

Data story

What the EU can learn from Sweden and vice versa

Sweden is known for occupying some of the top spots in international ranking lists. It is among the top five countries in 52 of the close to 150 indices included in the European Commission’s [Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer](#). Although countries have different characteristics and there is no one-size-fits-all approach, many other EU Member States can look to Sweden for inspiration by examining the policies that have been proven to work well. At the same time, Sweden can gain valuable insights by looking at the performance of other countries within the EU. The EU consists of diverse nations with unique strengths, experiences and approaches in various fields. Here we look at three ways in which the EU can learn from Sweden and vice versa.

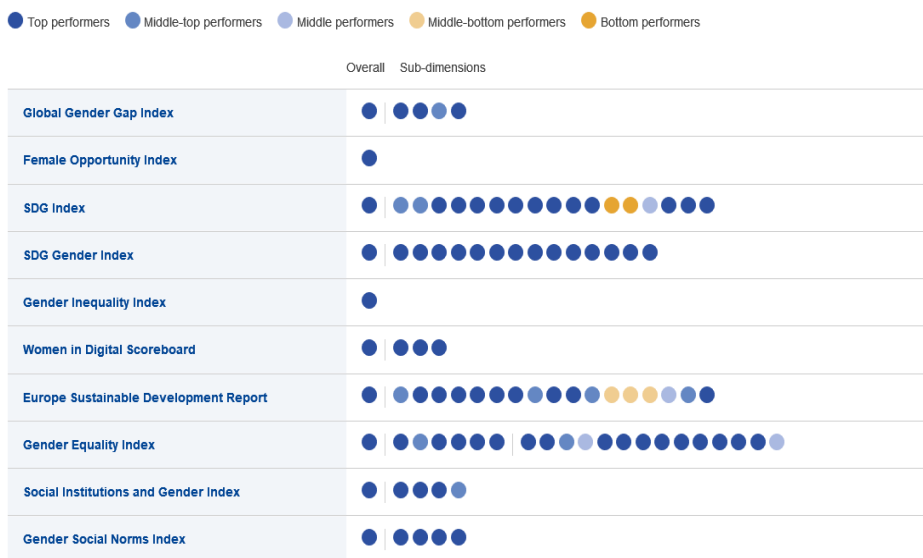
What can the European Union learn from Sweden?

1. Equality and gender

The EU’s [2020–2025 gender equality strategy](#) aims to create a ‘Union where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in and lead our European society’. Sweden appears to be making remarkable progress towards achieving this objective. The multiple measures addressing UN sustainable development goal 5 (gender equality) show that the country is a frontrunner when it comes to gender equality.

Of the EU Member States, Sweden holds the top position in the Gender Equality Index, which measures overall progress in gender equality. This achievement is not recent; Sweden has been consistently leading since the index’s inception in 2013. On a global scale, Sweden outperforms all other countries in the UN’s Gender Social Norms Index, which assesses how social beliefs impede gender equality in areas such as politics, work and education.

Figure 1 – Performance of Sweden across gender equality-related indices



NB: The chart shows the performance of Sweden across 10 indices related to sustainable development goal 5 (gender equality). The first dot in each row indicates the overall performance of Sweden in the respective index, while the following dots represent its performance across the constituent parts of each index (subdimensions). Dark blue denotes that Sweden is among the top performers, whereas yellow represents the areas in which there is significant room for improvement.

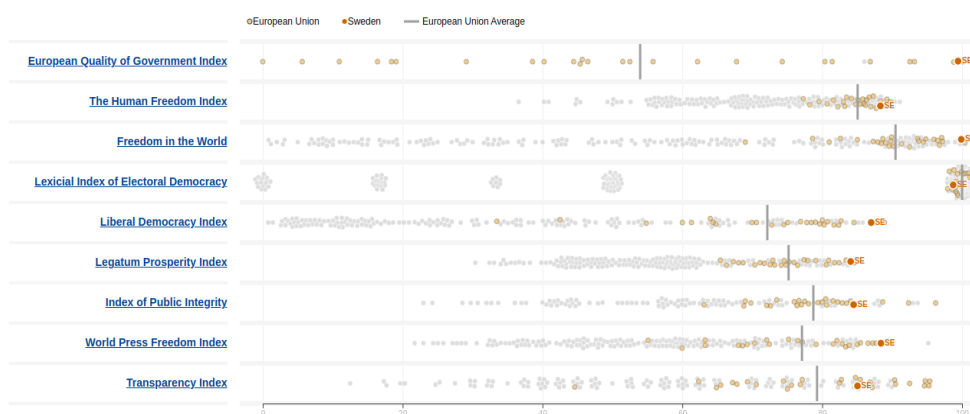
Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2023. The index values used were released between 2020 and 2023.

