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Is it possible for a country to be commercially competitive and at the same time protect the environment and social welfare? The recent (2011) initiative by the World Economic Forum to complement their well-known competitiveness rankings of nations with data on sustainability is here reinterpreted in terms of a general model of social and economic policy, using productivity and sustainability variables as policy goals, and the eleven so-called “pillars” of the Forum as policy instruments. Aiming further than just calculating a simple index, however, we consider the full multi-dimensional problem facing each nation maximizing its social preference for the goals, given its corresponding social policy costs. The solution to this optimization problem splits the nations into two categories: (i) those achieving the maximally doable, tracing the “frontier” or upper envelope to the scatter of data points and (ii) sub-optimal and thus under-achieving nations falling behind the envelope. Using the Forum data for 125 nations in 2013, we identify the frontier and sub-frontier nations. For each suboptimal nation we identify its “peers” on the frontier suggesting how its sustainable competitiveness might be improved.

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