

## MAJOR ISSUES IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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### Summary

A wide-ranging consideration of some of the major issues in human development begins with the question of what the term means. It then takes up the question of the dynamics of the transition from conditions that restrict human development, often ascribed to 'traditionalism' to the adoption of less provincial, more universal values generally ascribed to modernization. Brief attention is given to the measurement of human development in which emphasis is given to the importance of striking a balance between what is feasible in terms of the availability of comparable data for nation states and the fullest rendering of the concept of human development. Since a prominent feature of many large societies is their compositional diversity, the consequences for human development of social, cultural, economic and political diversity importance is touched on briefly. The question of how to measure human development having been raised, it is perhaps useful to ask why bother, what are the aims of the exercise? In a world of increasing interaction and interdependence less advantaged nations rarely confront the problems of development and the enhancement of the quality of life for its citizens unaided. It is in the interest of more developed nations to render assistance either out of humanitarian concerns, a quest for peace and stability in international relations or the security of commercial and other relationships. Foreign assistance often transmutes into interventions into local affairs in ways that can affect human development. This possibility is noted and left, as in the case of the consequences of diversity, for more definitive treatment in the disciplinary perspectives that follow in subsequent chapters. The prospects for future human development are briefly reviewed and blended into an introduction to the disciplinary perspectives on human development which complete this section. On human development.

## 1. Human Development: What it Means

The term human development has a variety of usages. It is, perhaps most commonly, used to refer to practices of human nurturance that relate to the shaping of human personality and the development of those traits, characteristics and behaviors that, together, define an individual's human potential or in Amartya Sen's term, her/his "capabilities". Human potential or capability in this sense arises out of an individual's psychological environment which determines the nature of the process of maturation - the development of a sense of self and self worth; an ego structure that governs involvement in social interaction; a capacity for moral judgement; a repertoire of coping skills for life course contingencies, motivational energy and orientation - in short; a personality variously equipped with its 'capabilities'.

A second usage, distinct from but not unrelated to the first, relates to the chances individuals have, whatever their potential, to pursue and achieve material and psychological security, to determine the direction of their affairs, to enjoy freedom of expression and action and to be governed by a system based on principles of fair and reliable treatment. In this sense, the focus is on the system, on the opportunities and constraints that must be seized or overcome, rather than on individual capacity. Individual rights, privileges, freedoms and treatment are, of course, central to any discussion of human development but here the question becomes, given a population with a range of genetically based and learned potential (capabilities), what are the conditions that are favorable for its full release and what conditions conspire to deny it? As a reviewer of a book entitled The Capabilities Approach, (2) puts it, "The capabilities approach is really a theory of freedom as positive action..." (3).

The conditions affecting the release of human potential or the development of individual capability are to be found in the realm of social structure, in the limits imposed by demographic character and ecological organization. The difference in these two uses of 'human development' is a simple difference between the individual and the collectivity, between part and whole. Can a descendent of the aboriginal Maori of New Zealand become a foremost interpreter of the exquisitely romantic arias of Mozart and Richard Strauss? Of course. It has happened. But do the present day Maori as a minority population in New Zealand rank high on the scale of human development as conventionally measured? Obviously not, for few of its members have attained the levels of survivorship, education, and economic status that are considered minimal requirements for a population to rank above average in 'human development'.

Freedom as positive action, and not merely a declared but passive 'right' implies a process of social transformation. In the course of history people have found out that bad governments could be altered or overthrown; that individuals had rights and freedoms; and that they belonged to political communities called nations based on race, language, culture and shared historical experience.

The classic ideational effort on the subject of rights and freedoms centered around the transforming events in Europe of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century - although many were prefigured in the philosophy of earlier thinkers, the Greeks in particular. The difference in the earlier and later formulations being that the latter led to calls for their activation in the form of

radical change in social conditions and in the nature of governance. These were not mere abstract freedoms but were envisioned in conjunction with the instrumentalities necessary for their realization.

The freedoms and rights demanded by the philosophers of that time were, most commonly, classified under the headings of Liberty, Fraternity, Equality. Liberty meant the freedom to lawfully do and think, in the realm of political, civil and economic life, as one chooses free of interference. Liberty cannot be unbounded but should be maximized only within the limits set by social good or, in the language of the period, by Fraternity and Equality. Fraternity or ‘collective cooperation, according a classification of basic rights made over 60 years ago, by Professor Ernst Baker of Cambridge University, refers to the ‘equipment’ (educational institutions, public welfare and services) and resources that go beyond what individuals or even voluntary groups can provide for themselves. Equality signifies even-handed treatment in social, economic political and cultural spheres. It is made manifest through the institutions of governance that define and enforce justice, fairness and opportunity. These noble goals remain only partially fulfilled to this day even in more advanced societies. In areas where most of the world population lives, they are trampled underfoot.

Reflecting on the “terrible century”, the label bestowed by Hannah Arendt on the century just past, Anthony Lewis (4) sees the darkest human instincts working on an unprecedented scale making a mockery of the very idea of human development in many part of the world. The technology of violence has increased the productivity of destruction, material and human, which in an increasingly crowded world of shrinking resources and lethal ethnic and racial juxtapositions leaves little opportunity or heart for the task of human development. Lewis argues that getting on with that task will require the willingness in all aspects of life to consider possibilities other than the received truth...openness to reason and thus an end to the romance with political utopias. Accordingly, to reach such a level of social rationality will require all our ingenuity and commitment to meet the challenges of the main underlying irritants to peace and stability, environmental degradation and population growth.