But what factors contribute to Sweden’s exceptional performance? One key aspect is that Sweden does not view gender as a separate issue but instead integrates it into all aspects of public activities. An exemplary initiative in this regard is the establishment of the [Swedish Gender Equality Agency](#) in 2018. This agency aims to integrate gender equality into the work of all government agencies, and serves as a prime example of gender mainstreaming, a practice that should be embraced across Europe to effectively achieve the goals outlined in the EU gender equality strategy.

2. Democracy and governance

During the [2023 Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#), Sweden made democratic values and rule of law one of its priorities. It comes as no surprise that Sweden holds the top spots in the Sustainable Governance Indicators, which various experts and practitioners use to assess the reforms needed to achieve more sustainable governance. Furthermore, in the European Quality of Government Index, which is based on citizen surveys about perceptions of public sector corruption and public service quality, Sweden holds second place out of 28 countries.

Figure 2 – Performance of Sweden across democracy- and governance-related indices



NB: This graph shows Sweden’s performance across 9 indices linked to the European Commission policy priority ‘A new push for European democracy’. The orange dots represent Sweden’s scores. The grey lines represent the EU average. Sweden scores above the EU average for most of the indices.

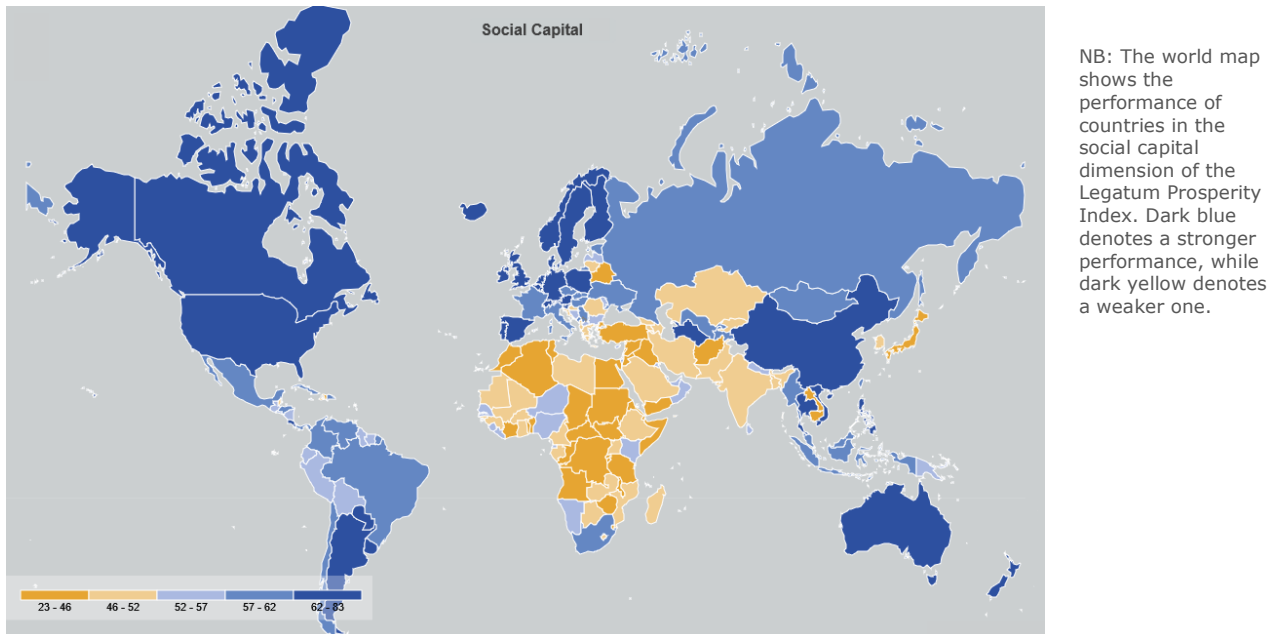
Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2023. The index values used were released in 2022 and 2023.

