



THE NEXT FRONTIER: HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report 2020 titled, "The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene" brings a new dimension in explaining and analyzing the state of the planet and the relationship between human development and the cost it entails for the planet.

According to the report, the human race is exiting the 'Holocene,' the span of which was some 12,000 years, and which defines human civilization as of now. On the other hand, according to scientists, human civilization is now entering the 'Anthropocene,' a proposed geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, anthropogenic climate change in which humans are a dominating force shaping the planet.¹

The report presents an adjustment to the Human Development Index (HDI) taking into consideration the planetary pressures. The original HDI continues to be relevant; however, it adds the Planetary pressures-adjusted HDI (PHDI) and a country's level of carbon dioxide emissions and its material footprint on a per capita standard.² The PHDI is the level of human development adjusted by carbon dioxide emissions per person (production-based) and material footprint per capita to account for the excessive human pressure on the planet. The idea of the 'Anthropocene' has also led to a new

¹ "The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene", UNDP Report, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr_2020_overview_english.pdf, p.4

² Ibid.

thinking, one which focuses on the acknowledgement of interdependent challenges, stemming from planetary change resulting from human actions. Human pressures on the planet are increasing and the advent of the pandemic has affected human development with full force. Climate change is affecting developing economies while natural disasters are intensifying, thus resulting in threatening the vulnerable populations with severity. Natural calamities are increasing with each passing year and so are the effects of climate change, with extreme temperatures rising very substantially.

Anthropocene Epoch

The development challenge has always been riddled with dilemmas and difficult choices. Just as COVID-19 wreaks havoc around the world, it is time to rethink the realities concerning the planet. The challenge of sustainable development is becoming more and more arduous in contemporary times as the pressure on the planet continues to increase with every passing day in the shape of the material footprint. The pandemic has further aggravated the situation and laid bare the inconsistencies prevalent around the globe. These inequalities and inconsistencies have particularly been exposed by the pandemic.

Human development has come at an immensely high cost and the footprint of this progress has been in the shape of climate change, carbon emissions and other ecological pressures on the planet. The UNDP report sheds light on the fact that the people and the planet have stepped into what can be called an entirely new geological epoch. This brings into focus, the need for rethinking and redesigning the path to progress and development by not compromising on sustainability. The path to growth, progress and development must be designed in a way that it does not compromise on the well-being of the planet at large.

The main emphasis of the report is its focus on the well-being of the planet alongside the already prevalent focus on human development. This effort must be designed in a way that it does not go against nature while continuing progress on the given agenda. Issues such as climate change and reforestation must become the focus of the development agenda. Sustainability holds the key to viable progress and the prevalent inequalities between countries aggravates the challenges of sustainable development, as envisioned by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 70/1 Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The UNDP report is timely as it raises the red flags pertaining to the various challenges identified by the report. According to the report, the pressures on planet earth are so overwhelming that scientists are questioning whether the earth has entered a

new era, namely the “New Geological Epoch: The Anthropocene.” This implies that the most overriding risk to the survival of humans is not from anything else, but themselves.³

Highlights of the Report

Acceptable human development is about striking the right balance. The report highlights the need to make amends in what can possibly be a viable and sustainable approach towards the expansion of human development, without undermining the balance required for the said approach. The permissible approach towards expanding human development should involve a just transformation which is in sync with nature and not against it. For this to succeed, new measures of human development are required keeping in view the current circumstances.

The report recommends that the planetary pressures-adjusted Human Development Index (HDI) be introduced with new benchmarks. The COVID-19 pandemic is the result of the imbalances resulting from disturbed ecosystems.⁴ The ongoing pandemic has the world’s attention, but the existing crises continue to do the damage. Bush fires, floods and hurricanes have continued to cause extreme damage. Similarly, the extinction of species and global warming continue with increased intensity, leading to newer challenges. As a result, the ecological pressure on the planet is unprecedented and is in the milieu of the above mentioned factors. For instance, climate change is exacerbating inequalities, along with social instability, and regression in other spheres of life as well.

The alienation of the planet can be halted if humans take ownership of the planet by becoming agents of change by using innovative and sustainable means. The current disparities and unfair resource distribution has resulted in inequalities of epic proportions, as evident during the ongoing pandemic as well. The report recommends that this should be the decade of action if transformational changes are to be achieved as shared challenges require close cooperation and an effort towards joint solutions. The well-being of the planet is the underlying theme of the UNDP report as a means of measuring progress, and offers a critical and thought provoking insight into what should be the correct balance between development and planetary change.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p. 3