

HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT: ETHICS AND JUSTICE NEEDS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Contents

1. Introduction
 2. The Economic Question
 3. Globalization
 4. The Crisis of Development
 5. Ethical Questions
 6. Ways Forward—Alternatives
 - 6.1 Sustainability
 - 6.2 Human Rights
 7. Institutional Development
 8. Conclusion
- Bibliography
Biographical Sketches

Summary

This article focuses on what is meant by human resource development and how the world currently treats human resources. It examines the notion of ‘development’ as generated in an economic paradigm and delineates its impact on human beings in different societies. Further, it explores the processes of globalization that are operating at unprecedented levels and how they impact on human resource development. It raises the question of a crisis in development, and analyzes this from the perspective of social justice and redistribution. The article raises ethical questions that are of increasing importance in a globalized world, and examines them in the context of human resource development. It concludes with alternative arrangements for the future, raising strategies in relation to human rights, social capacity and community building.

1. Introduction

People are the real assets of any society. Individuals contribute to the economic, cultural, social and spiritual areas of society. And yet development has overlooked this truth in the pursuit of material and financial wealth. Humans can only fulfil their potential, enjoy healthy and creative lives if there is an enabling environment, one which facilitates opportunities, fosters relationships and builds social capacity.

Human Resource Development is closely linked to the term ‘development’, a term that in itself has different meanings. As a generic term, it refers to change within a social context that is evolutionary. This framework considers the direction of change as being

towards increasing differentiation and complexity, and towards integration of parts of society that enable the continuing adaptation of social activities to social conditions. Growing complexity and adaptation are also seen in economic terms and are linked to economic growth, higher material standard of living and to more industrialized societies with sophisticated information technology.

Although development is linked with better life and is often expressed in economic terms, the ambiguities of the term highlight the way it can either be used to refer to a process or to an objective. Development as a process tends to create the notion of a linear progression and of replacing the old by the new. This view emphasizes the importance of quantification and the use of statistical indicators such as income or literacy rates to demonstrate the extent of development in a community or nation. This idea of development is connected with establishing conditions of industrialization and economic wellbeing. The idea of development as an objective, on the other hand, is to overcome degradation that is seen to come from conditions of underdevelopment, marginalization and social exclusion. Here development evokes the ideas of a qualitatively better life, cultural enhancement and personal performance.

Traditional views of development have been critically analyzed from a number of perspectives. The first is that the Western capitalist idea of social change, industrialization and competition as a benchmark for progress is fundamentally flawed. It views this idea as ethnocentric, rendering, as it does, Western notions of individuality, freedom and competition superior to other traditions of collectivity, communal harmony and cooperation. The second perspective is that it is possible to have high levels of economic growth and yet have declining living standards for the majority. The third is that there are value judgements involved in determining whether a society has made progress or not. A range of criteria, such as crime rates, literacy levels, economic growth, housing and equality of opportunity can be used to determine levels of progress and the selection of these criteria as well as the importance given to them all involve value judgements.

Traditional ideas around development are usually based on an unquestioning acceptance of the negative effects of unrestrained development of the natural environment through exploitation of natural resources. The quality of human life is often linked to using natural resources far beyond their capacity. However, growing levels of awareness reflected in recent critiques emphasize that human development is closely linked with sustainable development, a concept best defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) also known as the Brundtland Report. WCED states that sustainable development is one that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

Based on the above discussion, the notions of development based on the ideas of good life and human fulfillment become central in understanding human development. Human resource development is both a physical reality and a state of mind in which society has, through some combination of social, economic and institutional processes, secured the means of obtaining a better life for every being. The objectives of human resource development are to:

- increase the availability and widen the distribution of basic life sustaining goods such

- as food and shelter;
- raise the standards of living including greater attention to cultural values as well as higher incomes and more jobs;
- expand the range of economic and social choices and opportunities in society;
- increase capacity to participate in social and cultural life; and
- create opportunities to develop human potential and skill.

The notion of progress and better quality of life raises questions of how to determine who decides what is a better lifestyle and a better society as well as what measures are used as indicators of change. Expert economists, social scientists and politicians currently provide some of the answers to these questions. Community development perspectives contrast the idea of human development in terms of economic growth to growth in human potential, relationships and opportunities. This view holds that it is the members of communities who decide what constitutes a qualitatively better society that maximizes human resource development. Contemporary thinking is that human resource development must be holistic in its approach, people centered, equitably distributed and environmentally and socially sustainable.

2. The Economic Question

The links between quality of human life, distribution of goods and services in society, and economic growth and wealth creation has been the key topic of debate between scholars, economists and social activists over centuries. Economics forms the basis of global organization, production and distribution of goods and services vital for human survival and development. Undeniably, economic growth brings opportunities for the individual and allows choice, comfort and capability to develop human potential. Economic factors often determine whether a child lives or dies of disease, whether a person has food to eat and clean water to drink, and whether health and education services can be accessed. In the last two decades, significant advances in human development have occurred. Some of these advances have been greatly influenced by economic growth. Over the last three decades average life expectancy has increased by 10 years, infant mortality rates have been reduced, adult illiteracy is down by 50 per cent, the proportion of people with access to safe water has risen from 15 per cent to 70 per cent, and progress has been made towards reduction of poverty levels in many countries.