Several factors contribute to Sweden’s high performance in this area. Sweden boasts a deep tradition of democratic values and strong institutions. However, contrary to common belief, this has not always been the case. In 1900, Sweden, together with Prussia, had the most unequal voting rights in western Europe and severe economic inequality. The drastic change that then took place was rooted in well-organised social movements of the previous decades (Bengtsson, 2019). Hence, the will and actions of Sweden’s people made the country one of today’s global frontrunners of democracy and governance.

3. Social capital

Social capital refers to the way in which people relate to each other; for example, trust and shared norms and values contribute significantly to the well-being of a society as a whole. A look at the social capital dimension of the Legatum Prosperity Index, which captures aspects such as personal and family relationships, social networks, interpersonal trust and civic and social participation, shows that Sweden is among the top performers.

Figure 3 – Global performance in the social capital dimension of the Legatum Prosperity Index



Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2023 (2023 release of the Legatum Prosperity Index).

One key element of social capital in Sweden is the extensive social welfare system, which aims to provide a safety net for all individuals and reduce social inequalities. This system, coupled with progressive taxation and redistributive policies, helps to create a sense of fairness and equality, enhancing social trust and cohesion (Milotay et al., 2022; Martela et al., 2020).

Why focus on these particular aspects? Equality, governance and social capital can act as multipliers. For example, improving equality has positive effects on both well-being and security within a country (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017). Hence, if other EU Member States try to learn from Sweden in these three aspects, the positive effect will be multiplied.

What can Sweden learn from the European Union?

Although Sweden is at the top of the rankings in many indices taking the pulse of our societies, there are also areas in which there is room for Sweden to learn from other EU Member States.

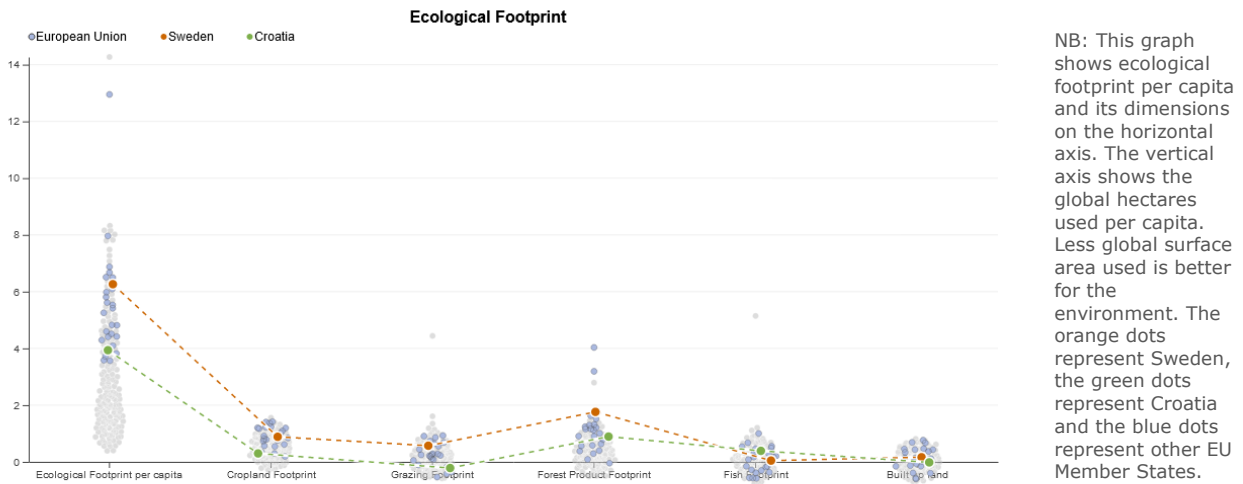
1. Ecological footprint

The ecological footprint of a country can be understood as the area needed to produce the materials it consumes and to absorb its carbon dioxide emissions. Sweden has one of the highest ecological footprints per capita in the world. According to the [Global Footprint Network](#), in 2021 Sweden had an ecological footprint per capita of 5.0 global hectares, which is higher than the global average of 2.75 global hectares. The reasons for this large footprint include the large amount of imported goods and their transport and a largely meat-based diet (Dawkins and Yang, 2023).

