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Briefing Note

The Concept of Human Development

The contrast between what great thing human beings can achieve and what limited lives most women and men end up living is truly remarkable.

Amartya Sen, 1998

This briefing provides a brief synopsis of the origins, definition and broad characteristics of the human development approach. To explore further, please see additional readings listed below.

Origins of the Approach

Human Development arose in part as a result of growing criticism of the leading development approach of the 1980s, which presumed a close link between national economic growth and the expansion of individual human freedoms. Many, such as Dr. Mahbub ul Haq, the Pakistani economist who played a key role in formulating the “human development paradigm”, came to recognize the need for an alternative development model due to many factors, including:

- Growing evidence that did not support the then-prevailing belief in the “trickle down” power of market forces to spread benefits and end poverty;

- Growing awareness of the human costs of Structural Adjustment Programs;

- The ongoing spread of social ills (crime, weakening of social fabric, HIV/AIDS, pollution, etc.) even in cases of strong and consistent economic growth;

- A wave of democratization in the early 90’s, which raised hopes for people-centred models.

What does ‘Human Development’ mean?

The capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and others provided the conceptual foundation for an alternative and broader human development approach defined as a process of enlarging people’s choices and enhancing human capabilities (the range of things people can be and do) and freedoms, enabling them to: live a long and healthy life, have access to knowledge and a decent standard of living, and participate in the life of their community and decisions affecting their lives.

Human development has always been flexible and “open-ended” with respect to more specific definitions. There can be as many HD dimensions as there are ways of enlarging people’s choices.

The key or priority parameters of human development can evolve over time and vary both across and within countries.
Some of the issues and themes currently considered most central to human development include:

- **Social progress** - greater access to knowledge, better nutrition and health services.
- **Efficiency** - in terms of resources use and their availability. HD is pro-growth and productivity as long as such growth directly benefits the poor and other marginalized groups.
- **Equity** - in terms of economic growth and other HD parameters.
- **Participation & Freedom** - particularly empowerment, democratic governance, gender equality, civil and political rights, and cultural liberty.
- **Sustainability** - for future generations in ecological, economic and social terms.
- **Human Security** - security in daily life against such chronic threats as hunger and abrupt disruptions including joblessness, famine, conflict, etc.

**What makes ‘Human Development’ distinctive?**
The human development approach is an **action-oriented** paradigm, coined within the UN and supported by other national and international development actors, which seeks practical change. It is a **holistic, interdisciplinary and integrated approach** that strives to find the virtuous circle between the six HD issues and themes described above. The human development paradigm defines poverty as **human poverty - a multi-dimensional condition** defined as the denial of choices and opportunities to lead a tolerable life - including lack of necessities for material well-being (such as income, education, health, safe water), as well as the denial of opportunities to enjoy dignity, self-respect and other basic rights.

**HD and Economic Growth**
The HD approach recognizes that there is **no automatic link between economic growth and human progress**. This link must be made through deliberate policies at all levels and by many actors, including the state. Growth is necessary, but not sufficient. Growth is an important means to enlarge human choices, but not an end in itself. The **structure and quality of growth matters**. Economic growth policies that do not take into consideration all aspects of HD can result in:

- **Jobless growth** (that does not expand employment opportunities)
- **Ruthless growth** (the fruits of growth mostly benefit the rich)
- **Rootless growth** (stifles cultural diversity and identity)
- **Futureless growth** (depletes natural resources)
- **Voiceless growth** (growth without expansion of democracy, empowerment)

**HD and Basic Needs**
Both the HD approach and the basic needs approach, which emerged in the 1970’s, share a preoccupation with the
poor and other marginalized groups, and as well as the importance of public action. The basic needs approach, however:

- **concentrates on a few sector-defined issues** (nutrition, health, primary education), rather than the full spectrum of valuable human choices. It underplays the role of freedoms, without which many choices are not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible;
- **focuses more on supplying goods to people rather than on what these goods allow people to do, emphasizing peoples’ participation as beneficiaries more than as agents of change.**

### HD and Human Rights

The HD and Human Rights approaches have much in common and complement one another. Human rights and human development share a common vision and a common purpose—to secure, for every human being, freedom, well-being and dignity. Divided by the cold war, the rights agenda and development agenda followed parallel tracks. Now converging, their distinct strategies and traditions can bring new strength to the struggle for human freedom. Human rights and the human rights approach represent an intrinsic part of HD. They bring principles of social justice to support an HD approach, particularly through greater government accountability and obligation. At the same time the HD approach is being used as a means to realize human rights.

### HD and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

- The MDGs represent a core set of development indicators, touching on many of the most important dimensions of human development. Additional aspects of human development not addressed directly by the MDGs—e.g., cultural liberty, human rights and equity, conflict and good governance—are reflected in the more comprehensive Millennium Declaration.
- Human development is concerned with equity and distribution and attempts to understand the causes and consequences of inequality. Global and national MDGs and indicators are, on the whole, inequality-neutral. Even if all MDGs are met, problems of inequality might still exist.
- The MDGs highlight the distance to be traveled to reach an important set of human development goals; a human development approach must be used to reach these goals, while recognizing other additional goals that must be addressed at the same time.

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