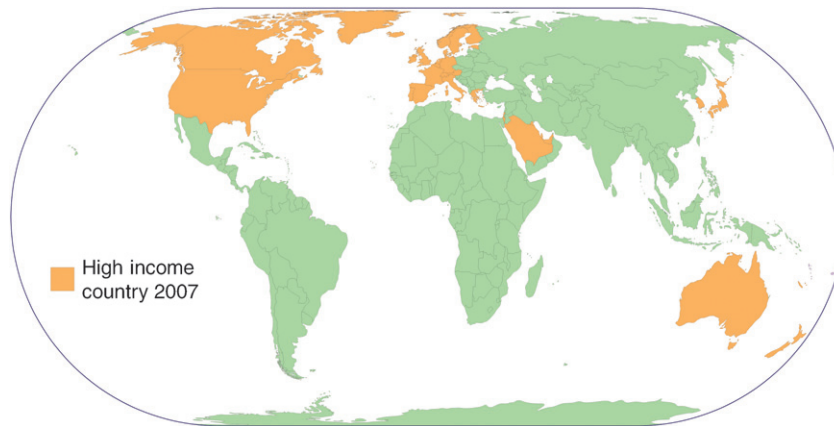


Figure 2 High income countries, July 2007. Based on data from [World Bank \(2007\)](#) and map data © Maps in minutes™ (1996).

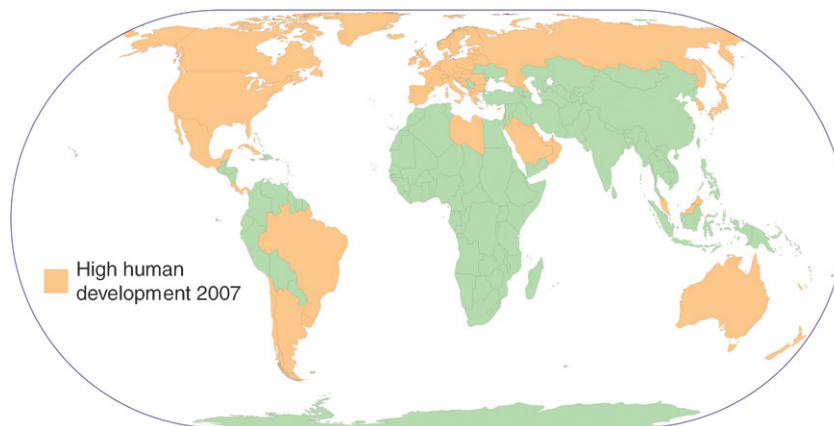


Figure 3 Countries with high HDI, 2007. Based on data from [UNDP \(2007\)](#) and map data © Maps in minutes™ (1996).

USA. Figures were not available for the oil-rich states of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, among others.

Levels of Human Development

The use of First World as synonymous with ‘developed’ needs to recognize the diversity of development measures. In the late 1980s, the United Nation Development Program (UNDP) devised the ‘Human Development Index’ (HDI) as a measure of development which goes beyond simple economic measures such as GNI p.c. The concept of ‘human development’ encompasses standard of living (measured using GDP p.c.), education (measured using adult literacy rates and gross enrolment rates), and health (using life expectancy at birth). Using these measures, the UNDP calculates a composite index – the HDI – which runs from 0 to 1; the higher the figure, the higher the level of human development.

According to the UNDP, countries with a high HDI in 2007 were much more widespread than those with high incomes according to World Bank criteria (see [Figure 3](#)). This reflects an understanding of development which does not see education and health levels as highly correlated with income levels. Thus, while all countries with a high income had high HDI in 2007, there are many others which had achieved high levels of human development at a national scale, without a GNI p.c. figure of over US\$11456. Many Eastern European ‘transition’ countries fall into this category, as do many Latin American countries. Malaysia was classified as a high human development country in 2007, as was Libya – the only African country to achieve this status.

Achieving high levels of human development can come through economic wealth, but the patterns of high HDI also reflect the way in which state policies, particularly in health and education, can create conditions for improved human development despite lower levels of national wealth. For example, Cuba achieved an HDI

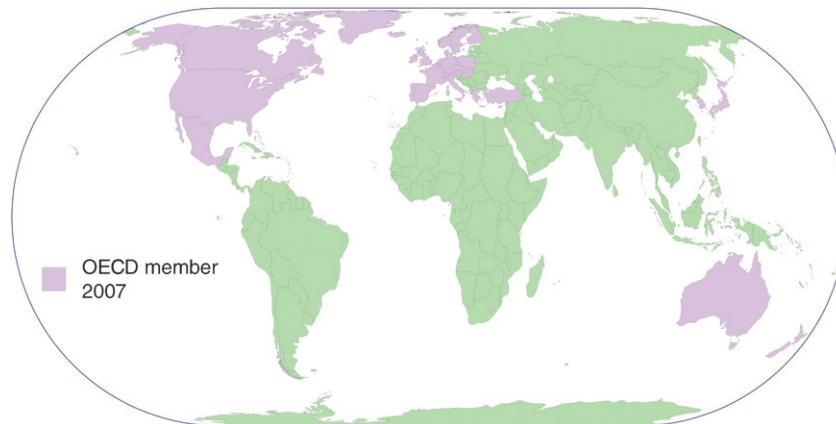


Figure 4 OECD members, 2007. Based on data from www.oecd.org and map data © Maps in minutes™ (1996).

figure of 0.838 with an estimated GDP p.c. figure of US\$6000 and Libya's HDI of 0.818 was achieved with a GDP p.c. figure of US\$10 335. These figures take into account purchasing power parity (PPP) to recognize different costs of living within different economies. These mismatches between levels of human development and economic wealth, demonstrate how problematic the concept of First World is, once the original political categorization has broken down.