Sweden could benefit from learning from other EU Member States that have excelled in certain areas. For example, Croatia has a lower ecological footprint per capita, of 3.4 global hectares, which is the fourth lowest in the EU. Clearly,

Croatia is different from Sweden in terms of population, global domestic product and geographical location. However, such differences should not hinder countries from benefiting from mutual learning.

Figure 4 – Sweden’s and Croatia’s ecological footprints per capita and footprints across various dimensions



NB: This graph shows ecological footprint per capita and its dimensions on the horizontal axis. The vertical axis shows the global hectares used per capita. Less global surface area used is better for the environment. The orange dots represent Sweden, the green dots represent Croatia and the blue dots represent other EU Member States.

Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2023 (2022 release of the Ecological Footprint index).

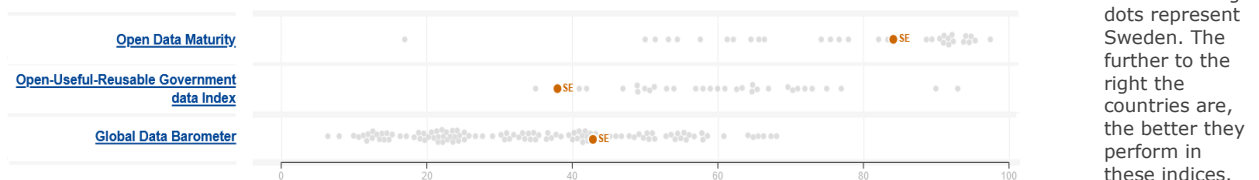
Croatia has made remarkable strides in sustainable land management practices that promote ecological balance. 93 % of its forests are certified as responsibly managed, and the per capita CO₂ absorption rate of Croatia’s forests is double the EU average (Forest Europe 2020). Sweden can benefit from Croatia’s successful implementation of agroforestry systems, combining trees with pasture or crops to enhance biodiversity, carbon sequestration and soil fertility while reducing the grazing footprint. Croatia’s sustainable forestry practices, such as strict monitoring and preservation of old-growth forests, can serve as a model for Sweden in relation to maintaining its forest product footprint at sustainable levels (Parliament of Croatia 2017).

Croatia’s best practices could serve as inspiration for Sweden in terms of introducing similar strategies and practices tailored to its context to curtail its ecological footprint and foster a greener and more sustainable future.

2. Open data

Sweden faces some challenges related to open data. This can be seen in Sweden’s performance in the Global Data Barometer, a tool that seeks to measure the state of data around the world, and in the Open-Useful-Reusable Government Data Index, which shows that there is room for improvement in terms of government data transparency and accessibility.

Figure 5 – Sweden’s performance across three indices related to open data



NB: The orange dots represent Sweden. The further to the right the countries are, the better they perform in these indices.

Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2023. The index values used were released between 2019 and 2022.

While Sweden has made significant progress in open data initiatives, it still lags considerably behind other EU Member States in this area. One of the reasons for its relatively poor performance seems to be the lack of formal open data policies in place (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). According to the European Data

