HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND EQUITY

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Summary

Human development is a shared enterprise, which goal serves the interests of all Humankind. Thus, for its success it must draw upon the resources and the diverse talents and capabilities of the broadest possible spectrum of humanity. But questions of equity are complex and multifaceted, involving all of the issues addressed in the ensuing essay and many others. It cannot be disentangled from questions of human development. Moreover, it must be reconciled for the multiplicity of groups that comprise the global family: there must be equity between nations and within, between ethnic groups and religious groups, between races, between classes, between genders, between generations, and, ultimately, between the many species, which share this planet.

The subtle, steady degradation of the environment is a serious issue that raises questions of equity between nations, since some are more responsible than others for the harm, but the burdens will be borne often by the least responsible. For example, global warming precipitated mostly by the economic activities of the major industrial countries may result in the flooding of the Maldives, and of much of Bangladesh, countries which bear almost no responsibility for the phenomenon. There are also questions of equity between generations, between those living, with the power to affect the future, and the generations to come, who have no direct representation and no voice. It is a question, too, of equity as fundamental fairness, between the human race and the other living things that share our planet, again a relatively voiceless constituency. Among the peoples and nations presently living, concludes a recent Human Development Report from the United Nations Development Programme, “global inequalities in income and living standards have reached grotesque proportions.” By their very nature, these glaring disparities suffuse all human relationships, distorting both justice and
development. They degrade the level of discourse, driving people to extremes and alienating them from one another, complicating all efforts to promote human development, peace, and justice. Inequities are not easily reversed, but must be addressed directly. Emphatically, neither human development nor equity can be assumed as a by-product of economic growth or any other facile or automatic process. Both equity and human development depend for their realization on a spirit of justice and of mutual respect, concern, and empathy. They require also commitments to equal rights, with appropriate codes for the protection of all peoples, and to an open and fair structure of participation, at local, national, and global levels. Equity and human development are, thus, inextricably interwoven; one cannot be realized without the other. Indeed, this is the large lesson gleaned from past efforts to promote development: neither valued end can be realized without the extraordinary work and commitment of a united front of dedicated people of good will and reason.

1. Introduction

Peoples all over the world and throughout history have demonstrated a persistent concern for justice. The realization of justice is a universal theme found in philosophy and ethics, religion, world literature and myths, politics, law, and in the thought and daily struggles of peoples everywhere to provide for themselves and their children decent, fulfilling lives. Most would agree that one measure of the progress of a society is the degree to which its laws conform to accepted standards and notions of justice. While one can discern broad agreement regarding many facets of justice, the subject is notoriously complex and people disagree in the details of what constitutes justice in a given situation. Lawmakers may attempt to embody notions of justice in their products, but laws frequently are admixed with elements of self-interest and confused thought, so that a country’s legal system will not accord fully with justice. The same may be said of any social system.

This realization leads us further to the concept of equity. If every legal and social system is in some degree flawed, then true justice resides not in the letter of the law, but in the spirit. Equity has been defined variously as fairness, impartiality, and the application of principles derived from conscience or natural law; and it flows from the belief that the rules and the ordinary workings of a society may not always eventuate in justice. Especially in contemporary times it connotes, as well, egalitarianism and democratization. That is, a measure of equality is expected in any developed society, such that laws are evenly applied, goods and burdens are not too disproportionately assigned, and the essential underpinnings of mutual respect and social cohesion are established. Equity may be viewed, thus, as a major goal of any decent society and as one of the most deeply rooted aspirations of Humankind as a whole.

Justice qua equity, however, is central not merely for psychological reasons, i.e., not simply because people crave justice. But it is indeed bound inextricably with human development, though again in highly complex ways. The notion of human development, or a developed existence, has likewise been debated for many centuries. There is a broad consensus about the elements of human development, though, which has emerged in the contemporary period. For example, it is generally accepted that human
development entails the opportunity to lead relatively long, healthy, and productive lives. Implicit in this are other conditions conducive to such lives. People should have adequate food for healthy diets. They should have access to decent housing, to healthcare, and to education facilities necessary for developing and sustaining their productive and creative potentials.

They need opportunities for meaningful work, interspersed with leisure time. Development would permit people to have and raise families in healthy and nourishing communities. They need environments that are reasonably secure for themselves and their families, insofar as security can be realized through human efforts. Such can be promoted, for example, through the extension of and firm commitment to political and human rights and freedoms in a society, and to mutual respect and the dignity of the individual. An environment conducive to human development, intent upon securing freedoms, would offer people a growing range of choices or options, within socially responsible parameters.

This emphasis on human development should be distinguished from the human capital approach, which views human development as a means to others ends, often the more intensive exploitation of natural resources in the generation of greater wealth. On the contrary, human development is assumed here to be in itself an end. The distinction is not merely academic, however, since any approach that subordinates people to higher ends is vulnerable to arguments demonstrating how human exploitation might increase the sought after goal, such as the creation of more wealth. Rather, means that degrade human dignity and welfare must be judged as patently inconsistent with real human development. Nor can the concept of human development be reasonably or safely detached from the kernel of religious and philosophical thought of virtually every people around the globe – East and West, North and South: that the highest stage of human development assumes the spiritual, moral, or intellectual elevation of the individual, culminating in virtue or wisdom.