Despite this, however, economic growth and development are major features of a global economic system that presents many impediments to sustainable and holistic development. The obsession with the creation of wealth to the virtual exclusion of questions of distribution, and tolerance of domination of the economically weak by the economically strong, affects aspects of our lives, encouraging carelessness and devaluation of natural and human capital. Economic forces encroach on many areas of life, seeking commercial gain and extending to traditionally non-commercial aspects of life.

A system based on the primacy of economic gain encourages consumerism without sufficient discussion of human need and want. Such a system provides for the needs of people on its own terms. For example, health care or welfare services are provided to

meet the needs of a workforce and can ignore the needs of those outside it. Education is aligned to industry needs and demands and not to enable every person to utilize their full potential. Only a few people who are wealthy have the opportunity to develop their talents without the need to satisfy economic criteria. Human fulfillment and value are based on their economic potential.

The economic system divides people into three categories that benefit from its workings in different ways. The first are the elite who control the means of production and distribution; the second are the skilled workers who can sell skills that are valued in the market; and the third are a large group who undertake the menial jobs in society where their employment is a means of survival and offers few chances of personal growth and little more than a basic remuneration. There is a fourth category that is excluded from the processes of the market and is referred to as the 'underclass' or the 'disposable people'. The underclass is estimated to constitute about 20 per cent of the world's population.

Economic systems are based on profit and growth. The problem of economics has always been one of scarcity. The tension that arises is between the desire for short-term economic gain and long-term concerns over the protection of a limited natural resource base. Social problems are closely linked with environmental and cultural destruction. Breakdown in traditional value systems, social dislocation, rural-urban drift, problems of minorities and disaffected young people are often the by-products of economic growth.

By failing to meet human need, the economic system can perpetuate massive human cost. This can be reflected in massive poverty levels, poor housing, increased mortality and morbidity, lack of broad-based educational opportunity and psychological and emotional disturbance. Such costs not only impact on individuals but also deny the benefits of a vast supply of human resources and human potential to be tapped in terms of the inventiveness, resourcefulness, caring skills and co-operative abilities. The economic system destroys social cohesion and diminishes the sense of community through the promotion of individual self-interest and consumerism. Not only does the system create destitution and deny many people a chance to contribute positively to the life of their communities; it promotes reluctance for social change. Those who benefit materially from economic growth find it difficult to vote for higher taxes in the welfare system where taxes form the basis for welfare revenue and redistribution in the form of public goods and services. Those who are beneficiaries from the economic system are not inclined to be concerned with broader issues of ethics of unfulfilled human need.

The economic debates have examined the connections between wealth maximization and quality of human life. Traditional measures of gross national product (GNP) have been used as indicators of well being. On the other hand, the history of individual nations has shown that it is possible to have a high quality of human life with moderate or low rates of GNP. Application of accounting principles to human development does not indicate improved quality of human life or increased opportunities for human development. Dominant contemporary tradition focuses on wealth generation at the common aggregate level. While it is not possible to deny the links between human well being and wealth, adopting wealth as an end product for human life neglects other

factors that comprise quality in human life and well being.

Human development approaches have challenged the adoption of economic criteria as the only relevant factor in human development. Other factors such as health issues, gender issues, public service provisions and social organization have been identified as being relevant to the well being of people. The United Nations has developed the *Human Development Index* that relies on a range of factors that make up quality of human life including income and wealth. This is a more balanced index as it recognizes that economic growth is only one instrument among many in promoting life opportunities, and its effectiveness is contingent upon other factors such as social service provision and distributional justice. An increase in private wealth or income can add to human resource development. However, what is more significant at a societal level is how economic growth is utilized to improve social services such as public health, education, drinking water and community infrastructure. This can make a big impact on expanding human capability and offer opportunities for human development.

(see: *Economic Security and the Environment*)

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Biographical Sketches

Narayan Gopalkrishnan is a Lecturer in Social and Community Studies at University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. He holds a number of qualifications from India including a Bachelor of Commerce, and Master of Business Administration. Mr Gopalkrishnan has also completed a Certificate in Energy, Environment and Renewable Sources, jointly offered by the United Nations University in Tokyo, University of Delaware and TATA Institute. He is currently exploring PhD options in relation to a comparative study of non-government organizations in India and Australia. Prior to 1998, Mr Gopalkrishnan lived in India where he held key positions in the private sector and the community development sector. He was last employed in India as a project manager of Gram Vikas, a large community development agency working with rural and tribal people in the state of Orissa. Mr Gopalkrishnan's research and publication interests relate to economic rationalism, globalization and its impact on communities; strategic participation methods for communities as a means of empowerment; development of sustainable communities; micro-credit and means of economic self sufficiency; multiculturalism; and issues relating to indigenous people.

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