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity as these noble words were parsed over two centuries ago remain with us as a worthy agenda. Today the language used in discussing human development tends to be less heroic and generally less geared to advocated implementation. It is much more concerned with the practical identification of central elements and with measurement. Paul Streeten (5), for example, has written that human development is a process of enlarging peoples choices. To which he hastens to add that these choices are not “unlimited” but should involve a responsible selection of items thought to promote human development. In this category he puts choices that lead to “long, healthy lives”, to the acquisition of knowledge, as well as access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living. These are, in fact, the ingredients of the Human Development Index (HDI) that has been used by the UN over the past decade to track trends and levels of human development among nations.

Critics of the Human Development Index such as Amartya Sen and Streeten himself, while acknowledging that the HDI is a great improvement on the venerable per capita GDP as a correlate of human development, note that it fails to take into consideration such obviously

important items as political, social, economic and cultural freedom, a sense of community, the opportunity to be creative and productive and human rights. This is Streeten's list (ibid) to which he also adds "self respect". Others stand ready to expand the list.

A seemingly obvious candidate for an index of human development would be some measure of the distribution of personal resources that affect individual capabilities and quality of life. For example in addition to measures of longevity, knowledge, ability and per capita GDP, one could include a measure of income distribution, such as the Gini coefficient. To do so, however, shifts the focus from the properties that can reasonably be ascribed to individual members of the population - their life chances and presumed capabilities to a property of an economic system in which the connection to human development is indirect and causally ambiguous in the individual case. A further difficulty is the question of data availability. The HDI has the virtue of being composed of data that are widely available from statistical series maintained by most countries. Distributional measures, such as the Gini, require joint tabulations population and income which, even when available, may be of doubtful quality for developing countries with substantial agrarian populations, a large informal work force and a great deal of unremunerated household labor. In considering what items go into an index of human development, it is often necessary to cut the suit to fit the cloth.

Development by itself and as measured conventionally by various specific indicators, in one way or another, reflects capacity - the capacity or ability of a population to engage in the generation of wealth, to maintain a workable level of social stability, and to provide institutional structures necessary to sustain these conditions into a predictable future. Human Development, on the other hand, assumes an open social and economic setting and also a sufficient reliability or trust in human affairs to pursue the opportunities that are on offer. But what is distinctive about 'human' development is the idea of satisfaction or fulfillment relative to human needs and strivings. When in recent decades students of development sought to expand on the notion of 'development', they turned to the 'community' as a construct that captured an idealized, holistic version of territorially bound human interactions. The community, to the extent that it functions in the idealized fashion, establishes group identity, re-enforces shared understandings about the cultural limits of human greed and exploitation - in short it rounds off the sharp edges and omissions of Development policy.

Disenchantment with the idea of community development set in as the difficulties of working at this level of organization became apparent. It was replaced as a focus for analysis, policy and action by an emphasis on meeting so called 'basic human needs'. This new perspective lacked the holism of 'community development' but offered an action agenda focused on achieving postulated "basic human needs" and was, in this respect, a forerunner of the idea of human development. The concept of 'human development' is however, more cognizant of questions of social organization, environmental connections, technology or cultural development. By contrast, the basic needs approach to development, pragmatic to a fault, was theoretically empty. It finessed the question of the nature of human development by arbitrary identification of some of its parameters.

Human populations defy attempts to do their portrait from a limited pallet of primary colors. They are too diverse, too dynamic and too particularistic. Life, survival, whatever

term one might use to label the ‘need’ for sustained physical existence, is not an absolute. Else, how to explain Thermopylae, a fast-to-the-death, giving up one’s seat in a lifeboat? Obviously there are things more important than life itself, even in its full rendering beyond mere survival, but the ‘basic needs’ school failed to identify them or solve the problem of rank order. In the end the ‘basic needs’ idea proved unsatisfactory as a template for action and research since it was difficult to place its findings and its program results into a comprehensive view of social organization.

Underlying the idea of ‘human development’, whether construed narrowly and within feasible limits of available information or more expansively, is the tacit understanding that the values that define it are instrumental to its achievement. This seems incontestable in the case of the values that make up the HDI. But what if other values that appear to be desirable or idealized ends, values like ‘democracy’, ‘empowerment’ (whatever that term is taken to mean), equity, self-respect, to take an arbitrary handful, are added to the basic definition? Do these have a necessary effect on the ability of members of given populations to make choices or to enhance their general welfare? If they don’t or if the answers are ambiguous or contingent, what purpose is served by including them in an index of ‘human development’? Wouldn’t it be more to the point, more realistic, to include only those characteristics for which there is either evidence or strong presumption as to their instrumentality? Characteristics, that is, that reflect the quality of governance, the transparency and reliability of dealings, the comity of group association, the effectiveness of the institutions of civil society, the certitude of collective identity et cetera.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

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His research areas include studies in Soviet demography carried out at the U.S. Bureau of the Census, field research on Canadian fertility, analysis of psychological and social factors in U.S. marital fertility, and pioneering investigations of adolescent fertility in the U.S. (with Melvin Zelnik).

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