Measures of such qualities, however, are woefully inadequate and illusive; material measures are much easier to apply to the situation. Thus, human development is too frequently conflated with these more accessible measures of material development, often Gross National Product (GNP) or Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Because human development is not faithfully reflected in the quantitative measures, which are near at hand, they must be deemed indicators rather than true measures of development. A life of abundance does not guarantee that an individual will develop in the sense of the term as defined above. Nevertheless, the quantitative measures are illuminating and useful indicators of the direction of Humankind. They are essential tools in the formulation and evaluation of policies, and in the crystallization of the objectives of development policies. Dissatisfaction with the gross economic measures of development led to the development of alternative measures with more emphasis on social and political factors affecting the human condition.

Since 1990 the United Nations has used a broader set of measures of human development, labeled the Human Development Index (HDI), which includes the following components: life expectancy; adult literacy and gross enrollment in first, second, and third levels of schooling; and real GDP per capita, adjusted for the cost of
living in each country (according to purchasing power parity, or PPP$). While this remains only a rough indicator of human development, it has served to draw serious attention to a broader range of measures, which the United Nations Development Programme includes in its annual *Human Development Report*. A subtler picture of the struggle for development emerges when the wide range of economic, social, and political measures covered in this report are examined carefully. Indicators like the Gini ratio, so named for its originator, Italian economist Corrado Gini, which attempts to measure disparities, can also be useful in supplementing our understanding of human development issues.

It is clear that human development presupposes a certain level of material development, which makes life possible at all and conditions the opportunities for cultivating human talents, capacities, and potentials. That is, full human development would seem to be precluded, absent certain basic requirements like food, water, shelter, and relative peace and personal security. The flourishing of the human spirit now entails more than the basic needs, but also access to a range of resources including education, health care, and jobs and income. Upon examining such quantitative indicators as are available to us, a picture of human progress toward development emerges that is equivocal.

In some respects, the indicators give reasons for optimism. Over the past several decades, infant mortality and maternal mortality rates have been brought down; the percentage of people suffering from hunger and malnutrition has likewise been reduced. Food production per capita grew by almost one-quarter during the 1990s. Infant mortality fell by 18 per thousand and the percentage of one year olds who have been immunized went from 70 to 89. Access to education has been broadened worldwide, reflected is a 12 percent gain in the adult literacy rate – to 76 percent – during the same period. In 84 countries, including 49 in the developing world, life expectancy has risen above 70 years. Just ten years ago, only 55 countries had life expectancies of 70 or above. The economic activity rate for women rose by more than six percent during the last decade of the twentieth century. Clearly, significant accomplishments can be seen in many areas of development.

On the other hand, the absolute number of people in poverty and malnourished has remained about the same or has grown in some places. Some 800 to 900 million people are still seriously malnourished. About the same number of people are yet illiterate. The gap between the wealthy and the poor, among countries and within, has become almost a chasm and continues to grow. The richest one-fifth of the Earth’s people consumes 16 times as much food as the poorest one-fifth of humanity. About a billion and a half people are expected to die before age 60. Nearly a billion people lack access to basic health care and an estimated 2.6 billion people do not have basic sanitation. The world is plagued by a set of new and familiar health problems and by social ills such as civil strife and crime. The number of people infected with human immunodeficiency virus or acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) more than doubled in the 1990s, to about 33 million. In some areas of the world, particularly countries formerly part of the Soviet Union and some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, health indicators have deteriorated in recent years, actually resulting in declining life expectancies. Victims of wars populate the swollen numbers of refugees, now estimated at over 21 million, not
including the 30 million classified as “internally displaced persons.” So while progress is evident in many respects, the distance yet to travel is daunting and substantial.

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Source: Human Development Report 2003

Table 1: Population Trends

2. The Distribution of Goods Within and Between Societies

Questions of equity have become increasingly central to continued human development and progress, though. Equity, as indicated above, is essentially a question of distributive justice. What is “fair” or “just” is, in some degree, a subjective evaluation. But a combination of common sense, logic, reflection, and empathy often directs Humankind to a shared sensibility. Moreover, it is here posited that any distribution of benefits and
burdens that significantly undermines human development and well being in general must be deemed inequitable. This follows from the assumption that human development is an end in itself, rather than a means to other goals, and any social, political, economic, or other arrangements that hamper such development are consequently contraindicated. The data that serve as gauges of equity and human development, and which are increasingly abundant, accessible, and suggestive, therefore should be more carefully scrutinized.

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Biographical Sketch

Wm. Gary Kline is Professor of Political Science at Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus, Georgia. His research and publications have focused on issues of hunger and food production, biodiversity, and development history and theory, in general. Professor Kline is a longtime member of the Association of Third World Studies (ATWS) and serves as its elected treasurer. He has received both the ATWS Presidential Award and its Mario Zamora Award for his essay, “Reflections on the Immaterial Conditions of Development”.

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