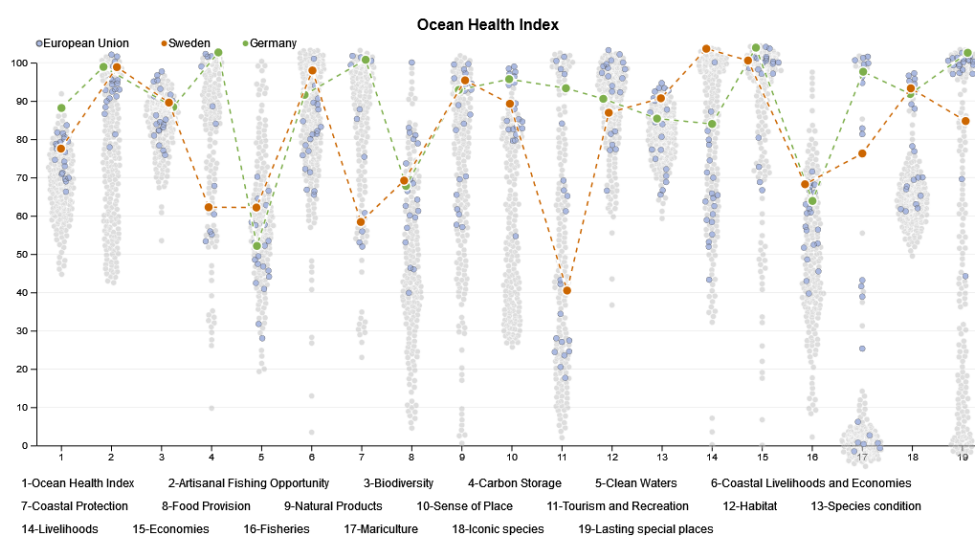
Portal (2020), countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands have consistently ranked higher than Sweden in terms of open data maturity and availability.

Sweden can learn from these countries to enhance its open data ecosystem by implementing policies that prioritise data openness, fostering collaborations between government agencies and stakeholders and improving the quality and standardisation of government datasets. By leveraging the experiences and practices of leading EU Member States, Sweden can strengthen its open data initiatives and unlock the full potential of government data for societal and economic advancements.

3. Ocean health

In general, Sweden is performing well in the Ocean Health Index, which assesses progress towards healthy and sustainable oceans. However, there is room for improvement in comparison with other EU Member States, especially in the carbon storage, coastal protection and habitat categories.

Figure 6 – Performance of Sweden, Germany and the EU in the Ocean Health Index



NB: This graph shows Sweden’s performance in the Ocean Health Index in comparison with Germany and other EU Member States. The orange dots represent Sweden, the green dots represent Germany and the blue dots represent other EU Member States. The first column shows the overall performance in the Ocean Health Index, while the other columns show the performance across the various dimensions of the index. Higher scores reflect better performance.

Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2023 (2020 release of the Ocean Health Index).

In particular, Sweden can gain valuable insights from Germany’s approach to enhancing marine conservation efforts, especially in the areas of carbon storage, coastal protection and tourism and recreation. Germany has made significant progress in promoting ocean health through various strategies and policies. For example, Germany’s [10-point plan of action for marine conservation and sustainable fisheries](#) could serve as inspiration for Sweden. This plan features many specific examples that emphasise collaboration among stakeholders to ensure sustainable use of coastal resources while preserving marine ecosystems.

In addition, Sweden can study Germany’s efforts in marine pollution control, such as the implementation of strict regulations on wastewater treatment and the reduction of nutrient inputs from agricultural activities. Germany’s success in establishing protected marine areas can also serve as a valuable lesson for Sweden in terms of enhancing its network of protected marine areas and strengthening conservation measures (Marine Conservation Institute, 2023). By learning from Germany’s experiences and strategies, Sweden can refine its own approach and work towards achieving a healthier and more sustainable marine environment.

Summary

We looked at a series of indices included in the Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer to examine how Sweden and the EU could greatly benefit from mutual learning across various fields. The EU is a diverse and interconnected community of nations, each with its own strengths, experiences and innovations. By fostering a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration, EU Member States can exchange best practices, policies and strategies to address common challenges and capitalise on shared opportunities. Whether in relation to sustainable development, technology,

healthcare, education or any other area, Member States can draw upon their neighbours' successes and lessons learned to inspire and inform their own initiatives. This collective learning and cooperation contribute to the overall growth, progress and well-being of the entire EU.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Silvia Capato and Michele Graziano Ceddia, who helped us improve the article significantly. Our thanks also go to our Swedish reviewers, Nina Faggion Robertsson and Hanna Ellis.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Zepharovich, E. and Neves, A. R., *Data story: What the EU can learn from Sweden and vice versa*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023, doi:10.2760/214125, JRC134616

PDF ISBN 978-92-68-07538-8 doi:10.2760/214125 KJ-04-23-853-EN-N

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