Global Political and Economic Power

In the post-Cold War period, new groupings have emerged on the global stage representing new forms of alliances. In some cases, these groupings have strong representation from earlier First World countries, but increasingly countries which were previously in the Second or Third Worlds are making their mark and challenging the idea of First World meaning economically and politically dominant.

The G8 is an organization with its roots in the 1970s Cold War world. Government representatives of the original G6 of advanced industrial democratic countries (France, the USA, the UK, West Germany, Japan, and Italy) met to discuss key economic and political challenges both domestically and internationally. By the late 1970s this group had become the G7 with the addition of Canada, and representatives of the European Community also attended meetings. Thus, most of the countries of the First World were part of this organization. Notably, exceptions included Australia and New Zealand. Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia joined in 1998, so the group became the G8. In some sense, this group of countries represents a new First World in terms of economic and political power. But such a position should not be taken for granted.

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) has a similar history. Its members

have high levels of economic development and are broadly classified as capitalist democratic states. This again has overlaps with the original definition of the First World, but as of 2007, membership was more diverse, including Mexico, Turkey, South Korea, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Slovak Republic (see [Figure 4](#)). Countries apply to become a member and the OECD Council decides whether to extend membership and on what conditions. The organization aims to promote economic development in its member countries by sharing expertise.

Since World War II, global governance institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) have been set up as a way of promoting peace and economic stability. Of course, the agendas set by these organizations are not neutral and have often reflected the priorities and ideologies of the First World, particularly the United States and countries of Western Europe. However, the economic rise of some countries in the Global South, combined with the increasing mobilization of alliance within the Global South, has meant that First World dominance in certain fora has been challenged.

This has been particularly noticeable in the WTO trade talks. Since it was established in 1995, the WTO has promoted reductions in trade barriers between its members and sought to uphold a rules-based trading system. Countries which become members of the WTO have to abide by the rules and members can appeal to the WTO in situations where they believe other members have broken the rules. Despite such a system, criticisms have been leveled at the WTO regarding the possible uneven application of the rules in favor of First World or Global North countries. In 2003, the WTO members met at Cancún, Mexico for trade talks. Prior to the meeting a group of Third World or Global South countries created an alliance called 'G21' as a negotiating bloc against the US and EU agricultural subsidies

Table 2 Economic and population indicators

	GDP (US\$ bn) 2005	GDP p.c. (PPP) (US\$) 2005	GDP p.c. annual growth rate (1990– 2005) %	Population 2005 (millions)
Brazil	796.1	8402	1.1	186.8
China	2234.3	6757	8.8	1313.0 ^a
Germany	2794.9	29 461	1.4	82.7
India	805.7	3452	4.2	1134.4
Japan	4534.0	31 267	0.8	127.9
Russia	763.7	10 845	–0.1 ^b	144.0
USA	12 416.5	41 890	2.1	299.8

^aFigure includes Taiwan.

^bFigure refers to shorter period due to changing national boundaries following break up of the USSR.

From UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) (2007). Human development report 2007/8, *Report of the United Nations Development Programme*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Tables 1, 5 and 14.

policies. G21 members included the increasingly economically important China and India as well as many Latin American countries, Pakistan Egypt and the Philippines, among others. Rather than agreeing to terms proposed by the Global North which had often happened in the past, the G21 countries continued to lobby for fairer policies on agricultural subsidies. No agreements could be made and the talks broke down. These new forms of alliances have continued to make their presence felt within the WTO and other institutions, meaning that assumed power of the First World countries is not always exercised in reality.

The economic rise of the so-called BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) in the early twenty-first century also demonstrates the problems with a bounded idea of an economically dominant First World based on categories from the 1950s (see Table 2). These countries contain a significant percentage of the world's population and are growing in importance in relation to both manufacturing production and natural resources. If economic development patterns continue to follow the same trends, then some, or all, of these countries will dominate the world economy in the middle of the twenty-first century in a way that the previously designated 'First World' countries did in the middle of the twentieth century.

Summary

The First World was originally identified in relation to the Second and Third Worlds in the 1950s and had a political basis. Over time, the concept has taken on other meanings, most notably to do with levels of economic development and progress. This has meant that the concept continues to be used despite the disappearance of the Second World with the collapse of the communist bloc. It is now used to refer to countries with high levels

of national income per capita, high levels of urbanization, and high standards of living. However, the number of countries which fall into this category is increasing depending on the criteria used and the countries have diverse forms of political system, as well as different economic structures. There are also disparities within the countries; the population is not all at First World status. Finally, assumptions that First World countries have the power to shape global economic and political processes are being challenged in some settings.

Classifying countries is always open to debate and there are concerns about diversity within national boundaries. The use of the term First World is indicative of this. The debates outlined in this article also stress the ways in which categories are based on assumptions which are often left unstated, such as 'development' being defined in relation to levels of national income or other economic measures. Since the end of the Second World, other terms have become increasingly common to refer to First World regions, such as Global North or Developed World. While they may be based on different criteria, they too suffer from the problems of diversity and the impossibility of classifying the world's people and places into a small number of categories.

See also: Cold War; Development I; East/West; Eurocentrism; North-South; Second World; Third World.

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Relevant Websites

<http://www.g8.utoronto.ca>

G8 Information Center.

<http://www.oecd.org>

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

<http://www.undp.org>

United Nations Development Program homepage. Follow links to the Human Development Report for national statistics.

<http://www.worldbank.org>

World Bank homepage. Follow links for statistics on national economies.

<http://www.wto.org>

World Trade Organization homepage.