

Country Groupings in IFs

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Overview

Countries are often grouped for various purposes, including research, forecasting, strategic planning, comparability, representation, advocacy, cultural identity, and policymaking. Regional, continental, strategic, and economic classifications of countries provide a valuable framework for understanding and analyzing global dynamics and play a critical role in economic and human development modeling used to forecast future outcomes. However, there is no universal agreement on how certain groups and their memberships should be defined. This lack of consensus has far-reaching implications, affecting development efforts, international cooperation, and policy decisions designed to address shared challenges and opportunities effectively.

To address this lack of standardization and the absence of published comprehensive justifications, the Pardee Institute for International Futures at the University of Denver has created its own set of country groupings for 188 countries in the International Futures (IFs) modeling tool. The Institute's classifications are based on the United Nations Statistical Division's (UNSD) M49 system but include additional research and justifications for specific country placements considered to be boundary cases. For countries where classifications have discrepancies or are controversial across multinational organizations, universities, or governments, we determine their grouping in IFs based on a thorough analysis of the country's geographical, historical, political, strategic, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic characteristics to justify their classification.

Summary of Core Issues

- No international consensus on how countries should be regionally classified.
- Classification differences affect data analysis, policy design, and forecasts (e.g., HDI or economic outlooks).
- Some countries, called boundary cases, are highly disputed, requiring explicit

justification.

Methodology

The primary framework for groupings is founded on the UN's M49 standard, developed by the UNSD. The Pardee Institute then conducted a qualitative analysis of various published country, regional, and continental classifications to understand the underlying rationale for these classifications. A range of sources were also reviewed, including classifications from international organizations (e.g., World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)), and academic and institutional groupings to develop a consistent and transparent framework for the IFs modeling tool. Particular attention was paid to identifying "boundary cases," where there is significant disagreement or ambiguity regarding a country's placement. For each boundary case, the Institute undertook a comprehensive, multi-faceted assessment, incorporating:

- *Geographical factors*: The physical location of a country, natural boundaries such as rivers and mountains, and its proximity to other regions.
- *Historical context and political dynamics*: The country's historical alliances, colonial past, and territorial boundaries established through treaties or conflicts. It also includes current and historical political affiliations, including membership in regional or global alliances like the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).
- *Ethnic, cultural, language, and racial considerations*: The demographic composition of the country and its alignment with neighboring states or regions, the shared linguistic ties, and cultural practices that align a country with specific regions

Classification balances these factors transparently. Each factor has therefore been assessed according to its relevance in deciding a country's grouping, ensuring that those decisions are well-reasoned and contextually appropriate. For instance, Cyprus's cultural and political history with Europe outweighs its geographic position in Asia.

Regional Groupings in IFs

- *Africa*: North, South, East, Central, West (55 countries).
- *Asia*: Central, East, South, Southeast, West (49 countries).
- *Europe*: North, South, East, West (41 countries).
- *Oceania*: Australia and New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia (10 countries).
- *Americas*: North, Central, South, and the Caribbean (33 countries).

Boundary Cases

Africa

- *Sudan*: Sometimes classified in Africa East, Africa North Africa, and MENA. In IFs, it is grouped in Africa North.
- *Mauritania*: Sometimes classified in Africa West or Africa North. In IFs, it is grouped in Africa West.

Asia

- *Afghanistan*: Sometimes classified in Asia Central, Asia East or Asia South. In IFs, it is grouped in Asia South.
- *Cyprus*: Sometimes classified in Asia West or Europe South. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe South.
- *Türkiye*: Sometimes considered Europe West Europe or Asia West. In IFs, it is grouped in Asia West.
- *Iraq*: Sometimes classified as Asia South or Asia West. In IFs, it is grouped in Asia West.
- *Iran*: Sometimes classified as Asia South or Asia West. In IFs, it is grouped in Asia West.
- *Georgia*: Sometimes classified as Europe East or Asia West. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe East.
- *Russian Federation*: Sometimes classified as Europe East or North Asia. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe East.

Europe

- *Iceland*: Sometimes classified as Europe North or Europe West. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe North
- *United Kingdom*: Sometimes classified as Europe North or Europe West. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe West
- *Ireland*: Sometimes classified as Europe North or Europe West. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe West
- *Spain*: Sometimes classified as Europe South or Europe West. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe South
- *Portugal*: Sometimes classified as Europe South or Europe West. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe South.
- *Austria*: Sometimes classified as Europe East or Europe West. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe West.
- *Kosovo*: Sometimes classified as Europe South or Europe East. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe South.
- *Albania*: Sometimes classified as Europe South, Europe East, or Europe North. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe South.
- *Latvia*: Sometimes classified as Europe South, Europe East, or Europe North. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe North.

- *Lithuania*: Sometimes classified as Europe South, Europe East, or Europe North. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe North.
- *Estonia*: Sometimes classified as Europe South, Europe East, or Europe North. In IFs, it is grouped in Europe North.

Americas

Americas North

- *Mexico*: Sometimes classified as Americas North, Americas Central, and Americas Caribbean. In IFs, it is grouped in Americas North.
- *Puerto Rico*: Sometimes classified as Americas North, Americas Central, Americas South, and Americas Caribbean. In IFs, it is grouped in Americas North.

Americas Central and the Caribbean.

- *Belize*: Sometimes classified as Americas Central or the Caribbean. In IFs, it is grouped in Americas Central.

Economic and Development Groupings

Countries in IFs are also classified by:

- *Human Development Index (HDI)*: Low, Medium, High, Very High.
- *World Bank Income Levels*: Low, Lower-Middle, Upper-Middle, High income.

Conclusion

The IFs groupings aim for transparency and consistency while addressing disputes over boundary cases. By explicitly justifying controversial classifications, the framework strengthens forecasting accuracy and helps researchers and policymakers interpret global trends with clarity.

To find more detailed information on decisions behind country groupings please refer to the International Futures (IFs) Country Groupings working paper on the Pardee Institute website.

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